Philosophy 237A

Proper Names: How Thought Touches Reality

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Rabb 332
Office Hours: M/W 2:30 – 3:30, and by appt.

Course Description:

You probably know that Muhammad Ali = Cassius Clay. When you learned this, however, what exactly did you learn? That Muhammad Ali was “really” Cassius Clay? But Cassius Clay is none other than Muhammad Ali, and you already knew that Muhammad Ali is Muhammad Ali! Did you learn, perhaps, that Muhammad Ali used to be Cassius Clay? Can x, however, be only temporarily identical to y? Further, can x be only contingently identical to y, or, on the contrary, isn’t it true that that if x = y, then x is necessarily identical to y, i.e. identical to y in all possible worlds?

It was Gottlob Frege who first drew attention to some of these issues in his classic essay, “On Sense and Reference”. More recently, Saul Kripke introduced new dimensions to the topic in his essay, “Identity and Necessity”, and then at greater length in Naming and Necessity. It’s fair to say that we’re still grappling with the issues bequeathed to us by Frege and Kripke, which concern language, belief, knowledge, and metaphysics – especially, the metaphysics of identity, necessity, and possible worlds. In this seminar, we will grapple with these issues, which take us to the cutting edge of contemporary research on these topics which concern, fundamentally, the question of how thought touches reality.

A rough outline of how the course will proceed follows. (Note: topics may well change as students’ interests develop.)

(Week 1) We will begin by investigating the classical approaches to reference via proper names and definite descriptions (Frege vs/ Russell; the Frege-Russell correspondence: when you think about a mountain, is the mountain itself “in” your mind?), and then examine modifications of the classical approach (Strawson; Searle, et al.)

(Weeks 2 & 3) We will then look closely at the “revolutionary” rejection of the classical approach adopted in recent years by the so-called New Theory of Reference (NTR): a causal/historical account of proper names (Donnellan; Kripke), a new approach to definite descriptions (Donnellan), and a new account of demonstratives (Kaplan; Perry).
(Week 4) We will then discuss some key challenges to the NTR, asking, in particular: Why are proper names useful? (i.e. why do we have proper names in the first place?) (Kaplan; Yourgrau), and also ask: whatever happened to Frege’s idea of “sense”? (was it a mere fantasy, like Bigfoot?) (Yourgrau; Sainsbury).

(Week 5) We will then ask: whatever happened to Russell’s epistemological notion of acquaintance? (Yourgrau; Kripke; Kaplan) Was it only Russell’s idea, or did Frege (implicitly) adopt it? (Yourgrau; Kripke) Has the New Theory of Reference been able to successfully avoid it?

(Weeks 6 & 7) Next, we will examine some key problems with the NTR raised by Kripke himself, such as “a puzzle about belief”, and also empty names (Kripke; Donnellan), and names in fiction (Kripke; Thomassson, et al.), which has become a prominent topic in recent philosophy.

(Weeks 8 & 9) We will then look into the question of whether the NTR has metaphysical implications, via the notions of rigid designation and necessity, and discuss Kaplan’s notion of “haecceity”, as well as the relationship between identity and necessity (Kripke), and identity across possible worlds.

(Week 10) We will address the broader issue of causality and “externalism” in a general context (perception, mind, proper names) (Grice; Kaplan; Kripke; Putnam; Burge, et al.), and discuss the question of whether the causal theory of reference depends on the causal theory of knowledge (Stalnaker; Yourgrau).

(Week 11 & 12) Next, we’ll examine some of the most recent reassessments of the NTR, as well some recently published essays of Kripke’s.

(Week 13) Finally, we will ask the fundamental question of what the theory of referring terms, such as proper names, definite descriptions, and demonstratives, can contribute to the way thought interacts with reality. (Stalnaker; Kripke; Kaplan; Evans; Yourgrau)

Texts:

K. Donnellan, *Essays on Reference, Language, and Mind*
A.W. Moore, ed., *Meaning and Reference*
P.F. Strawson, *Individuals*
S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*

*Reference and Existence*

In addition, there will be individual essays provided on Latte by Stalnaker, Yourgrau, Sharvy, Thomasson, et al..
Writing Requirements:

Three papers, 4 ppg long, each valued at 1/3 of the final grade.

Learning Goals:

Students will learn what’s at stake in finding the correct theory of proper names and definite descriptions by investigating the relevance of such a theory to fundamental questions of semantics, epistemology, and metaphysics. They will understand the significance of Kripke’s assertion the proper names are “rigid designators” (i.e. have the same referent in all possible worlds), and examine the relationship between the semantics of modal logic and issues in metaphysics and epistemology.

Note:

a) No ipads, iphones, or any such computer related device to be used in class. The only "i" I want to see in class is you.
b) Attendance in class is mandatory. Attendance will be taken. After two unexcused absences, there will be a grade penalty for each additional unexcused absence.

Disabilities:
If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis and need to have special accommodations for this class, please see me immediately. Also please note that any case of dishonesty (cheating on a test, using materials, including from the internet, and failing to cite its origin) is a serious academic infraction and is subject to disciplinary action.

Academic Integrity:
You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please consult the university webpage for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity. Allegations of alleged dishonesty will be forwarded to the Director of Academic Integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include failing grades and/or suspension from the university.

Please Note: This is a Four-Credit Course (with three hours of class-time per week). Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.).