REFERENTS AND FIXING REFERENCE [1]

Howard Wettstein

University of California, Riverside

The first of the following two notes concerns the notion of a referent; the second explores an idea that became central in the field with the publication of Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*: reference fixing.

I.   On the Idea of a Referent

Wittgenstein speaks of the fog that surrounds the workings of language. Our ways of thinking about reference contribute generously to the fog. While a full

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discussion would constitute a book-length project, my aims here are quite limited. I want to have a look at the idea that reference is a relation between a piece of language and a piece of reality. The idea might seem unexceptional and unexceptionable; names, for example, name things, and "relation" seems just right. But there is casual relation-talk, and then more serious talk of a genuine relation, one that requires the existence, in every case, of a *referent*. Referential expressions, I'll argue, sometimes lack such a relatum, and other times—when in some straightforward way there is such a thing—it's quite difficult to know what we are talking about.

Reference as a relation becomes especially interesting in the context of the widely accepted idea, that reference constitutes a master key to the understanding of the link between language (or even representations generally) and reality. It would be interesting to trace the history of attempts to take one sort of expression or another as the model for "reference as the master key." Fregeans have found it tempting to focus on the definite description; contemporary anti-Fregeans (with whom I have much sympathy) have gone with the proper name, some with the indexical expression. And some have resisted a single model, still however seeing reference as involving a relation between a piece of language and a piece of reality.

Proper names both make the relational picture intuitive—here's the name, "David Kaplan," and here's the referent, DK himself—and dramatize the difficulties.

"Pegasus," certainly to non-philosophers a perfectly good name, one that people use to say things, lacks a referent.[2] What then of the genuine relation?

I raise this issue not at all in the spirit of any sort of anti-realism about reference; "David Kaplan" still refers to DK. But it does reveal that things do not go as smoothly as we might have supposed for the relational picture, even for proper names.

Let's move on to natural kind terms like "water." The term seems to function like a name. But what of its referent? Unlike the case of "David Kaplan," the matter of its referent is certainly not straightforward. Quine says that the referent of "water" is a scattered object. That's a weird bird. Quine, I'm thinking, wants a referent for the term 'water' and wants something more concrete, less abstract, than a *stuff*. Notice that in practical terms there is no puzzle about the functioning of terms like 'water'. It's not as if we have trouble applying the term. But when one asks focused questions about the identity of the referent, something goes haywire.

'Horse' is another problematic sort of "natural kind term." This one doesn't look like a name at all. One might suppose, and I've heard it said, that the term names a species; we certainly can speak of "the species, horse." But the subject term there is not "horse" but rather "the species, horse." In such contexts the term "horse" identifies a species without naming it. Indeed one cannot begin a sentence about the

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[2] Such "empty names," raise a number of well-known problems, as do names in fiction. Prominent for Millians like me is the problem of the significance, the meaningfulness of reference-less names. This is a problem, or at least certainly appears to be, since Millians are fond of saying things like "the sole semantic significance of a name is its reference." At the same time, as I discuss in Chapter 7 of *The Magic Prism: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language (Oxford University Press,* 2004), empty and fictional names had better be meaningful. We certainly use them in significant sentences. (See my criticism there of "pragmatic approaches" that deny the semantic significance of empty and fictional names.)

species with simply "horse," as in the incoherent sentence "Horse is a species…." It seems important that "horse," unlike proper names, takes plurals. Indeed, "horses" seems more like a device of reference than "horse," although not singular reference. And again while "reference" seems like it ought to be an appropriate idea here, the referent is not some chunk of the world. One begins to wonder about whether "natural kind term" identifies a natural kind of expression, and about what exactly a natural kind is supposed to be.

I raise these questions as a way of generating interest in another picture. As Wittgenstein emphasized, the connections between language and the world are much more multifarious than we are apt to suppose. To look—at least to look through a philosophical lens—for *the referent* of a referential expression, as simple, as trivial, as this sounds, often leads to a dead end. Not with proper names of course—at least the happy ones that stand for real things in the real world. But such expressions are, I want to suggest, a special case; hardly paradigmatic. I'm not sure there is a paradigm; perhaps illumination comes, as Wittgenstein supposed, from seeing a variety of cases and developing a sense of the family they constitute.

