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KRIPKE AND THE ILLUSION OF CONTINGENT IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Saul Kripke's (1971, 1972) modal essentialist argument against materialism remains an obstacle to any prospective Identity Theorist. This paper is an attempt to make room for an Identity Theory without dismissing Kripke's analytic tools or essentialist intuitions. I propose an explanatory model that can make room for the Identity Theory within the constraints of Kripke's view; the model is based on ideas from Alan Sidelle's, "Identity and Identity-like" (1992). My model explains the apparent contingency of some scientific identities by appealing to our epistemic access to the conditions of identity for sensations and brain processes. *Pace* Kripke, the Identity Theorist can thus explain away the apparent contingency of mind-brain identity claims.

KRIPKE AND THE ILLUSION OF CONTINGENT IDENTITY

An obstacle to any serious type-identity theory in the philosophy of mind (hereafter, Identity Theory) is Saul Kripke's modal essentialist argument against materialism. The standard way for materialists to avoid Kripke's argument is to deny that the argument applies to the theory in question, typically on the grounds that the theory does not specify identities using rigid designators. This response may be used by functionalists, but it is not readily available to the Identity Theorist. The present essay is an attempt to make room for an Identity Theory that specifies identities using rigid designators, without dismissing Kripke's analytic tools. I will suggest that there is at least one possibility that could accomplish this aim. I am not trying to argue that the Identity Theory is the correct metaphysical theory of consciousness; I am merely trying to show that it is a live option in the philosophy of mind.

I

Kripke's argument against materialism is so well known that it is by now an obligatory cliché to begin any discussion of it by pointing out how well known it is. The idea, I suppose, is to avoid recapitulating the argument in excruciating detail, yet again. At least, that is my purpose.

If the relation between two rigidly designated things or kinds is contingent, then that relation cannot be identity. So in order to maintain that scientific identities are necessary, Kripke needs a way to explain away the apparent contingency.

In the case of water and H₂O, Kripke argues, we might have thought that water seems only contingently to be H₂O. But the apparent contingency of the identity is to be explained by the actual contingency that H₂O is the stuff with which we are familiar. We are to understand our belief as something like, "the clear, cool, thirst-quenching liquid found in the rivers and lakes, that rains from the sky, that we call 'water'... might not have turned out to be H₂O." This, Kripke points out, is not a case where water fails to be identical to the chemical kind H₂O. Rather, it is a case in

which the clear, cool, thirst-quenching liquid found in the rivers and lakes, that rains from the sky, that we call ‘water’... is not water. The apparent contingency is due to the fact that something other than water could have the superficial characteristics—the appearance—of water. This is Kripke’s epistemic model of explaining away the apparent contingency of scientific identities.

If the appearance of contingency can be revealed to be illusory, then the identity can be maintained. Water is H₂O. Heat is kinetic molecular energy. Gold is the element with atomic number 79. And so forth. If the apparent contingency cannot be explained, then we are obliged to apply *modus tollens* and conclude that there is no identity, but some other relation instead. This is the problem that Kripke raises for the Identity Theory.

Kripke argues that the epistemic model fails when it comes to mind-brain identity claims. Sensations do not admit of the appearance-reality distinction that allows us to explain away the apparent contingencies of in other cases. Anything superficially like pain, is pain. That’s just what pain is:

To be in the same epistemic situation that would obtain if one had a pain *is* to have a pain; to be in the same epistemic that would obtain in the absence of pain *is* not to have a pain. The apparent contingency of the connection between the mental state and the corresponding brain state thus cannot be explained by some qualitative analogue as in the case of heat (1972/80: 152).

Because the apparent contingency of the relation between pain and C-fiber activation cannot be explained away as in the other cases, Kripke concludes that pain cannot be identical to C-fiber activation.

