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Kripke on the A Priori and the Necessary

By Albert Casullo

Philosophers have traditionally believed that there is a close connection between the categories of a priori propositions and necessary propositions. One widely held thesis about the nature of this connection is that all a priori knowledge is of necessary propositions and that all necessary propositions are knowable a priori. Saul Kripke has recently argued that this traditional account is mistaken. In ‘Identity and Necessity’ he argues that there are necessary a posteriori propositions, while in ‘Naming and Necessity’ he argues, in addition to this, that there are contingent a priori propositions. The primary concern of this paper is to examine Kripke’s arguments in order to determine whether he has succeeded in calling the traditional account into question.

I

Kripke’s claim that there are necessary a posteriori propositions arises in the context of a discussion of essential properties. He begins with the following consideration:

Supposing this lectern is in fact made of wood, could this very lectern have been made from the very beginning from ice, say frozen from water in the Thames? One has a considerable feeling that it could not, though in fact one certainly could have made a lectern of water from the Thames, frozen it into ice by some process, and put it right there in place of this thing. If one had done so, one would have made, of course, a different object.

Therefore, in any counterfactual situation in which this lectern existed, it would not have been made from water from the Thames frozen into ice. Kripke goes on to argue that if the essentialist view is correct, then there are necessary propositions knowable only a posteriori. He summarizes his argument in the following manner:

In other words, if P is the statement that the lectern is not made of ice, one knows by a priori philosophical analysis, some conditional of the

1 For example, Kant states in the Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), p. 11, that ‘Any knowledge that professes to hold a priori lays claim to be regarded as absolutely necessary’. Leibniz claims in The Monadology that ‘There are also two kinds of truths, those of reasoning and those of fact. Truths of reasoning are necessary and their opposite is impossible, and those of fact are contingent and their opposite is possible. When a truth is necessary its reason can be found by analysis, resolving it into more simple ideas and truths until we reach those which are primitive.’ See Leibniz: Selections, ed. P. P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), p. 339.


4 Identity and Individuation, p. 152.
form "if \( P \), then necessarily \( P \)". If the table is not made of ice, it is necessarily not made of ice. On the other hand, then, we know by empirical investigation that \( P \), the antecedent of the conditional, is true—that this table is not made of ice. We can conclude by *modus ponens*:

\[
\begin{align*}
P & \Rightarrow \Box P \\
P & \hline \\
\Box P
\end{align*}
\]

The conclusion—"\( \Box P \)—is that it is necessary that the table not be made of ice, and this conclusion is known a posteriori, since one of the premisses on which it is based is a posteriori.\(^1\)

Therefore, since presumably what a certain lectern is made of can be known *only* a posteriori, the essentialist view can be accommodated only if one rejects the thesis that all necessary propositions are knowable a priori.

The claim that if there are essential properties then there are necessary propositions which are knowable only a posteriori is ambiguous, and two different interpretations of it must be distinguished. In order to see this ambiguity, one must distinguish between knowledge of the truth value of a proposition and knowledge of its general modal status. One has *knowledge of the truth value* of a proposition when one knows whether it is true or false. One has *knowledge of the general modal status* of a proposition when one knows whether it is a necessary proposition or a contingent one. Letting 'Fa' stand for the proposition 'a has the property \( F \)' where \( F \) is an essential property of \( a \), one can now see that the claim that there is only a posteriori knowledge of necessary propositions such as 'Fa' can be interpreted in either of the following two ways: (1) 'Fa' is knowable only a posteriori, and 'Fa' is a necessary proposition, or (2) that 'Fa' is a necessary proposition is knowable only a posteriori. If there are essential properties, then it would follow that one could have only a posteriori knowledge of the *truth value* of necessary propositions such as 'Fa'. But, even if there are essential properties, it would not follow that there can be, let alone can only be, a posteriori knowledge of the *general modal status* (or necessity) of propositions such as 'Fa'.

The claim that even if there are essential properties, it would not follow that there can be only a posteriori knowledge of the *general modal status* of some necessary propositions, might seem to be in conflict with Kripke's conclusion. For he maintains that if there are such properties, then '\( \Box P \)' is knowable only a posteriori. Therefore, we seem to have a case of a posteriori knowledge of the necessity (or general modal status) of a proposition. This is not so, however. One must distinguish between

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\(^1\) Ibid., p. 153.
the general modal status and the specific modal status of a proposition. By the general modal status of a proposition I mean its being necessary or its being contingent, regardless of whether it is necessarily true or necessarily false, or contingently true or contingently false. By the specific modal status of a proposition I mean its being necessarily true, necessarily false, contingently true, or contingently false. One must also recognize that knowledge of the specific modal status of a proposition consists of knowledge of its general modal status together with knowledge of its truth value. Hence, in cases where one’s knowledge of both the general modal status of a proposition and its truth value is a priori, knowledge of its specific modal status would also be a priori. But in cases where one’s knowledge of the truth value of a proposition is a posteriori, knowledge of its specific modal status would be a posteriori, even if knowledge of its general modal status is a priori.