Consider an analogy concerning the concept of truth. Here's our picture: "The cat is on the mat" is true just in case the cat is on the mat. Everything, again, is out in the open. A propositional representation is true just in case it matches, corresponds to, what it purports to represent. But then we come to contexts that don't quite fit, like negative existentials and fictional contexts. The usual way has been to make the paradigm fit, using more or less force as needed. If the student speaks truly when she says that Hamlet is a prince, then we need referent for

"Hamlet"; Kripke, et al, thus posit an abstract entity engendered by the act of writing the fiction. And so on.

I prefer a less orthodox option: truth only sometimes conforms to the correspondence paradigm, which is in fact a special case of truth. In fictional contexts, the explanation of truth does not require positing a fictional abstract entity. A remark about Hamlet can be true, correct, just because *it gets the story right*. Perhaps there is a vague and general idea associated with our use of the concept of truth—crudely put, it's a matter of getting things right. This is not to say that one could not further articulate and illuminate the more general idea. But it won't be simple; and the result will surely not be as simple as the ideas with which we have been working.[3]

Let me return from this digression about truth to the topic of reference. In what follows, I'll sketch an alternative model. I don't know the limits of my model; it's not a new paradigm that's supposed to cover everything.

Consider our talk of pain. Pain talk is surely referential; we are speaking of things that go on with us. But the referent of "pain" is another matter. First, there is the question of whether the term is something like a family resemblance term. Is there something like pain-in-general, the sort of thing that might turn out to be identified with C-fibers firing? Or are there pains and pains? Perhaps pain resists a uniform sort of physical treatment.

Leaving that question aside and focusing on a single pain—this pain in my leg—isn't there something a little strange about the question of where and indeed

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[3] "Truth" also seems subtle and complicated with respect to reports of speech, belief, and the like, as I suggest in Chapters 8 and 9 of *The Magic Prism*.

what it is? In one sense, "where and what" is apparent to all pain-sufferers; we know where it hurts, and what it is. But that's not the "where and what" of interest to philosophy. What seems strange is the idea that *it*—my leg hurting—might turn out to be an event in my brain, or maybe in some immaterial substance associated with my body.[4] The putative referent is puzzling in other ways: Does it have boundaries? What if it's sort of there but elusive? Is it really a something? One is (almost) tempted to resort to Wittgenstein's non-answer to a parallel question about universals: it's not a something, which is not to say it's nothing.

Wittgenstein sympathizers sometimes emphasize the role of pain-talk as expressive of pain—as opposed to referential about pain. But it's worth pointing out that these functions—expressive, referential—do not preclude one another. I find it helpful to think developmentally here, even in the armchair way for which we are notorious.[5] I like the Wittgensteinian idea that expressive pain talk begins as a socialized replacement for more primitive pain behavior; thus "ow!" in place of writhing or an even less articulate groan. At a later stage, "Ow!," in a matter of short geological time, begets words like "owie"[6] that work their way into sentence frames and become referential.

Our pain vocabulary is referential and so it's natural to wonder about the referent, the item picked out by "this pain in my leg." But my developmental sketch

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[4] I surely don't mean to deny the utility of "identifying" the pain with some CNS event, process or whatever. "Identifications" of that sort can be of use to us even when they involve no claims about real identity, my interest here. Cf. Paul Benacceraf, "What Numbers Could Not Be," for the distinction between questions of real identity and identifications that have utility.

[5] The following remarks on the development of pain vocabulary are adapted from my paper, "Terra Firma" (*The Monist*, October 1995, Vol. 78, Number 4, pp. 425-446).