I am trying to make room for an Identity Theory about consciousness. This means that I have some explaining to do—more precisely, some explaining away. Kripke himself puts it thus:

[The materialist] has to hold that we are under some illusion in thinking that we can imagine that there could have been pains without brain states.... So the materialist is up against a very stiff challenge. He has to show that these things we think we can

see to be possible are in fact not possible. He has to show that these things we think we can imagine are not in fact things we can imagine (1971: 163).¹

I accept that the Identity Theory will make claims such as that a red sensation of such-and-such sort is identical to this-and-that activation, event, property, or some such in the brain. And I accept that the terms of the Identity Theory's claims are used rigidly. Moreover, I accept Kripke's claim of essentiality: pain is essentially painful, this sensation of red is essentially like *this* [insert inner ostension here.] I therefore accept, in contrast to the earlier Identity Theorists to whom Kripke addressed his argument, that mind-brain identities are, as scientifically discovered identities, necessary *a posteriori*—just like 'water is H₂O' and 'Hesperus is Phosphorus'. In short, I am trying to make room for just the sort of Identity Theory that Kripke has in mind, just the sort that his argument is designed to run against.

Kripke says that the epistemic model for explaining away the apparent contingency of certain identity claims ("water is H₂O", "Hesperus is Phosphorus") is the only model he can think of, but he leaves it open that there could be others:

That the usual moves and analogies are not available to solve the problems of the identity theorist is, of course, no proof that no moves are available. ...I suspect, however, that the present considerations tell heavily against the usual forms of materialism (1972/80: 155).

Earlier Kripke wrote, of the Identity Theorist's challenge,

[T]he only model I can think of for what the illusion might be...simply does not work in this case.... [An alternative model] requires some very different philosophical argument from the sort that has been given in the case of heat and molecular motion. And it would have to be a deeper and subtler argument than I can fathom and subtler than has ever appeared in any materialist literature that I have read (1971: 163).

¹ Kripke believes that what is not possible is not imaginable; alternatively, one could hold that imaginability is not

I am proposing just such an alternative explanation. The apparent contingency of mind-body identities is not genuine metaphysical contingency; it is an illusion that can be explained by our epistemic situation. The model that I have in mind was suggested by ideas presented in Alan Sidelle's essay, "Identity and Identity-like" (1992). Whether my model is deeper and subtler than Kripke's model is a matter that I leave to the reader.

II

Alan Sidelle explores the question of what distinguishes those cases in which we entertain the possibility of scientific identity (e.g., sensations and brain processes) from those we do not even consider (e.g., sensations and weather activity). He argues that such discovery requires us to already know something about the things in question:

While water turned out to be H_2O , it could have turned out to be H_2SO_4 , or XYZ, and if it had, we would presumably be as willing to accept these as H_2O as identifications with water. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that we would consider 'liquid enjoyed by George Washington' as a candidate for identity with water, even if it turned out that all and only water (the items we call 'water') has this feature. What this suggests is that there are 'candidacy' criteria which anything must meet if it is to be a candidate for identification with our subject of inquiry. And I suggest that in order to be such a candidate, something must have identity conditions which are compatible with those for our subject. [fn.11] Identity conditions are compatible if, and only if, when spelled out precisely, they might be the same. (1992: 273)

In footnote 11 Sidelle explains that identity conditions are:

the sorts of things that are represented by statements saying, for any possible object, what features it must have in order to be, or those which suffice for it to be

a good guide to possibility (e.g., Putnam, 1975.)

(identical to) some particular thing (or, for kinds or properties, for something to be a member of that kind, or possess that property). ...a specification of identity conditions need not state with full precision—need not mention—what the relevant features are; for certain purposes, ‘this chemical microstructure’ or ‘this thing’s origin’ will do as well as ‘H₂O’ or ‘sperm S and egg O’. (1992: 291)

The conditions of identity for a thing or kind of thing are the boundary conditions for *being* that thing (token-identity) or that kind of thing (type-identity).

It was discovered that gold is not a compound (much to the alchemists’ despair), and that it is not the element with atomic number 14; but we do not even consider that gold is a Bordeaux wine. Common material stuffs have identity conditions (specified generally) that involve their contemporaneous microstructure; whereas French wines have identity conditions (specified generally) that involve their appellation and vintage. We do not even consider the identification of gold with Bordeaux, for the identity conditions (specified generally) for gold are incompatible with those for Bordeaux. Something is gold whether or not it comes from a certain place, at a certain time; not so for Château Haut-Brion.

