PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS OF NAMING MERELY POSSIBLE INDIVIDUALS

From the talk about possible worlds, one may have the temptation to talk about 'merely possible' objects, which do not actually exist in any actual world. Even if there are such merely possible individuals, can we talk about their being named ? In other words, is it legitimate to talk about their reference being fixed ?

I shall first examine the prospect of such a project and then see the related problems. The use and purpose of a name is primarily to identify or pick out an individual. A proper name or an indexical singular term denotes its present referent with respect to past and future times. If a proper name or singular term is rigid (as claimed by Kripke and many others) then it refers to the actual individual in all possible worlds including those in which the actual referent does not exist. It may sound like an essentialist claim about name. But no name would be used if no one ever existed as referent of that name or there is no one in the language community to use it.

We usually use the name of an actual individual person to refer to him even with respect to counterfactual situations in which (i) he may not exist or (ii) may not have that name. For example, when we use the name 'Aristotle' in 1982, although there is nobody in that name now, it refers to the same famous Greek philosopher. Or, as in the sentence 'The world would have been a better place if Hitler were never born', the name refers to the notorious world figure in a counterfactual situation where he does not exist.

From this consideration about the use of names (which denote individual) in all possible worlds, there is a temptation to think that we may also name merely possible individuals who do not exist in any world. The reasoning is like this: There exist possible worlds, therefore there exist possible individuals

in these worlds. Lewis thinks it is true and not problematic at all, but according to Kripke that talk of possible worlds do not refer to some 'remote' real worlds — it is only a way of talking about counterfactuals.

Kaplan has a theory that in some cases it is possible to talk about naming merely possible objects. His formula is a variation of the Barcan formula :

$(x) L Fx \rightarrow Lx Fx$

From $M (\exists x) Fx$ possible that there be something that is F

and $\exists x M Fx$ there is something that is possibly F

Kaplan's formula is : $M (\exists x) Fx \rightarrow \exists x M Fx$ which says that here exists a possible individual.

In what circumstances can we speak of naming a possible individual? Kaplan's reply is that if the origin or the constituent parts of the object actually exist, and we can uniquely specify them, then we can name the individual. For example, we may speak of a person who would have been born of a particular sperm and a particular egg had they been united, and name this individual 'Newman'. Kripke also seems to agree with this view.[1]

This view of course assumes the metaphysical principle that individuals made from the same constituent matter are identical in all possible worlds. Kaplan's requirement of being 'uniquely specified' is not satisfied by fictional names like 'Pegasus'. There is no fixed individual Pegasus denoted by 'Pegasus' with respect to all possible worlds in which it exists. Moreover 'Pegasus' still denotes nothing.

There is a possible view that 'Pegasus' finds its denotatum in the world of myth. Kaplan calls such possible world as 'M worlds'. If w is a M world, then the name 'Pegasus' used in the language of M world will denote something with respect to w and our description 'the x such that x is called 'Pegasus' ' will denote the same thing with respect to w, but our name 'Pegasus' will still denote nothing with respect to w. So Kaplan thinks that even if the name 'Pegasus' of M worlds denotes something with

respect to our world that does not exist in our world, our name Pegasus does not even denote with respect to their world. Kaplan's conclusion is that proper names like 'Pegasus' and 'Hamlet' are not like 'Aristotle' and 'Newman 1' in our language, the latter denote whereas the former do not.[2]

Kripke in similar vein, holds that fictional names like 'Sherlock Holmes' were never attached to any individual in any possible worlds. S. Holmes could not have existed because the reference is not fixed. Similar is the case with 'unicorn'. It is never uniquely specified, therefore it cannot exist. This requirement however implies that if C. Doyle would have specified the name 'S. Holmes' as the 'only result of this sperm S and that egg E', then it would be rigid designator. Both Kripke and Kaplan would have to concede in that case, to the claim that 'S. Holmes' name the same individual not only in actual world but also in all possible worlds in which that individual exists.

Salmon points out some further difficulty, namely, that the 'unique specification' requirement leads to contradiction. The following formulae seem to be inconsistent with each other.

(i) $(\exists x)$ Fx says that it is possible that there be something that is F (for example, my first brother) —   it is true

(ii) $\exists x$ **M** Fx says there is something that is possibly F (there exists something that is possibly my first brother) — **M** and actual individual

(iii) Kaplan's formula : $\exists x$ **M** Fx   says there exists a possible thing that is F — merely **M** individual.

In the third case we are not considering any *actual* things but merely possible individual. It is tantamount to say that there *exists* some possible object. The position seems to be contradictory, namely in holding that there exist objects that do not exist.

"The difficulty might be avoided˙by reformulating the claim that 'Newman' denotes the merely possible individual" (so does 'my first brother') "who would have resulted if sperm S had fertilized egg E." This is nothing but stating the counterfactual

situation that if S had fertilized E then it would have been the case that : some individual x results and 'Newman' *actually* denotes x. This claim avoids the ontological commitment to a merely possible individual. It asserts only that there might have been a person resulting from the fertilization of E by S and avoids apparently the existential claim that there actually exists a possible individual, denoted by 'Newman'. But notice that the position is puzzling. It is not just the trivial claim that there might have been someone denoted by 'Newman', but that there might have been someone who *does not* actually exist, but actually is denoted by 'Newman'. The position is baffling; "while there is no one actually denoted by" 'Newman', "'here still might have existed someone who not only would have been, but actually *is* denoted by" 'Newman'.