[6] I hope this children's term for pain is recognizable.

aims to make us pause over the idea of the item picked out. At one moment—or epoch—we are crying out. Later this behavior gives way to words that express our hurting. Still later these same expressions or their progeny work themselves into sentence frames; now we can talk about our hurts. But where exactly do disrcete pain-entities—subject to theoretical identification—enter the story?

One might, contrary to what I'm suggesting, suppose that the crying out was responsive to such discrete pain-entities. And further that with the birth of referential pain vocabulary, speakers wake up, as it were, to the fact of such entities. I am not providing anything like a refutation of such an approach idea. Just an alternative, one that I hope the reader will find natural.

Let's return to natural kind terms, "water" and "horse." The direction I'm pursuing is easier for "horse" than for "water." My suggestion is that we not move too quickly from talk of language being referential to questions about the identity of the thing picked out. In the case of "water," to which I'll return, the term at least appears to have a referent, namely water. But with "horse," things seem different. Here we really need not think of it as picking out an item to think of it as referential, as applying to things in the real world.

"Water," as I say, is more difficult for my picture, since the term does, as we say, refer to water. But to stay for a moment with linguistic practice, it will be very difficult and involve serious strain to make the argument that linguistic practice—the ways we talk of water—allows us to discriminate between the stuff view and the scattered object view. Probably these philosophical views each pick up on aspects of the way we speak of water. Still, there may be some sort of

consideration—philosophical, scientific, or whatever—that reveals the superiority of some way of thinking about the referent. But perhaps not. The suggestion I've been making about reference leaves the referential character of "water" intact, the vicissitudes of these philosophical views aside.

Wittgenstein, in the Brown Book, discusses what he refers to as names of directions, "North," etc. He suggests, characteristically, that we should attend to the analogies with proper names without neglecting the differences. I don't know that such names of directions should be thought of as referential; nor am I confident that they should not be. The category of referential is no doubt not sharply bounded.[7] My point here was that attention even to a small sample of our variegated referential vocabulary suggests that the proper name picture of reference—"David Kaplan" and DK—does not represent anything like the general case. This is not in the service of some sort of linguistic idealism or anti-realism about reference. Nor is my proposal in any serious way anti-theory, except in the sense that we owe to Aristotle that the degree of precision in a theoretical proposal needs to be sensitive to the subject matter.

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[7] Another interesting case is that of the indexical expression,"now." Kaplan's widely accepted treatment, that "now" refers to a time, raises all sorts of issues. One wants to know more about the referent, for example.

II.   Fixing the Reference

Frege, Kaplan, and Kripke: Three treatments of the idea

Naming and Necessity broke new ground in a number of philosophic domains. Reference-fixing was just one of Kripke's exciting ideas: it is one thing for a definite description to be synonymous with a name, to formulate its meaning; quite a different thing is a description's merely determining or fixing the name's reference.

To be clear about the distinction, one wants to hear more about synonymy; and one wants to know the cash value, as it were, of the difference between giving the meaning and fixing the reference. Two avenues have been discussed for the understanding of the distinction, one modal, the other concerning propositions. Kripke emphasizes the first of these; Kaplan, the second.

Kripke's modal characterization: if we are thinking in terms of synonymy, then the description formulates the conceptual content of the name. Accordingly, "Aristotle taught Alexander" would be a tautology and so a necessary truth. By contrast, if the description merely fixes the reference of the name, the idea is that the description, as it were, searches the world, finds its satisfier and attaches the name to it. But the referent itself, the person who really did teach Alexander, might well not have gone into education; someone else might have taught Alexander. So "Aristotle taught Alexander" is a contingent truth.

The other way to get at the distinction is by way of the notion of proposition. Proposition-talk is not Kripke's preferred idiom; nevertheless, for better or worse, it's become more or less standard. Using proposition-talk, one can say that if the description is synonymous with the name, then the proposition expressed by

"Aristotle was wise" contains as its subject constituent the conceptual content of the description, "the teacher of Alexander." However, if the description merely fixes the reference of the name, the proposition expressed is—Kaplan and others argue—the singular proposition that contains the man, Aristotle, in the subject position.

