

Saul Kripke (1980/1971) – The Identity Thesis / Excerpt from “Identity and Necessity”

Give a sketch of Kripke’s argumentation against the identity theory and discuss it!

Kripke and the mind-body problem

“I regard the mind-body problem as wide open and extremely confusing”. Having read this in a footnote of Saul Kripke's argumentation, one can quickly grasp where Kripke's argument against the Identity Thesis is heading to: The materialist's refutation of dualism following the theory of identity (mental states are physical states) is just too easy and disregards important questions. We are still faced with important questions before we can safely discard dualism.

In the same footnote, Kripke says that he is not accepting dualism by pointing out the difficulties identity theorists are faced with. Kripke admits that at this point his own solution of the mind-body problem would have to follow, but he does not have any (of course he has no problems admitting this since his point is that no one has yet presented one).

Modal logic: Contingency versus necessity

Kripke argues that identity theorists confuse synonyms with identity (note that he primarily talks about type-type identities). So what they say is that a mental state M is a physical state P, but M does not necessarily follow from P. There could as well be some other mental state M1 following from P.

Kripke, on the other hand, insists that claiming an identity is to claim it in the modal logic way: it is necessary, so it could not possibly be false. That is due to the use of rigid designators for both parts of the relation: the mental state (e.g. pain) and the corresponding brain state (e.g. stimulation of C-Fibers).

Now, in modal logic, saying that "It is *not necessary that X*" is equivalent to saying "It is *possible that not X*." So every identity theorist has to answer why his theory makes it possible that there could possibly be a brain state without the corresponding mental state (here Kripke points to the analogy to the Cartesian premise in the mind-body problem: The body could exist without the mind). And this is where things become hard for identity theorists, because this is not an easy task to do.

Kripke explains what leads the identity theorists into this dilemma: They are claiming an identity relation that is in fact a contingent one (again, in the way of modal logic: it is *not necessarily* true – it is possibly true, but also possibly false). A working example for this would be the identity relation between heat and molecular motion, both also being rigid designators.

It is contingent in the way that, even after doing some consideration, we still can imagine beings reacting with the very same sensation we call “heat” to an input very different from molecular motion. It seems that we can do this also for pain and stimulation of C-Fibers, but this feeling, though intuitive at first, is flawed. With heat and molecular motion, the contingency lies in the referential use of the rigid designator. The reference here is the sensation we experience as heat. Those other beings could use the same sensational reference for their rigid designator, but designate something else with it, not molecular motion.

With pain, the plausibility of a contingent identity with stimulation of C-Fibers breaks down when we consider that the reference was not picked by the sensation. The designator “pain” is the sensation itself.

To further explain why this contingent view of the identity of pain and C-Fiber stimulation is intuitive at first, Thomas Nagel¹ claims that it is due to the disparate types of imagination: we

1 Nagel (1974) “What is it like to be a bat?”

imagine pain sympathetically, but C-Fiber stimulation perceptual. This is confirmed by psychological studies² that find disparate memory subsystems for living things (here: beings in pain) and non-living things (here: the stimulation of mere nerve fibers).

Kripkes conclusion

Kripke says that the identity theorists are wrong if they do not discuss how what we can imagine (e.g. pain without C-Fiber stimulation) cannot be true. This is equivalent to refuting the Cartesian premise, which has not yet been done by identity theorists. Although he says so in a footnote, Kripke is not all too clear in that the identity theorists might come up with a good solution. All he really is saying is that they face serious problems. Like Nagel all I see proofed here is the lack of a theoretical framework that helps to make references understandable (and it seems that Levine also makes this point in “The explanatory gap”).

Discussion

Of course, Kripke's argumentation is bound to the way objects are named. He insists on the use of rigid designators, according to the causal theory of proper names. If, otherwise, we name an object by demanding a description that both the name and the object satisfy, Kripke seems to say that then we could accept more than one description and are running into contingency. Although he is not talking about the naming issue too much here, and I suppose he may have done so in earlier texts, the reader of his text would still have to think about accepting this tactic of naming, since it is a premise in Kripke's argumentation. Kripke could have hinted to that a little more explicitly.

Also, I think that the different types of identity, namely type-type and token-token, leave a lot of room for discussion.

I do confirm with the refutation of type-type identity in the way that theories building on it leave out the subjective character of mental states. Admittedly, in his paper „The nature of mental states“ (1975) Hilary Putnam tries to separate concepts and properties, such that being synonyms is not needed for terms to state an identity. Despite those attempts, functionalism is a type-type identification and in Kripkes argumentation it does not succeed to provide the necessity of a mental state when a corresponding physical-functional state is given (as Block showed when he suggests that the population of china could imitate the organization of a brain state without there being any mental state).

Kripke says that token-token identity theorists are not much affected by his discussion³, though he thinks that they would run into “fairly similar” problems. I guess, at least for Nagel, following the principles of modal logic, it could work as follows: Assume he denies that he would postulate a contingent identity, since he insists on exactly one particular mental state correlating to one particular brain state (note that I do not postulate here that Nagel would want to do so). In addition, Nagel would further claim that he cannot do any consideration if there might had been an other mental state correlating to this brain state, for he knows nothing about the subjective experience of that organism. I would take that even further and say that if he knows nothing about the subjective experiences of that organism, how would he proof that it has any mental state at all, that it is no zombie? So let X stand for “the organism has a mental state when a brain state occurs”, then Nagel could not refuse to say "It is *not necessary that X*" which means "It is *possible that not X*" which means contingency.

2 Farha/McClelland (1991): „Semantic Memory Impairment“, Journal of Experimental Psychology: Vol. 120, No. 4, p. 339-357

3 A side remark: I find it difficult to believe that token-token theorists would not like to be called materialists, like Kripke says in footnote number 1 of „The Identity Thesis“. Nagel says he is a physicalist and Davidson is a proponent of Supervenience, also a strong physicalistic view.