

# ON DEFENCE OF KRIPKE: NECESSARY *A POSTERIORI* PROPOSITION

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ABSTRACT: One of Kripke's innovations concerning the philosophy of language is the doctrine that the truth of some metaphysically necessary propositions is *only* known *a posteriori*. The typical example he gives is the identity statement consists of *two different* proper names that refer to the same referent, like "Hesperus = Phosphorus". By metaphysically necessary he means that the proposition is true in all possible worlds and by *a posteriori* knowledge he means that its truth is known by experiment or investigation. Some philosophers have given arguments against Kripke's doctrine and claimed that such propositions can, *also*, be known *a priori*. In this paper, I will defend Kripke's view by showing that his approach to the issue is linguistic not metaphysical, opposite to his critics.

KEYWORDS: Kripke, a posteriori, a priori, necessary proposition

## 1. Kripke's Doctrine and Critics' Argument

Saul Kripke has claimed that some necessary propositions are *only* known as *a posteriori* (Kripke 1982, 98-105 & 160), one kind is an identity proposition concerning *two different* proper names, such as "Hesperus = Phosphorus". Because the names 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' refer to the same object, the sentence is firstly true and secondly necessary, since in Kripke's view proper names are rigid designators i.e., they refer to the same referent in all possible worlds (including the actual world); so, the two names denote Venus in all possible worlds; therefore, the identity proposition is true in all possible worlds, that is, the proposition is metaphysically necessary. Thirdly, it was an astronomical discovery that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' have the same referent; that is, the truth of the identity is known *a posteriori*.

However, some critics, like G.W. Fitch (Fitch 1976, 243-247), Scott Soames (Soames 2011, 83-87), and Mihai Rusu (Rusu 2011, 197-218) have criticized Kripke's claim. They have presented their arguments in different terms. However, the core of their views is the same and the main point of their argument against Kripke is as follows: a proposition is the object of knowledge. In our example, the proposition is, in fact, the identity of Venus with itself (i.e. "Venus = Venus"). This proposition may be expressed in terms of "Hesperus = Hesperus" and is therefore known *a priori* (i.e., the proposition is necessary *a priori*) and *also* may be expressed in terms of "Hesperus

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= Phosphorus” and hence is known *a posteriori* (the proposition is necessary *a posteriori*). Therefore, Kripke’s claim in which he holds that this kind of proposition is *only* known as *a posteriori* is rejected.

## 2. Defence for Kripke

In defence of Kripke, we need some presuppositions accepted by him. One of them is causal-chain theory. According to this theory, the designation of a proper name begins with baptism and then transfers that designation from one link or generation to another till now when we use it. For example, regarding the name ‘Hesperus’, it is supposed that for the first time, Babylonian people in a ceremony (baptism) decided to name the brightest star in the sky near the Sun in the evening ‘Hesperus’. Now although the description “The brightest star near the Sun in the evening” *fixes* the referent of the name ‘Hesperus’, that name and that description are not synonymous and since according to Kripke proper name is a rigid designator this name refers to its referent (whatever it may be and whatever descriptions it may have) in all possible worlds. We may repeat the same story concerning the name ‘Phosphorus’: again, in *another* baptism, this name is called for the brightest star near the Sun in the morning. Another presupposition that is important and seems to be obtained from the whole of Kripke’s views and which is *natural* among people is that each name designates its referent based on people’s understanding; that is, if in *different* baptisms, *two* names are introduced this means that *two distinct* referents are considered by those who participate in those baptisms. Hence, naturally and primarily, distinct names should have distinct referents. Now by using the thesis of rigidity of proper names and causal-chain theory and the above presuppositions, we may interpret Kripke’s approach to the analysis of the identity proposition—“Hesperus = Phosphorus”—as follows: first, it is metaphysically necessary; since ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ are rigid designator and they refer to the same referent, i.e., Venus, in all possible worlds, therefore, the proposition “Hesperus = Phosphorus” is true in all possible worlds and that means that it is metaphysically necessary. Second, it is known *only a posteriori*: if the identity sentence “Hesperus = Phosphorus” was mentioned at the date of Babylonian people they would consider it as a false statement (or proposition), contrary to the reality since they thought that each name should designate a referent *distinct* from the other name. So according to those presuppositions (mentioned above) naturally (or commonly) the sentence “Hesperus = Phosphorus” is conceived as false, or else its truth should be proved; and that proof is *only* possible through experimental evidence, which means it is *a posteriori*.

Kripke's view can be defended from another perspective. In this method, it is useful to compare the two sentences "Hesperus = Phosphorus" and "Hesperus = Hesperus". Since the challenge between Kripke and his critics is confined to *a priori* and *a posteriori* of them, that is they all agree that these sentences are metaphysically necessary, I deal only with their epistemic and semantic aspects. The sentence "Hesperus = Hesperus" is true since we can regard it as an instance of the primitive Identity Principle, "everything is identical to itself", which may be mentioned in the form of "N = N" ('N' is the name of a thing) and its truth is known *a priori* and it expresses that Venus is Venus or identical to itself. On the other hand, its falsity is not conceivable, or else we have an unusual and impractical<sup>1</sup> supposition that each occurrence of the same name in a context designates a distinct thing. In this case, and based on this strange supposition, the sentence will be false since it says two things are one thing. Now in this situation, if someone is to claim that the sentence expresses a true proposition, that is she believes that the iteration of 'Hesperus' in our example, contrary to the above supposition, designates the same thing, she should present some evidence to prove her claim, hence in this case its truth will be *a posteriori*. Corresponding to the above issue, concerning the sentence "Hesperus = Phosphorus", it can be said that it, in fact and metaphysically, expresses a true proposition, that is Venus is identical to itself. However, that sentence is not an instance of the Identity Principle since it is *conceivable* that each of the two names designates different things, i.e., it is conceivable that the sentence be regarded as false. That each distinct name designates a distinct thing is a usual and practical (or rational) supposition and reconciles with Kripke's view regarding baptism and causal-chain theory. So, if someone claims, contrary to that supposition and contrary to the conceivability of its falsity, that the sentence expresses a true proposition, she should give evidence and prove her claim, so its truth will be *a posteriori*.