The idea that a description might merely fix the reference of an expression and not formulate its meaning has the appearance of a radical departure from Frege. My idea, on the contrary, is that the idea of reference fixing represents a lingering Fregean element in the thought of Kripke, Kaplan, and those of us who have been influenced by them.

Interestingly, Frege himself flirts with the distinction. In the *Begriffsschrift,* Frege identifies (in a way that anticipates Russell and Kaplan) the notion of content with reference: the content of a name is the thing named. Nevertheless Frege supposes that names apply to things in virtue of descriptively given "ways"[8] in which the things are presented. Put these two ideas together—descriptive ways of determining reference **and** content as reference—and you have arrived virtually at Kaplan's approach: Reference is fixed by the "ways of determining reference" but the proposition contains the referent, the object. This is of course very different than Frege's mature sense-reference view, a view that breaks with the *Begriffsschrift*'s content-as-referent doctrine.

I want to dwell for a moment on Kaplan's use of reference-fixing (specifically for indexicals) since it is interesting in its own right and importantly different than

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[8] As with Frege's later notion of sense, thinking of senses, and ways of determining reference, as descriptive seems to capture what Frege has in mind and yet does not fit with everything he says.

Kripke's. In "Demonstratives," Kaplan says that indexicals, unlike proper names, have descriptive meanings, formulated by Kaplan's "character rules." "I," for example, means "the agent of the context," roughly, the speaker. So far, Kaplan's characters sound just like Frege's senses. But there is a difference: the descriptions that formulate Kaplan's characters are improper, they fail to denote. "The speaker," fails to apply uniquely to anything—unless of course one is speaking of a specific context of utterance.[9] And relativize them to context is exactly what Kaplan does; characters determine reference relative to context. This is Frege updated for the special case of indexicals.[10]

Kripke's use of reference fixing might seem less Fregean. A Kripkean reference determining description should not be thought of as formulating the meaning of a name. One of Kripke's examples of reference-fixing by description is the name "Neptune," introduced by the description, "the cause of perturbations in the orbit of Uranus." Kripke's point is not that when members of the linguistic community use the name "Neptune," they somehow fix its reference in this way. If that were Kripke's idea, it would be parallel to Kaplan's. The relevant description would then be like a character rule for the name. Instead, for Kripke the description is germane only to the question of how the name was originally introduced; "Neptune" was introduced into the language by way of the description in question. When the name is later passed along, this reference-fixing information is not

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[9] And even then there are issues. Relativize "the speaker" to a conversational context and there may be more than one speaker. Such issues are beyond my scope here.

[10] This is Kaplan's Fregean side. His anti-Fregean side is represented by his Russell-inspired view of propositions as containing objects.

necessarily or typically passed along. Others down the chain pick up the name—that is, they achieve competence with it—without necessarily learning the reference-fixing information. So reference-fixing descriptions come in only at the name-introduction phase.

That Kaplan, by contrast, is really thinking of the reference fixing descriptions as meanings is also evident in Kaplan's use of characters to resolve the Frege puzzle for the special case of indexicals. Kaplan explains the informativeness of, for example, "I am he," in terms of the different characters of "I" and "he"; these characters capture the respective modes of presentation under which speakers conceptualize the referent. Characters clearly have nothing special to do with the introduction of expressions, but with the continuing practice. Indeed in the case of indexicals, introduction of the expression is not what's at issue.

And similarly for Frege's early view. It is concerned with names, not indexicals. But the idea of way of determining reference is not restricted to name introduction. These precursors of Frege's modes of presentation are meanings, even if only in the attenuated sense of continuing reference-fixers,[11] even if they are not elements of the propositional content.