Kripke’s claim that ‘□P’ is knowable only a posteriori is a claim about knowledge of the specific modal status of a proposition and is based on the fact that where ‘P’ is a proposition about a physical object possessing a property, its truth value is knowable only a posteriori. But Kripke clearly does not deny that knowledge of the general modal status of propositions about essential properties is a priori. (He says that ‘if P is the statement that the lectern is not made of ice, one knows by a priori philosophical analysis, some conditional of the form “if P, then necessarily ∼P”’.

Therefore, the existence of essential properties would entail that there are necessary propositions whose truth value and specific modal status are knowable only a posteriori, but it would not entail that there are necessary propositions whose general modal status is knowable only a posteriori.

The question whether Kripke’s claims about knowledge of propositions such as ‘Fa’ conflict with the traditional account of the relationship between a priori and necessary propositions is a difficult one to answer, since its proponents did not distinguish between the truth value, specific modal status, and general modal status of a proposition. We can conclude that if there are essential properties like those suggested by Kripke, then it would be incorrect to maintain that the truth value of all necessary propositions can be known a priori. From this it follows that it would also be incorrect to maintain that the specific modal status of all necessary propositions can be known a priori. But the existence of such properties would not call into question the claim that the general modal status of all necessary propositions can be known a priori.

II

In ‘Naming and Necessity’ Kripke attempts to strengthen his claim that the traditional account of the relationship between a priori and

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1 Ibid. The emphasis is mine.
necessary propositions is mistaken by providing an example of a proposition which is contingent but knowable a priori. His discussion begins with a consideration of Wittgenstein’s comments about the standard metre. Wittgenstein claimed, ‘There is one thing of which one can say neither that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long, and that is the standard metre in Paris.’ Kripke disagrees: ‘If the stick is a stick, for example, 39.37 inches long (I assume we have some different standard for inches), why isn’t it one metre long?’ He then goes on to raise the question whether the proposition that the standard metre is one metre long at time $t_0$ is a necessary truth. He argues that the proposition is not necessary even if one grants that by definition the standard metre is one metre long at time $t_0$ because

the ‘definition’, properly interpreted, does not say that the phrase ‘one metre’ is to be synonymous (even when talking about counterfactual situations) with the phrase ‘the length of $S$ at $t_0$’ but rather we have determined the reference of the phrase ‘one metre’ by stipulating that ‘one metre’ is to be a rigid designator of the length which is in fact the length of $S$ at $t_0$. So this does not make it a necessary truth that $S$ is one metre long at $t_0$.

Kripke goes on to claim that for a person who fixes the metric system by reference to stick $S$ at $t_0$, the proposition ‘Stick $S$ is one metre long at $t_0$’ is known a priori:

For if he used stick $S$ to fix the reference of the term ‘one metre’, then as a result of this kind of ‘definition’ (which is not abbreviative or synonymous definition), he knows automatically, without further investigation, that $S$ is one metre long.

Therefore, the proposition that stick $S$ is one metre long at $t_0$ is both contingent and knowable a priori.

In order to evaluate this argument we must distinguish the following two sentences: (1) $S$ is one metre long at $t_0$; (2) The length of $S$ at $t_0$ is one metre. A further distinction must also be made between two possible interpretations of the second sentence. We may follow Donnellan by pointing out that the definite description ‘the length of $S$ at $t_0$’ can be used either attributively or referentially. (I shall not attempt to defend

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2 *Semantics of Natural Language*, p. 274.
3 Ibid., p. 275.
4 Ibid.
5 See Keith S. Donnellan, ‘Reference and Definite Descriptions’, *The Philosophical Review*, LXXV (1966): 281–304. On page 25 he states, A person who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so. A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion, on the other hand, uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing.
the distinction here.) When a speaker uses the sentence, ‘The length of $S$ at $t_0$ is one metre,’ to introduce the term ‘one metre’, he might be making either of the two following claims: (a) he wishes to introduce ‘one metre’ as the name of the length of $S$ at $t_0$ whatever that length might be; (b) there is a particular length which he has in mind and which he can identify independently of the truth of the proposition that it is the length of $S$ at $t_0$, and it is this length which he wishes to call ‘one metre’. Depending on how the definite description is used to introduce the term ‘one metre’, what is asserted by (2) and, consequently, also what is asserted by (1) will change.

