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Descriptivism, Causalism and Causal Descriptivism

In the following I present Putnam's anti-realist account of what the world is like and explain why Lewis finds it to be paradoxical. I will then explain how the general notion of descriptivism, causal descriptivism and causalism are supposed to determine reference, and discuss why Lewis and Kroon find causal descriptivism to be the more tenable theory. Finally, I will discuss how descriptivism relies on something like a Fregean sense, and why Richard finds a particular tenet of this view to be problematic.

"Putnam's Paradox" is a term used by David Lewis to reject Hilary Putnam's theory of what the world is like. Putnam's argument is that it makes no sense to think that a theory of what the world is like is false, because on any given account of what the world is like, that world will provide some interpretation of the theory that makes it come out true. Lewis thinks this is paradoxical because if attempts at constraining the theory have to be located within the theory, then the possible interpretations of the theory aren't really being constrained and no progress is being made at all. Lewis concludes that, in order for constraints to work, they need to be located outside the theory and that a way of accomplishing this is by adopting a causal descriptivist approach to reference.

Causal descriptivism is a variation of descriptivism, which is an account of reference or a general account of how linguistic expressions "get attached" to things in the world. It holds that linguistic expressions have associated descriptive content, and that what an expression refers to is the thing in the world that fits that descriptive content. Causal descriptivism maintains that descriptive fit determines reference, but adds to it that the associated descriptive content of the term must include explicitly causal properties. For example, "The person that *caused me* to utter Tom" is a causal description, while "The only person at the party named Tom" is descriptive but not causally descriptive.

Causalism is another account of how reference is supposed to work and stands in opposition to descriptivism. For causalists, the referent of a term is determined by some sort of causal connection between a name and an object in the world. It is a type of direct reference in that there is no descriptive fit and also no entity that matches up with something in the world to determine reference. Fredrick Kroon argues that causalism is untenable because, without descriptive content, it can wrongly determine reference. He illustrates this objection by use of his "Who was Dumas?" example.

In this example, Kroon supposes that there are two people, Person A (A) and Person B (B), where A says, "Dumas was the best friend I ever had." Unbeknownst to B, A is speaking of his deceased dog whom he named after his favorite author, Alexandre Dumas. Because B is unaware of these details, he wonders, "Who was Dumas?" On the causalist view, when B asks this question, he is referring to the dog, not the author. This is because according to causalism, B's use of the name "Dumas" is caused by whatever or whomsoever A's use of the name refers, which in this case, is the dog. Kroon labels this process as "direct reference borrowing," simply meaning that B intends to refer how A refers.

In another case of reference borrowing, "indirect reference borrowing," Kroon illustrates what it is that he finds to be most problematic about causalism. He constructs an example of a man (C) that names his child after the pop-star, Engelbert Humperdinck (EH). In overhearing C talk about his son, Person D (D) says, "What a curious name your son has! Who is, or was, Engelbert Humperdinck?" Because D is asking a question that refers beyond C's usage of the term (C's usage being his son), this is an example of indirect reference borrowing, and what Kroon finds to be most problematic about causalism. He argues that while it is possible that D's question refers to the pop-singer, it is equally possible that D is referring to the German composer from whom the pop-star received his name, or possibly even the person from whom that composer received his name, and so on. Because causalism

appears to provide no way of uniquely distinguishing whom D is referring to on the causal chain, Kroon argues that causal descriptivism is needed to determine a unique referent.

This notion of descriptivism closely resembles what a Fregean sense is supposed to be. For Frege, a sense is an abstract entity that encapsulates certain properties or conditions of each meaningful linguistic expression. Sentences express thoughts, thoughts are a complex of senses, and each meaningful linguistic expression refers to the thing in the world that fits the conditions of the sense. In performing this role, each Fregean sense is assumed to serve the following three functions: 1) be the information value of a linguistic expression, 2) be the means by which reference is determined, and 3) be the entity to which one is related when one has beliefs.

In his paper, "Taking the Fregean Seriously," Mark Richard focuses on the third, "belief ascription" function of a Fregean sense and "takes seriously" the Fregean fact that different people can associate different senses with the same name. This is problematic because, if the sense of a name can vary in descriptive content, then there is no single way to determine what a thought is referring to (there could be multiple interpretations). It is for this reason that Richard asks the motivating question of his discussion, "What does a 'that-clause' (t-clause) which has no one sense associated name, when it occurs in an attitude ascription?" Richard provides, what he calls, "three obvious answers" to this question: 1) that t-clauses in belief attributions name the sense that the believer has in mind, 2) that t-clauses name the sense that the person ascribing the belief has in mind, and 3) that t-clauses characterize a de re belief between the believer and the thought.

While Richard finds each of these "answers" to be problematic, what's troublesome with the first answer is that, while it seems obvious that the belief we're attributing to the believer must have something to do with her representation of the world, there is no way of knowing what her representation actually entails. The sentence is making the claim that a believer is cognitively related to some thought, but we have no way of knowing what exactly that thought is. It is primarily for this reason that Richard believes the Fregean is unable to provide an acceptable account of how attitude ascriptions (particularly, belief ascriptions) are supposed to work.