



Book Review

Beyond Rigidity: The Unfinished Semantic Agenda of Naming and Necessity, by Scott Soames

Heimir Geirsson
Iowa State University

Disputatio Vol. 1, No. 18

May 2005

DOI: 10.2478/disp-2005-0005

ISSN: 0873-626X

***Beyond Rigidity: The Unfinished Semantic Agenda of Naming and Necessity*, by Scott Soames.** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 379 pp., £14.00.

In *Naming and Necessity* Saul Kripke criticized descriptivist theories of proper names and suggested a 'better picture' as a replacement. But while the 'better picture' that Kripke provided was very interesting and stimulating, it was little more than a sketch of a theory that needed much work and refinement. While Kripke argued that proper names are not synonymous with definite descriptions or clusters of definite descriptions, he was silent on what the semantic contents of names might be. Further, he even speculated in the introduction to his book that the apparatus of propositions might break down given his arguments, thus further adding to the need to develop the agenda that he got underfoot. Still further, in his third lecture Kripke extended his account of proper names as being rigid designators to natural kind terms without providing arguments for such an extension and without arguing specifically that natural kind names are rigid designators. Consequently, it is not clear what one should think about his well-known arguments regarding the epistemic and modal status of identity statements, such as 'water is H₂O.'

In his book, Soames deals with all the aforementioned issues, and then some. The book contains, at the same time, a careful extension of some of Kripke's central ideas, a critical discussion of rival accounts, and a critical discussion of some of Kripke's views. Soames' discussion is characteristically careful and detailed, while always insightful and stimulating.

One of Kripke's line of attacks on Fregean theories of names consisted of modal arguments, namely arguing that if we accept description theories of names then certain modal statements will wrongly be judged to be true. For example, if 'Christopher Columbus' means 'the first European to discover America,' then 'necessarily, if one person discovered America, then Christopher Columbus discovered America' would be true, while it is in fact false. Fregeans have responded to this line of attack with new versions of descriptivist accounts of names. Soames discusses two of these new accounts in the early stages of *Beyond Rigidity*: the analysis of proper names as wide-scope descriptions, and the analysis of proper names as rigidified descriptions.

As Kripke pointed out, there is a sense in which the discoverer of America might not have discovered America and that instead someone else might have discovered America. According to the wide-scope analysis, the occurrences of 'the discoverer of America' that follow the modal operator 'might not have' remain within the scope of the operator, and the sentence expresses truth on that interpretation. Against this analysis Soames argues that certain arguments containing proper names that appear to be valid turn out to be invalid on the wide-scope analysis of proper names. The rigidified description analysis takes a different approach. By applying the indexical 'actual' we can rigidify descriptions so that whenever the description 'the x : Fx ' denotes an individual o in the actual world, the rigidified description 'the x : actually Fx ' denotes o in all possible worlds in which o exists. After reviewing several critical lines against the analysis, Soames argues that it faces a serious problem that involves the interaction of modal and propositional attitude constructions. The problem is based on the observation that individuals in this and other worlds can share some of my beliefs. As Soames argues, on the rigidified descriptivist view beliefs are indexed to worlds and so my belief about Columbus is a belief about the actual world, A_w . Someone in a different world can then only have the same belief if she has a belief about the same world, A_w . But that seems very difficult to do and so goes against our observation that we can easily share beliefs.

In spite of Soames' criticism of description theories of names, descriptions do play a significant role in his theory. Given the prominent role of descriptions in Soames' theory there is even a sense in which one can view Soames as offering a compromise between Russellians and the descriptivists. Soames argues that the semantic content of a simple sentence containing a proper name is a Russellian structured proposition, i.e., that it contains the object referred to by the name in the sentence as well as properties and relations. But when a speaker utters a sentence that expresses a singular proposition, and more generally, when she utters a sentence that contains a proper name, she asserts a singular proposition and in addition to that she asserts various descriptive propositions. As we will see, Soames uses this to explain why we often resist substitutions of coreferential names; a problem that a Millian theory of proper names faces and has a hard time dealing with.