If one uses the definite description attributively in introducing ‘one metre’ by means of sentence (2), then one is using ‘one metre’ as the name of the length of $S$ at $t_0$ whatever it may be. The term is not being introduced as the name of a particular length which the speaker has singled out but as the name of whatever length happens to satisfy the definite description. This method of introducing the term results in what Kripke calls an ‘abbreviative definition’, for the speaker is using the term ‘one metre’ as an abbreviation for the phrase ‘the length of $S$ at $t_0$’. As a result of this definition, the proposition expressed by the sentence ‘The length of $S$ at $t_0$ is one metre’ is a necessary one, true solely in virtue of the terms used in expressing it. Since it is true solely in virtue of the meanings of its terms, it is also knowable a priori. If the term ‘one metre’ is introduced in this manner, the proposition expressed by the sentence ‘$S$ is one metre long’ is also a necessary one. Since ‘one metre’ is an abbreviation for ‘the length of $S$ at $t_0$’, the proposition expressed by the sentence ‘$S$ is one metre long’ is identical to the one expressed by the sentence ‘$S$ has at $t_0$ whatever length it does have at $t_0$’ which is trivially true. Hence, if the term ‘one metre’ is introduced by means of a sentence which uses the definite description attributively, both propositions—that expressed by the sentence ‘The length of $S$ at $t_0$ is one metre’ and that expressed by the sentence ‘$S$ is one metre long at $t_0$’—are necessary and a priori.

The situation is not the same, however, if one uses the definite description referentially in introducing the term ‘one metre’ by means of sentence (2), for the speaker is not introducing ‘one metre’ as the name of whatever length happens to satisfy the definite description ‘the length of $S$ at $t_0$’. Instead, he is introducing it as the name of a particular length to which he tries to call attention by using the definite description. He uses this particular definite description because he believes that $S$ in fact has the length he wishes to name. But if it should happen that due to some peculiar environmental conditions $S$ does not have the length he thought it had, then the speaker would have introduced ‘one metre’ as the name of the length which he thought $S$ had, rather than the one which it in fact had. Therefore, the term ‘one metre’ is not being used as a
synonym for ‘the length of $S$ at $t_0$’ but as the name of a particular length, whether or not it is in fact the length $S$ at $t_0$.

Since this point might not be clear in the case of lengths, let us consider the case of colours. Suppose someone were to introduce the term ‘red’ using the definite description ‘the colour of $S$ at $t_0$’ referentially. Also, suppose that he is using the definite description to refer to the colour red; but, because of some peculiar lighting conditions unknown to the speaker and everyone else in the immediate vicinity of $S$, although $S$ appears red, it is in fact white. Since the speaker was using the definite description to draw attention to a particular colour, and it was that particular colour he wished to name ‘red’, he would have introduced ‘red’ as the name of the colour red despite the fact that the colour satisfying the definite description ‘the colour of $S$ at $t_0$’ was white. In such a case, a necessary proposition does result in virtue of the definition of ‘red’. This necessary proposition, however, is not satisfactorily expressed by the sentence ‘The colour of $S$ at $t_0$ is red’. It is more accurately captured by the sentence, ‘This colour is red’, where ‘this colour’ refers to the colour the speaker singled out using the definite description. This proposition is also knowable a priori, since it can be known solely on the basis of the definition of ‘red’.

Returning to our original example, introducing ‘one metre’ as the name of a particular length to which one calls attention with the definite description ‘the length of $S$ at $t_0$’ also yields a necessary proposition, which can be best expressed by the sentence ‘This length is one metre’, where ‘this length’ refers to the length to which the speaker was calling attention. This proposition is also knowable a priori. But this is not true of the proposition expressed by the sentence ‘$S$ is one metre long’. Since ‘one metre’ has been introduced as the name of a particular length, the proposition expressed by the sentence ‘$S$ is one metre long’ is no longer identical to the one expressed by the sentence ‘$S$ has whatever length it does have’. Instead, what it asserts is more accurately expressed by the compound sentence ‘$S$ has this length (rather than another), and this length is one metre’. As was stated above, the second conjunct is both necessary and knowable a priori. But this is not true of the first conjunct. For, as Kripke correctly points out, it is a contingent fact about $S$ that it has any particular length; had the environmental conditions been different at $t_0$, $S$ would have had a different length at $t_0$.