The Fregean Heritage

Kripke suggests in Lecture 2 that name introduction by reference-fixing description is the paradigm. Even when a name is introduced by some ostensive

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[11] By "continuing reference-fixers" I mean that competence with a name involves associating the name with such a reference-fixer.

gesture, a reference-fixing description is in fact operative. This view of Kripke's has always has seemed to me strange, out of character for Kripke. Part of what I took to be the big lesson of the work of people like Kaplan, Kripke, Donnellan, Marcus, and Putnam was a certain skepticism about traditional ideas about the role of descriptions: reference by names is direct, conceptually unmediated, and the contrary Frege-inspired way overintellectualizes language.

The spirit of many of Kripke's wonderful examples also seemed radically non-descriptivist. Take Madagascar. Kripke's powerful response to Evans and other critics was the idea that the (current) reference "Madagascar" to an island was born in a mistake, a mere speaker's reference. People were misusing this name that really was a name of a part of the mainland. But the mistake became socialized and generalized—that's how the name became a name of the island. At least on the face of it, there are no reference-fixing descriptions launching this new use of the name. Perhaps one could find a way to push a descriptivist analysis here as well; but it does not seem the most natural way to proceed.

Indeed I would have thought that for Kripke, it's not in general semantically important how a name gets going. There might indeed be a variety of ways. One need not deny that there are cases in which the name begins with an intellectual act (as if in the privacy of one's study—to paraphrase Kripke in another context) of reference fixing by description. But what's important is that the name-user just uses the name as Mill suggested, without descriptive meaning. Descriptions are irrelevant, one might say, to the semantics of names. So it seemed strange that Kripke would insist that name-introduction be by description.

Let's think for a moment about baby-naming and the role or lack of it for descriptions. At one point in his discussion, Kripke mentions a baptismal ceremony. In my own (Jewish) religious tradition—Kripke's is the same—a name is not used until a formal act of naming occurs. But this is quite a distinctive practice and hardly the way it goes typically for people. Parents may muse for quite a while—at the expense of their friends and relatives—about names, and then the baby is born and they just start using the name; no baptism; no act of giving the name, *a fortiori* no intellectual act of giving a name by means of a description. When we name a baby, we may already know a great deal about the child. But unless one has descriptivist commitments, one will not naturally see the name giving as involving a reference-fixing description. The name is applied to the baby directly.

I think the examples by means of which Kripke generates intuitions about reference fixing are worth attention. Kripke's Neptune example is quite an oddity. Isn't it unusual for us name givers to first have a theoretical idea—like "cause of the perturbations in the orbits of Uranus"—and then coin a name to stand for the thing? That's about as typical as definition by stipulation.

Another of Kripke's examples is the meter. Notice that "one meter" is hardly a name. Any more than "two meters." Words for lengths—perhaps this generalizes to words for measures—like "meter" are not proper names. And concerning the standard meter bar, who would suppose that the assignment of the bar to the measurement in question involves reference-fixing, indeed by description? It seems important that Kripke's two real-world examples of reference fixing by description—Neptune and the meter—are atypical.

I've been trying to draw attention to what I see as the Fregean lineage of the idea of reference-fixing. Not only because Frege make early use of it. I sense the Fregean inspiration in Kaplan's approach: associating his reference-fixing characters with modes of presentation, and then using the characters to explain the Frege puzzle in Frege's way. I also see it in Kripke's intuition that somehow descriptions have to be involved, if not in typical name use then in name introduction. The idea is that at some level the connection between a name and the thing named is descriptional, conceptual.

Afterthought: Kripke's Chains of Communication

Kripke says, in Lecture 2, that when one hears another using a name and starts using it himself, the current speaker intends to be using it with the reference of the prior user. Kripke's remark is subject to interpretation. It might mean—if one pushed the text in a descriptional direction—that one fixed the reference of say, "Jones," by the description "the person who was spoken of by the person from whom I learned the name, 'Jones'."

I don't believe that this is Kripke's intent. Much of the spirit of the first two lectures suggests otherwise. Indeed on page 91 he strongly suggests quite the opposite, in the paragraph that begins, "But that's not what most of us do." What we don't do, Kripke is saying, is to assign names by intellectual acts.