The comparison may be continued, this time, regarding the inequality relation. In this case, we have two sentences "Hesperus is not Hesperus" and "Hesperus is not Phosphorus" (we may use '≠', instead of 'is not'): The sentence "Hesperus is not Hesperus" is, in fact and metaphysically, false and expresses something contrary to the Identity Principle; it says that Venus is not Venus and its falsity is known *a priori*. On the other hand, its truth is not conceivable, or else, again, that unusual and impractical supposition is considered to be true. In this situation, and based on the above strange supposition, the sentence "Hesperus is not

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<sup>1</sup> By 'impractical' I mean that the communication of people confronts difficulties such that understanding each other becomes very hard to the extent that it may result in changing our lifestyle. Accepting that supposition is tantamount to accepting the heteronomy of names. So, perhaps we should regard such supposition as somehow irrational.

Hesperus” would be true since based on that supposition each occurrence of ‘Hesperus’ designates a distinct thing. Now if someone claims that it is false, she means that “It is not the case that Hesperus is not Hesperus” (or equivalently “Hesperus is Hesperus”) and this time she should give evidence to prove her claim since it is contrary to that supposition, that is she should give evidence and prove that the iteration of the name ‘Hesperus’ in our example designates the same thing so, its truth will be *a posteriori*. Now, what about the sentence “Hesperus is not Phosphorus”? It is in fact and metaphysically false since it expresses the proposition that Venus is not Venus, that is Venus is not identical to itself. However, it is *conceivable* that the sentence would be true if we have the usual and practical (or rational) supposition that distinct names designate distinct things which reconciles with Kripke’s view concerning baptism and causal-chain theory. Hence, it is conceivable that the sentence “Hesperus is not Phosphorus” is true. Now if someone claims that the sentence is false, that is, she holds that “It not the case that Hesperus is not Phosphorus” (or equivalently “Hesperus = Phosphorus”) she should give evidence to prove her claim, that is she should give evidence that the two names ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ designate the same thing, hence knowing its truth is *a posteriori*.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

We may find the difference between Kripke and his critics is such that the starting point of his critics is the proposition itself; and then, they consider the terms in which that proposition is going to be expressed. Because of this, they conclude that if the proposition “Venus = Venus” is expressed by “Hesperus = Hesperus” it is necessary *a priori* and if it is expressed by “Hesperus = Phosphorus” it is necessary *a posteriori*. Therefore, Kripke’s claim that “Hesperus = Phosphorus” (or in other words “Venus = Venus”) is *only* known as *a posteriori* is rejected. However, the starting point of Kripke is from language (or sentence) and then he reaches the proposition (or content). In language, if we have the sentence “Hesperus = Hesperus”, it expresses a necessary *a priori* proposition and is a true instance of the primitive Identity Principle that “everything is identical to itself”. However, if we have the sentence “Hesperus = Phosphorus” it is *conceivable* that it presents a false proposition since it is *supposed* (and naturally understood by people) that the two names by two baptisms are going to designate two *distinct* referents; so, saying two different objects are one object is false. Now, if it is going to show a true proposition, the investigations should occur and when we find its truth, because of the rigidity of names, the asserted proposition is necessary however *a posteriori*. We may say

that the approach of Kripke's critics is metaphysical and the approach of Kripke is linguistic.

For more explanation, I should say when Soames starts his criticizing, on the first page of his paper (2011) he claims that Kripke in his book—*Naming and Necessity*—usually uses the expression 'statement' instead of 'proposition'. However, Soames thinks that they are the same since both of them are the objects of attitudes and bearers of the truth value. So, he begins his argument against Kripke by supposing that 'statement' and 'proposition' are somehow synonymous. It seems that other critics have this idea as well. To present critics' argument faithfully I have followed Soames' supposition. However, by finding and locating Kripke's reason for holding specifically that the truth of "Hesperus = Phosphorus" can *only* be known *a posteriori*, I think there is a delicate difference between 'statement' and 'proposition' which we may attribute to Kripke and this is why he prefers the word 'statement' to 'proposition' (contrary to Soames' supposition): when we consider a sentence which has a content (=meaning) we may call that content a 'proposition' or a 'statement'. However, in discussing issues or giving arguments if primarily the content is considered and secondarily the proper sentence is sought for expressing that content then in this situation usually the word 'proposition' is used; while if primarily the sentence is considered (of course together with the conventions or baptism and rules which we discussed earlier) and secondarily, we look for its content or meaning, then in this situation the word 'statement' is used (of course, this analysis is not explicitly mentioned by Kripke or his critics and it is my understanding of their views). I have called the former the 'metaphysical approach' and the latter the 'linguistic approach' which I think is Kripke's approach. We have noticed that one result of the difference between these two approaches shows itself in Kripke's claim that the truth of the statement "Hesperus = Phosphorus" can *only* be known *a posteriori* since at first glance, using presuppositions mentioned above, these names should refer to different things so that the statement seems to be false and, if someone claims that it is true, she should prove her claim by giving evidence and there isn't any alternative; so, the truth of the statement can only be known *a posteriori*, just what Kripke claims.

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