Consider an example Soames gives. Suppose that Soames utters

1. Carl Hempel lived on Lake Lane in Princeton.

Suppose further that Soames utters the sentence to a graduate student in the philosophy department at Princeton and so he expects the student to have heard of Carl Hempel before. In that situation Soames claims that in addition to asserting a singular proposition he is also, in all likelihood, asserting that the well known philosopher of science, Carl Hempel, lived on Lake Lane in Princeton, and that a former member of the Vienna Circle lived on Lake Lane in Princeton. The descriptive propositions that the speaker asserts with his utterance may differ from context to context and from speaker to speaker. While Soames gives a fairly complex account of the semantic content of a sentence such as (1), the general principle is the following: a proposition *P* is semantically expressed by sentence *S* iff *P* is the proposition that all competent speakers assert and intend to convey in all normal contexts in which they utter *S*. Soames observes that no general proposition is invariably asserted in all normal contexts and concludes from that, together with basic competency conditions for proper names, that the semantic content of a sentence such as (1) is a singular proposition. Consequently, the semantic content of 'Carl Hempel' is Carl Hempel himself. That being so, (1) and

2. Peter Hempel lived on Lake Lane in Princeton.

have the same semantic content and express the same singular proposition, since Peter Hempel is Carl Hempel. Nevertheless, the general propositions asserted and conveyed might differ when one utters (1) and (2). Soames uses the idea that sentences that express the same singular proposition can be used to assert different general propositions to explain why we resist substitutions of coreferential names.

Nowhere is the resistance to substitution stronger than in the important class of identity sentences, such as

3. Carl Hempel is Carl Hempel.
4. Carl Hempel is Peter Hempel.

While (3) and (4) have the same semantic content on Soames' view, ordinary speakers, when asked whether (3) and (4) have the same meaning, tend to focus on that the two sentences do not assert and convey the same information. Since they correctly judge that the

sentences assert and convey different descriptive propositions they resist substitution, claiming that the two sentences differ in meaning. The asserted descriptive sentences can even differ to such an extent that a substitution can change the truth value of the asserted sentence leading one to believe, falsely, that the different ways of expressing the same singular proposition affects their truth values.

Soames never mentions pragmatic implications and so the view he presents here is different from the Salmon-Soames pragmatic implication account of belief ascriptions. It is hard to say what motivated the change from pragmatic implication to the current account of descriptive assertion. It is quite likely, though, that a significant reason for the change stems from the fact that the Salmon-Soames pragmatic implication account was limited to belief ascriptions, where a belief ascription, such as *L* believes that *P*, was analyzed as a three-place relation holding between a person, *L*, a proposition, *P*, and a guise under which the proposition is apprehended. On the Salmon-Soames account, guises are not a part of the semantic content of the proposition believed. It is a shortcoming of the Salmon-Soames view that it cannot readily be extended beyond belief reports to simple sentences, such as (1) and (2). The account they gave for belief reports depended on an existential generalization over a three place relation, and there is no such generalization and no such relation present in (1) and (2). Granted, the difficulty that the Salmon-Soames view has with simple sentences does not create a problem for their account of belief reports unless one is seeking a somewhat holistic solution for how to deal with our intuitions regarding substitutivity. It is quite possible that Soames introduced his descriptive assertion account because of such holistic considerations. If we have anti-substitution intuitions in sentences (1) and (2), and we have anti-substitution intuitions in belief sentences which embed (1) and (2), then it seems (assuming semantic innocence) that we should look for the reasons for those intuitions in the simpler cases, which in this case are the simple sentences.

That being said, I believe that there are reasons to question Soames' new account. One reason is fairly straightforward. On Soames' account my intuition that (4) is false is to be explained by me confusing the semantic content of (4), namely the singular proposition that it expresses, with the semantic content of some descriptive sentences that one uses (4) to assert, or that are asserted along with the singular proposition when uttering (4). Supposing that I am well versed in linguistics and supposing that I am very careful about not confusing

one proposition with another, it appears to me that I could nevertheless accept (3) as true while denying the truth of (4). But, if Soames' theory is correct then, since I have eliminated the element of confusion, I should realize that (4), just as (3), expresses a true proposition. It thus seems that Soames has not located the source of the problem and hence has not explained away our anti-substitution intuitions.

Consider further that one can assert (1) and (2) without intending by doing so to assert, or convey, or suggest different propositions. Perhaps the point is best brought out when one considers that when I utter (1), I need not be committed to any descriptive content you might think (1) asserts or conveys, and I need not be committed to any descriptive content at all. Further, one can understand the utterances of (1) and (2) in different ways without that understanding involving different propositions with different descriptive contents. While I agree that one often has a reason to prefer uttering either (1) or (2), for they certainly do convey different information (in most contexts), the difference in information does not need to be couched in different descriptive propositions. Since I think that it is reasonable to believe that one can represent objects, for example, pictorially, the difference in information between two uttered sentences might lie in different pictorial information that is conveyed, and not in different descriptive content. By giving up the key idea of the Salmon-Soames view than one can believe propositions under different guises, Soames has stripped his theory of a very powerful explanatory tool.

While there is a wealth of material beyond what already has been discussed in Soames' book, I will only briefly describe two more important issues. The first is Soames' thesis of partially descriptive names, and the second is his discussion of kind names.