It appears that names like 'Newman' or 'vulcan' (a planet) are not designators because their reference is not fixed. What if we use the description 'the planet that causes X and have features F' as a rigid designator ? Does it designate 'Vulcan' then ? If it can, then we can name merely possible objects. The description 'the planet that causes X and have features F' could have rigidly designated Vulcan if the reference of 'Vulcan' is already fixed on some occasion and if it were not possible for any other planets to satisfy the unique description. But that is not the case. In fact, the cause of the perturbation in the orbit of Mercury is explained and no such planet 'Vulcan' actually exists. The name 'Vulcan' does not denote anything, and therefore does not name any possible object.

There still remains some difficulty about naming future objects, where the origin or the constituents can be specified. The name 'Vulcan' or 'Newman' do not name any (possible) objects now, but they can name some future objects. 'Vulcan' may one day name a planet which is the referent of the rigid definite description 'the planet that causes X and have the features F.' 'Newman' can rigidly refer to the first child born in 21st century.

We can take a different case where we can name a future 'mere possible' individual, on the basis of scientific reasons. The

name 'tigon' stands for the predicted natural kind which is a hybrid of tiger and lion. It is also possible to name a particular individual by uniquely specifying the individual to be a particular sperm S (say from the tiger X) and E (from the lioness Y). In fact, it has been the case that a particular geneticist named the expected resultant of his experiment (with hybrid) — both in the case of a whole new natural kind and a particular individual. Both Kripke and Kaplan, I think, would grant this, because the requirement of unique specification is satisfied, and since there is the difference of tense the contradiction resulting from existential generalization also would not arise. Undiscovered elements for example can be named by an unique specification such as 'the element number 132' although no more specification is possible.

Salmon thinks that the difficulty in naming merely possible objects is a pragmatic difficulty, not a logical difficulty.[3] If the table to be made out of a hunk of matter C is called D, we may take 'D' not as a name but as a free variable that occurs within a derivation by way of instantiation. Thus it does not affect the logical validity of the argument.

Another problematic case is about the name 'God'. Is it a merely possible object? Surely, it does not have an actual referent in any actual world. It is neither like 'Aristotle' which has a referent in the past, nor like 'Newman 1' which has a referent in the future. The case is also different from 'Pegasus' because the latter is fictional, but the name 'God' may have some referent (the theists have argued at length to establish that) although in a very special way. It is controversial whether the name is a proper name or a rigid definite description. Kripke thinks 'such cases needn't necessarily bother us'.[4] But I think this is a very special case and can be handled by Kripke and Kaplan's account of 'unique specification'. The definite description for God is unique in the sense that there is only one individual that can be denoted by it (like any ordinary proper name), taking a monotheistic view of course. So the name 'God' can denote the unique individual in all possible worlds if the description rigidly picks out any such being.

If the principle of identity of indiscernibles is true (in one reading) then one may tempt to argue that 'Gertrude' the expected resultant from sperm S and egg E has some essence which will uniquely specify it, and cannot be satisfied by any other individuals as Kripke would have objected about naming merely possible objects. But as we have already seen that it may lead to other difficulties.

The most significant objections against the possibility of naming merely possible future individuals have been made by Prior. He treats existence in terms of tensed predicate logic. He made a distinction "between predicates (like 'is red', 'is hard', etc.) which entail existence and predicates (like 'is thought to be red', 'is thought of' etc.) which do not."[5] The first sort of predicate expresses attributes including relational ones, they may be called 'existence attributes' or 'e-attributes'. It is then suggested that "x exists" may be defined as 'there is some e-attribute which x possesses" (p. 162). Prior's remarks suggest the following :

(D1) x exists if and only if there is some e-attribute which x has

(D2) P is an e-attribute if and only if P entails existence.

According to (D1) Prior thinks *being identical with* would be e-attribute. So it further follows that.

(1) 'Antony is identical with Antony' is necessarily true. Prior also accepts the modal principle that, whatever logically follows from something necessary is itself necessary. If 'being identical with' is an 'e-attribute' then (1) would entail,

(2) Antony exists.   •

It is clear that by this account only past and present individuals can be identified. No future (or merely possible individuals) objects have any e-attribute. Therefore they cannot be identified. That means they do not denote anything. There are no e-attributes by which they can be 'identical with themselves' to be picked out from merely possible individuals. By this

reason, 'Aristotle' denotes something but 'Pegasus' or 'Newman 1' do not.

But Prior's theory is based on the notion of e-attribute which itself is not very clear. Moreover, it implies that since every existent object is necessarily identical with itself, it follows that there are no contingent objects at all. This is absurd. Not only that, it is difficult to determine which ones are e-attributes, one may suspect whether existence is the only e-attribute. So, the account of impossibility of existence of future individuals is inconclusive from Prior's theory. And even if we cannot name merely possible objects, it does not follow that they do not exist.

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NOTES

1. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*. Addenda (a) unicorns. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1980.
2. David Kaplan, 'Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice' in *Approach to Natural Languages*, edited by Hintikka, 1973, Los Angeles.
3. Salmon, *Essence and Reference*. Fn. p. 202-3.
4. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, p. 27.
5. Prior, *Past, Present and Future*, p. 161. Also "Identifiable Individuals', *Review of Metaphysics*, 13.