

World-indexed Descriptivism and an Illusory Problem of Empty Names^{*†}

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Stuart Brock criticizes two kinds of descriptivist views developed in response to Saul Kripke's modal argument. In this paper, I raise an objection to Brock's criticism of the world-indexed view by arguing that he fails to distinguish between $\exists x(\mathbf{A}F!x)$ and $\mathbf{A}\exists x(F!x)$.

주 제 philosophy of language

주요어 empty names, descriptivism, modal argument, actuality, existence

In his paper "The Ubiquitous Problem of Empty Names", Stuart Brock criticizes two kinds of descriptivist views developed in response to Saul Kripke's modal argument.¹⁾ That argument runs as follows²⁾:

Let 'N' be some name and 'the F' a description that uniquely pick

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1) Stuart Brock (2004), "The Ubiquitous Problem of Empty Names", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 101, pp.277-298.

2) Saul Kripke (1980). I am following Brock's formulation of the argument. Stuart Brock (2004), p.285.

out N--a purported candidate for the meaning of 'N'.

- (i) 'The F might have not have been an F' is ambiguous.
- (ii) If 'N' were used to mean 'the F', then 'N might not have been an F' would also be ambiguous.
- (iii) But 'N might not have been an F' is unambiguously true.
- (vi) Therefore, 'N' is not used to mean 'the F'.

Some descriptivists respond to this argument by incorporating an actuality operator into the relevant descriptions and thereby rigidifying the relevant descriptions. Thus, instead of saying 'the F' is the meaning of 'N', they say 'the actual F' is the meaning of 'N'. According to this view, (i) is false. After all, 'the *actual* F might not have been an *actual* F' is not ambiguous at all. Other descriptivists respond to the argument by taking names as descriptions that always take wide scope over modal operators occurring in the same sentence. According to this view, (ii) is false. Brock calls the former view 'world-indexed descriptivism' and the latter view 'wide-scope descriptivism', and he raises objections to both of them by claiming that they have a problem with empty names. In this paper, I will raise an objection to his criticism of the world-indexed view. So, below, I will only explain his objection to the world-indexed view and criticize it.

His objection to world-indexed view runs as follows. Consider an empty name 'Santa Claus'. Let 'F!' be a predicate like 'is a *unique* big fat jolly man who has a beard and lives at the north pole and so forth', and 'A' the modal operator 'actually'. Then, according to world-indexed descriptivism, 'Santa Claus does not exist' is expressed as follows:

$$\neg \exists x(\mathbf{A}F!x)$$

This is true. Now, it seems a commonplace that Santa Claus might have existed. ‘Santa might have existed’ is expressed as follows:

$$\diamond \exists x(\mathbf{AF!}x)$$

But this is false, according to Brock, who says the following:

If it is false that *in the actual world*, there is an x that has a beard, lives at the north pole,..., then it is also false that there is a possible world such that: *in the actual world* there is an x that has a beard, lives at the north pole,...³⁾

According to this reasoning, if $\neg \exists x(\mathbf{AF!}x)$ is true, then it’s necessarily true, and thus $\diamond \exists x(\mathbf{AF!}x)$ is false. Brock claims, then, that Santa Claus could not have existed according to world-indexed descriptivism.

Brock says that the fact that this view is contrary to commonsense is not itself a big problem. He says commonplaces can be challenged. His point is rather that world-indexed descriptivism attributes widespread stupidity. The descriptivist claims that names have meanings or senses and whenever we use a name, we must have the sense associated with it in mind. But if these senses are captured by ‘the actual F ’, then, Brock claims, once we realize that there is no individual who fits that description, we should be in a position to infer that Santa could not have existed. Given that most people assert both that Santa does not exist and that Santa might have existed, world-indexed descriptivism

3) Stuart Brock (2004), p.289.

has the consequence that most of us suffer from some rational failing or other. Brock claims that “we should be suspicious of any theory that attributes such widespread stupidity.”⁴⁾ This is his objection to world-indexed view.

Now I will argue that Brock's reasoning about why Santa Claus could not have existed according to world-indexed descriptivism is mistaken. If his reasoning is correct, then we could apply exactly the same kind of reasoning to the cases of non-empty names, and we can get a much more devastating objection to world-indexed view. But I will show that this cannot be done. This will show that Brock's reasoning in the case of empty-names is mistaken. I will illustrate it below.