Soames argues that certain syntactically complex expressions are partially descriptive. The proposition expressed by the sentence '*n* is *F*' is the same as that expressed by 'the $x:Dx \ \& \ x = y$ ' relative to an assignment of an object *o* to '*y*'. Examples of partially descriptive names include 'Professor Saul Kripke', 'Mr. Terry Thomas', 'New York City', 'Mount Rainier', and 'Justice Antonin Scalia.' Interestingly, linguistically simple names, such as 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus', are not partially descriptive and so the difference in informativeness between, for example, 'Hesperus is Hesperus' and 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' cannot be explained in terms of partially descriptive names.

Soames' treatment of partially descriptive names leaves a lot to be desired. In particular, it is not clear why one should treat some of the

examples that Soames gives as being names at all. While 'Saul Kripke' clearly is a name, it is far from clear, and I think, quite implausible, to claim that 'Professor Saul Kripke' is a name. When we prefix Kripke's name with the title 'professor,' then we are not renaming him. Same goes for 'Justice Antonin Scalia.' And while 'New York City' clearly is a city and so one might be tempted to treat the name as being partially descriptive, 'Polk City,' a town of fewer than three thousand in Iowa, clearly is not a city.

Finally, Soames discusses the idea that natural kind terms are rigid designators. While Kripke claimed that natural kind terms are rigid designators he did not argue for that claim. As Soames points out, it further adds to the unclarity of natural kind terms being rigid designators that they often function as predicates, such as 'chunk of gold,' 'tiger,' 'animal,' 'cow,' and 'flash of lightning,' and it is not clear what it is for a predicate to be rigid. Soames concludes that there is no useful notion of rigidity for predicates available and suggests that when Kripke claimed that kind names are rigid he only had in mind that they are not descriptive.

Soames argues that the meaning, or semantic content, of a simple natural kind term is the natural kind that it designates. It follows, Soames argues, that simple natural kind terms that designate the same natural kind, such as 'groundhog' and 'woodchuck,' have the same meaning and so the identity statement 'all and only groundhogs are woodchucks' is necessarily true. Since this sentence expresses the same proposition as does 'all and only groundhogs are groundhogs,' it is *a priori* rather than *a posteriori*, according to Soames.

The semantic content of complex kind terms, such as 'H₂O,' is a property that determines the kind it names. The meaning of 'H₂O,' according to Soames, is roughly the same as the phrase 'something molecules of which consist of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom.' Consequently, if this is true, then theoretical identity statements consisting of 'water' and 'H₂O,' such as 'water is H₂O,' are necessary and knowable only *a posteriori*.

In addition to the issues described and discussed above Soames' book contains, among other things, a detailed discussion of Mark Richard's semantic theory as well as that of Peter Ludlow and Richard Larson.

Soames discussion is throughout the book detailed and somewhat technical, while at the same time engaging. In spite of the details Soames never loses sight of the semantic intuitions that drive the

discussion. The book is an outstanding contribution to contemporary philosophy of language and it is, quite simply, a must-read for everyone who works in the field.

Heimir Geirsson
Department of Philosophy
Iowa State University
Ames, IA 50011, U.S.A.
geirsson@iastate.edu

***The Things We Mean*, by Stephen Schiffer.** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 362 pp., £17.99

Stephen Schiffer admits early on in his latest book that those who have followed his previous work will accuse him of displaying a sort of *chutzpah*, given his current position on meaning. Specifically, Schiffer has gone from systematically attacking his own (and every other) positive theory of meaning and recommending a 'no-theory theory of meaning' (cf. Stephen Schiffer, *Meaning*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1972, and *Remnants of Meaning*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1987), to now introducing a new positive theory of meaning. However, he insists that the effrontery is actually quite mild and that, while he has changed his mind on certain issues, *The Things We Mean* should be considered more of a sequel to, rather than an abandonment of, *Remnants of Meaning* (p. 9).

The book covers an impressive amount of ground, and I will not treat every issue it pursues. However, before discussing a few specifics, a general overview of the book should provide a good sense of just what Schiffer is up to. He begins by endorsing what he considers the face-value theory of belief reports. In particular, the face-value theory is a relational account of belief reports, to the effect that reports of the form '*A* believes that *S*' 'are true just in case the referent of the '*A*' term stands in the belief relation to the proposition to which the '*that S*' term refers' (p. 12). Of course, this opens the question of the nature of the propositions that believers are supposed to be related to. Concerns about compositionality drive Schiffer to argue that the things we mean are 'pleonastic propositions;' i.e., propositions 'whose existence is secured by something-from-nothing transformations' (p. 51).