What then of the referential intention of which Kripke speaks? I take Kripke's remark to be of a piece with his comment in "Speaker Reference and Semantic Reference" in which he distinguishes general from specific referential intentions. The

most fruitful and plausible reading of that latter passage I owe to David Kaplan. He suggested that what Kripke means by general intention is simply the intention to use the name conventionally. That's not to say that the speaker performs some mental ceremony in first using the name, but just that in general the speaker means to be using language conventionally. To return to *Naming and Necessity* Kripke means, I'm supposing, that when I pick up a name, of course I mean to use it as it's been used. Period.

My reading of Kripke—both generally and with respect to this remark about intention—admittedly emphasizes passages in *Naming and Necessity* and deemphasizes others. The work, after all, is ground-breaking and highly suggestive. And like other seminal works that are prior to developed theory, one sometimes struggles to see how, and indeed if, the work's insights all cohere. The core idea of the work is clearly Millian, as Kripke emphasizes: names are non-connotative. Kripke's descriptivist remarks about name-introduction seem (to me at least) to come from another place. But Kripke still goes a long way with Mill. For the name user down the chain, the name is fully Millian—no descriptions or modes of presentation, not even in a reference-fixing capacity. Indeed, the later name user does not fix reference; she becomes competent in the use of a name that already has a referent.[12]

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[12] This brings me to another point of some importance about what I take to be, and hope is, Kripke's picture. The question is one of the character of the chain of communication. Here I'm making use of some thoughts of David Kaplan and Joseph Almog. One might suppose that the chain of communication story of Kripke's—he denies in conversation that he meant to emphasize "causal"—is his externalist alternative to the internalism of Frege; an externalist alternative to Frege's internalist story of what determines reference. The semantics of the name then crucially involved the chain; the links are links, as it were, in the semantics. And one might

I said above that my picture of Kripke's view is based upon emphasizing some passages and deemphasizing others. Here I need to mention a passage that is least amenable to my sort of treatment, "least" meaning "not at all." I tend to joke that Lecture 3 is apocryphal. I hope Kripke finds this amusing; it's meant to express reverence for the first two lectures and my sense that something important changed in the third. Here's what I mean: Kripke's treatment of natural kind words suggests that they are name-like but that their references are fixed by description. And indeed the role he gives to these reference-fixing descriptions is not limited to anything like name-introduction. Perhaps I am wrong here, but it seems that our concepts of the relevant kinds somehow involve the reference-fixing conceptual material. From where I sit, that makes such expressions very much unlike names; they are rather some sort of name-description hybrids. In the course of this discussion, Kripke remarks on an important difference between proper names and such natural kind words: when someone learns a name, we don't care much how he fixes it's reference,

suppose—there may be alternatives—that there is a question about what determines the reference at each link. It's at least thinkable that at each link, the new user fixes reference, etc.

But there is an alternative I prefer. When one learns the word "table," for example, it is implausible to suppose that the transmission of this word from one to another constitutes something internal to the semantics of the name. One is rather passing along something that is semantically whole and complete. This is of course not to deny that one can change the meaning of the word, and then something really new may happen. But barring that, the "chain" is not semantically relevant.

The idea is that names are like that. At some point the name "Aristotle" entered our practice and then its semantics was finished. Passing it from one to another is like passing the salt; like passing "table" from one to another. The chain is of interest in various ways, but it's not an externalist link of name to referent. That link was whole and complete; if not there was nothing to pass along. If this picture has merit, then again we see that it's a mistake to see each user as fixing reference. This would be like reinventing the wheel. It's there already.

Question: if Kripke's is not an externalist response—that is an explanation of the name-referent link— how does one respond to the Fregean challenge for an explanation of the link between name and reference. I'm inclined to suppose that the question is ill-framed and that the challenge withers upon analysis. I argue this in Chapter 5 of *The Magic Prism.*

whereas with natural kind expressions, it really matters. This is trouble for my

picture. For it suggests that indeed name users do indeed fix the reference of names,

and in different ways, presumably by different descriptions.