As it turns out (again, much to the alchemists’ despair), the identity conditions of gold—specified precisely—are also incompatible with those of lead. But *that* empirical discovery is prefaced on knowing that the general identity conditions for each were microstructural, and then discovering that gold and lead differ in precise microstructure. But precision in the identity conditions, the full *principium individuationis*, is not what is relevant to candidacy:

Compatibility of conditions is required here, rather than sameness, because at the time an identification is being considered, it will be unclear what the precise identity conditions are—if, for example, the identity conditions for elements are to be given by their atomic structure, all atomic structures are candidates for identification with some element, but before we make the identification we cannot specify, say,

‘atomic number 79’. If we had to know that the fully specified conditions were the *same*, we would already know whether the identity held. (Sidelle 1992: 273)

To know that a thing is a thing of a certain kind, one must not only know some information about the thing, one must also know which information is relevant to deciding whether the item is an item of a particular kind.² That is, one must know what sort of features are relevant to being a thing of certain kind. Sidelle introduces the example of a schoolchild’s art project: If I want to know whether a certain bit of clay is an urn, I need to know that, say, macro-shape is among the relevant criteria for being an urn. It’s not enough to know the actual shape of the thing. I need to know that shape rather than microstructure or atomic number is a condition for being an urn.³

What happens when one does not know the identity conditions for a thing? Perhaps you are a proverbial American analytic philosopher who comes across a cricket match. Suppose you know that it is a cricket match on superficial grounds (someone reliable has told you that it is a cricket match.) Will you thereby know the identity conditions for cricket matches? Plainly not. You might be entirely unaware of the identity conditions for the match; you might not know that the match can continue even when there is nothing “cricketish” occurring on this field, unlike the urn which must remain urnish to be an urn. Or you may have some notion of the identity conditions for the match, but not enough to know for certain, in borderline cases, whether an event is part of the match. In this case, one knows some of the properties of a thing, but not enough to know the identity conditions for things of that kind.

² Here, especially, I want to be clear that I may not be in agreement with Sidelle’s analysis. He argues that although scientific identities are empirically discovered, the conditions of identity must be known *a priori*. On that view, it is proper to say that knowledge of identity conditions must come *before* knowledge of identity. My use of Sidelle’s notions of candidacy and of identity conditions does not depend on his analysis of them. In particular, Sidelle introduces these ideas and then argues that they are *a priori*, consistent with his nominalism (1989). I do not believe that the present argument rests on this question of *a prioricity*—which is in fact Sidelle’s central concern in the paper from which I am drawing.

³ It looks as though Sidelle’s “identity conditions (generally specified)” for a kind are at work in most philosophical discussions of individuation and identity through time. Certainly this is so of the literature on personal identity from Locke’s discussion (*Essay*, II.xxvii) on. It is a matter for courts or psychiatrists, or God, to determine if *this* is the same person as *that* (i.e., what the precise *principium individuationis* for *this* person is.) But it is matter for philosophers to inquire after the general conditions for the identity and survival of substances, trees, brutes, persons, and so on. That is, the conditions for when something comes to be or ceases to be the thing or kind of thing that it

Another case wherein identity conditions may be unknown is when one is entirely unsure of what kind of thing one is faced with: One day your child, sibling, niece, friend, or whomever arrives with a painted lump of clay. “Look what I made!” Is it an urn, you wonder? A bowl? The notorious *ashtray*? If the identity conditions involve shape it might be one thing; if they involve function, another; and so on. It seems that one must know the identity conditions (generally specified) for this kind of thing in order to begin to guess what it is. You must know, for example, that school craft projects—despite overwhelming *prima facie* evidence—are not simply lumps of clay that have been painted.

Suppose we are considering the type-identity of two kinds of things, widgets and thingamajigs. If we know that their identity conditions are incompatible, then we know that they cannot be identical. If we know that they have the same identity conditions, then we have (at least) reason to think that they are identical. If their identity conditions are compatible so far as we know, then—so far as we know—they are candidates for identity.