We must notice, however, that this conjunct is also knowable only a posteriori. For although one knows a priori that the length one singled out with the definite description ‘the length of $S$ at $t_0$’ is one metre, one does not know a priori that $S$ in fact has that length. One can know this only on the basis of a posteriori considerations, such as the manner in which the object appears and the conditions under which it appears in that way. Therefore, the sentence ‘$S$ is one metre long at $t_0$’ expresses a
contingent and a posteriori proposition when ‘one metre’ is introduced by means of a sentence which uses the definite description ‘the length of $S$ at $t_0’$ referentially.

Let us consider again our example of the speaker who introduces the term ‘red’ using the definite description ‘the colour of $S$ at $t_0’$ referentially. Although he knows a priori that this colour is red, he does not know a priori that $S$ is red, for he does not know a priori that $S$ has the colour he named ‘red’. If he were to infer that $S$ was red on the basis of the manner in which he introduced the term ‘red’, not only would he be unjustified, but he would also be mistaken in this case, since, by hypothesis, $S$ is in fact white at $t_0$. He would be justified in believing that $S$ is red at $t_0$ only if he knew that $S$ appears red and that only red objects appear red under the conditions in which $S$ appears red. But both of these facts can be known only a posteriori. Therefore, his knowledge that $S$ is red is a posteriori. It is based on his knowledge that $S$ has this particular colour (rather than another), which is a posteriori, and his knowledge that this colour is red, which is a priori.

It might be argued that there is a third way of introducing the term ‘one metre’ which has not been considered.¹ When a speaker uses the definite description ‘the length of $S$ at $t_0’$ attributively in introducing ‘one metre’, there are two possibilities: (1) the speaker might be using the definite description to give the meaning of the term, in which case ‘one metre’ is an abbreviation for ‘the length of $S$ at $t_0’; or (2) the speaker might be using the definite description to fix the reference of the term, in which case ‘one metre’ is the name (or rigid designator) of whatever length $S$ happens to have at $t_0$. Although we have considered the first case, we have neglected the second. The primary reason for neglecting this case is that it does not constitute a genuine possibility. Since, by hypothesis, the description is not used referentially, how can one generate a genuine name from it? How can one, relying solely on the description, provide the term with reference? The appeal to the vague and unexplained notion of ‘fixing reference’ does not by itself provide answers to these questions. If the term is to be a genuine name, rather than merely an abbreviation of the description, there must be criteria for its use which are not simply the criteria for the use of the description. It must be possible, at least in principle, for someone to determine whether the term is used correctly on future occasions without relying on the description. (This, of course, would be possible if the description had been used referentially.) If this is not possible, then it is no longer clear in what sense the term is not a mere abbreviation of the description and the distinction between the term’s being a name and its being such an abbreviation appears to be of little consequence. Therefore, at the very least, Kripke owes us much further explanation.

¹ This point is due to the editor.
The failure to provide a convincing example of a contingent a priori proposition removes the basis of Kripke's second argument against the traditional account of the relationship between the a priori and the necessary. He has not given us any reason to suppose that the traditional philosophers were mistaken in claiming that all a priori knowledge is of necessary propositions.¹

¹ I am indebted to Professor Panayot Butchvarov for a number of illuminating discussions on several aspects of this paper.

THE ATTRIBUTIVE USE OF PROPER NAMES

By A. P. Martinich

It is widely held that Keith Donnellan has successfully argued that definite descriptions in the subject position of a sentence have, among their possible uses, an attributive use, which is distinct from the philosophically familiar referential use. Here is his complete characterization of it:

A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so. A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion, on the other hand, uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing. In the first case the definite description might be said to occur essentially, for the speaker wishes to assert something about whoever or whoever fits that description; but in the referential use the definite description is merely one tool for doing a certain job—calling attention to a person or thing—and in general any other device for doing the same job, another description or a name, would do as well. In the attributive use, the attribute of being the so-and-so is all important, while it is not in the referential use ("Reference and Definite Descriptions", Philosophical Review 75 (1966), p. 235).

In this paper I want to argue that if we suppose that there is an attributive use and that Donnellan has adequately characterized it, then there is also an attributive use of ordinary proper names. In itself,