Consider a non-empty name ‘George W. Bush’. Let ‘F!’ be a predicate that might plausibly capture the meaning of this name, a description like ‘is a *unique* president of the USA in 2006’, and let ‘A’ be the modal operator ‘actually’. Then, according to world-indexed descriptivism, ‘George W. Bush exists’ is expressed as follows:

$$\exists x(\mathbf{AF!}x)$$

This is true. Now, it seems a commonplace that George W. Bush might not have existed. ‘George W. Bush might not have existed’ is expressed as follows:

$$\diamond\neg\exists x(\mathbf{AF!}x)$$

If we apply the same kind of reasoning Brock employs in the case

4) Stuart Brock (2004), p.291.

of empty-names, this turns out to be false. Following Brock's reasoning, if it is true that *in the actual world*, there is an x that is a president of the USA in 2006, then it is also true that every possible is such that: *in the actual world* there is an x that is a president of the USA in 2006. According to this reasoning, if $\exists x(\mathbf{A}F!x)$ is true, then it's necessarily true, and thus $\Diamond\neg\exists x(\mathbf{A}F!x)$ is false. Thus, we have the consequence that George W. Bush necessarily exists according to world-indexed descriptivism.

If this is sound reasoning, it creates a much more serious objection to the world-indexed view than Brock's own objection. The commonplace that Santa Claus (or Sherlock Holmes or unicorns, etc.) might have existed is challenged by philosophers such as Kripke,⁵⁾ but, as far as I know, no philosopher challenges the claim that ordinary people like George W. Bush might not have existed. Thus, if world-indexed descriptivism has the consequence that all of the actually existing things could not have failed to exist, then it will be in big trouble.

The question is whether world-indexed view really does have this consequence. The answer is No! Here is why. Even if $\exists x(\mathbf{A}F!x)$ is true, it's *not* necessarily true. It's because that there is a possible world such that: at w the person who is a unique president of the USA in 2006 in the actual world does not exist. Thus,

$$\exists x(\mathbf{A}F!x)$$

is false. When $\exists x(\mathbf{A}F!x)$ is true, what is necessarily true is $\mathbf{A}\exists x(F!x)$.

5) Saul Kripke (1980).

It's because if it is true that *in the actual world*, there is an x that is a unique president of the USA in 2006, then, it is also true that every possible is such that: *in the actual world* there is an x that is a unique president of the USA in 2006. Thus,

$$\mathbf{A} \exists x(F!x)$$

is true. This shows that $\exists x(\mathbf{A}F!x)$ and $\mathbf{A} \exists x(F!x)$ are not equivalent.

We can now see what went wrong with Brock's reasoning in the case of empty-names. Brock fails to distinguish between $\exists x(\mathbf{A}F!x)$ and $\mathbf{A} \exists x(F!x)$. His reasoning in explaining why $\exists x(\mathbf{A}F!x)$ is necessarily false, when it's false, in fact applies to $\mathbf{A} \exists x(F!x)$, not $\exists x(\mathbf{A}F!x)$. When we evaluate whether $\mathbf{A} \exists x(G!x)$ is true at other worlds, we only need to check whether $\exists x(G!x)$ is true in the actual world. If it's true in the actual world, then $\mathbf{A} \exists x(G!x)$ is also true at every other world. If it's false in the actual world, then $\mathbf{A} \exists x(G!x)$ is also false at every other world. Thus, if it's true, it's necessarily true, and if it's false, it's necessarily false.

However, when we evaluate whether $\exists x(\mathbf{A}G!x)$ is true at other worlds, we have to check whether the same individual who is a unique G in the actual world also exists in those other worlds (of course, that individual doesn't have to be G at those world unless G is one of her essential properties). That is, we have to check whether a certain person who satisfies G in the actual world also exists at other worlds. For example, if ' $G!$ ' is a predicate 'a unique person who is a tennis player who won Wimbledon in 2005', then we know that $\exists x(G!x)$ is true in the actual world, and that person is Roger Federer. In order to see whether $\exists x(\mathbf{A}G!x)$ is true at other worlds, we have to see whether

this person, Roger Federer, exists at other worlds as well. Obviously, at some worlds, that person exists (whether or not he is a tennis player at those worlds), but at some other worlds, that person doesn't exist (perhaps because his parents never met at those worlds).

In conclusion, I have shown that Brock's reason for claiming that Santa Claus could not have existed according to world-indexed descriptivism is mistaken. Brock fails to distinguish between $\exists x(\mathbf{A}F!x)$ and $\mathbf{A}\exists x(F!x)$. Showing that $\exists x(\mathbf{A}F!x)$ is necessarily false, if it's false, is a key premise of the main argument in his paper. If his argument in support of this premise is fallacious, as I maintain it is, his whole argument fails.

References

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Discussion

세계-색인-기술 이론과 비어 있는 이름에 대한 가상적 문제

김 세 화

스튜어트 브록은 소울 크립키의 양상 논증을 극복하기 위해 개발된 두가지 종류의 기술 이론에 대해 비판을 한 바 있다. 본 논문에서 필자는 브록이 $\exists x(AF!x)$ and $\mathbf{A}\exists x(F!x)$ 를 구분하지 못했음을 보여줌으로써 그에 대한 반론을 제기한다.

[Subject] 언어철학

[Key Words] 비어 있는 이름, 기술이론, 양상 논증, 현실성, 존재