Likewise, if we do not know how to individuate either widgets or thingamajigs, or both then so far as we know they are candidates for identification—for as far as we know, their identity conditions are compatible. At the same time, as far as we know their identity conditions are incompatible. If we are uninformed about the identity conditions for some widgets and thingamajigs, then even if they are identical it might seem that they could fail to be, that it could be otherwise. Thus arises the appearance of contingency.

Let us return now to a case of scientific identity. Before the advent of molecular chemistry, the identity conditions for water (as they were known at the time) were compatible with its being an element or a molecule. Even on molecular chemistry, the identity conditions (generally specified) for water are compatible with its being some molecule other than H₂O. It is only when the identity conditions for water are more precisely specified, perhaps fully specified, that we conclude that water is identical to H₂O—that it could not be other than H₂O. The identity conditions for water are

is.

identical to the identity conditions for H₂O, and incompatible with those of any other stuff. Having discovered that the identity conditions for water and H₂O are identical, the apparent contingency of “water is H₂O” is eliminated.

I am suggesting that some identity claims may appear contingent, even though they are not, because we do not know the relevant criteria of identity to apply. Compatible criteria of individuation (generally specified)—if they are not known to be identical—thus provide a second model for explaining away the apparent contingency of putative identities; call it the *individuation model*. It might seem that water does not have to be H₂O if you do not know how to individuate typical material mass kinds, and if you do not know that molecular structure is the way we individuate substance kinds.⁴ It might seem that this thing does not have to be a chair if you do not know how to identify chairs; but once you know how chairs are identified, you know that this thing cannot fail to be a chair. You might still, of course, fail to recognize that this is a chair—you might be unsure, you might think that it is not a very good example of a chair, or that it is only vaguely a chair. But all of these possibilities that you might consider depend upon your already knowing the criteria of identity (generally specified) for chairs.⁵

Another example is the case of chemical elements. It might have seemed, at one time, that gold does not have to be the element with atomic number 79. It might have seemed that way, for example, before the atomic theory of chemistry was developed. The atomic theory tells of how to individuate things of certain kinds. After the atomic theory, we do not think that gold could have atomic number 80, or that something with atomic number 79 could fail to be gold. I am claiming

⁴ I have been using ‘criteria’ interchangeably with ‘condition’. I am arguing that there is a model that can explain away the apparent contingency that remains in cases in which the criteria of identity that we use are correct but generally specified identity conditions. If, as is likely, we do not use the conditions of identity for things as the criteria for identifying or individuating them, then this only helps my cause. For if our criteria of identity are wrong or—if there is a difference—not the conditions of identity, then so much greater will be the sense of contingency.

⁵ You might think—perhaps you would also think this of games—that chairs do not have well defined criteria of identity. This is beside the point for my purposes. I am concerned with failures that depend upon not knowing (or not knowing enough about) criteria of identity. If identity conditions are vague or uncertain, that might be yet another source of apparent contingency. But this is different from the apparent contingency that results from simply not knowing how to individuate the items at hand.

that, when it comes to sensations and brain processes, we are in a position analogous to chemistry before the atomic theory.

We do not know how to individuate brain states. We do not know the identity conditions of brain states. It is sufficient for my case that we do not know how to individuate brain states; but I also contend that we do not know, with much specificity, the identity conditions for sensations. The latter is a more controversial claim. It is sufficient that we are under- or uninformed about the identity conditions of one or the other; if it is both about which we are in the dark, so much greater will be the illusory sense of contingency.

III

There is not space enough here to defend my proposal on empirical grounds. Unless we know that the identity conditions for sensations and brain processes are incompatible, the possibility remains open that they are identical. But until we know the precise *principium individuationis* for sensations and brain processes, it will appear that they could fail to be identical. If they are identical, that appearance is illusory; and it is an appearance that, *pace* Kripke, can be explained without abandoning the Identity Theory. The individuation model thus provides a new tactic for explaining away the intuition of contingency about scientific identities.

I have not argued that an Identity Theory is correct. My burden has been to diffuse Kripke's objection, to show that the Identity Theory is philosophically viable. This is only one step in the rehabilitation of Identity Theory.

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