

The Modal Problem for Descriptivism

ABSTRACT: I defend descriptivism against Kripke's modal problem for descriptivism. One popular solution to this problem is to rigidify descriptions but this 'solution' is inadequate as it stands. Salmon and Kaplan raise a harder version of the modal problem— the new modal problem. No one has yet shown how rigidified descriptivism would solve the new modal problem. In this paper, I do just that. The new modal problem states that names refer even wrt worlds at which their usual referents do not exist whilst rigidified descriptions do not refer wrt worlds at which their usual referents do not exist. In the jargon: names are obstinately rigid but descriptions merely persistently rigid. If this were correct, names could not be synonymous with rigidified descriptions and descriptivism would be false. However, I show, contra Kaplan and Salmon, that (on a variable domain semantics) there is no reason to assume that names are obstinately rigid. Therefore, descriptivism withstands the new modal problem.