# A Trip to the Metaphysical Jungle –
# How Kripke's Intuitions Revived Aristotelian Essentialism

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Besides his substantial influences on other fields of philosophy, Saul Kripke is famous for smoothing the way for a new type of Aristotelian essentialism. However, Kripke's comments on essentialism are utterly vague and are built entirely on fundamental intuitions about the use of language and necessity *de re* in modal logic. He famously disproved Willard Van Orman Quine who, a few decades earlier, had banned necessity *de re* into the metaphysical jungle of Aristotelian essentialism – a jungle that a true empiricist must not enter. But not only Kripke's refutation of Quine, but also his own essentialism is based on intuition. Kripke thereby overcomes an anti-essentialist dogma that was established by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. But because of its vagueness, one might well call Kripke's intuitive essentialism a 'metaphysical jungle'. Nevertheless, a trip to Kripke's jungle is a promising milestone on the way to a refreshed Aristotelian metaphysics.

## 1. Travel arrangements: The rejection of Quine's anti-essentialism

In *Two dogmas of empiricism*, Willard Van Orman Quine rejects the traditional distinction between synthetic and analytic truths. Among others Immanuel Kant suggested this distinction in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Quine criticizes it as a relic from metaphysical dogmas which a pure empiricism (as Quine wants to pursue it) has to overcome:

> [O]ne is tempted to suppose in general that the truth of a statement is somehow analyzable into a linguistic component and a factual component. Given this supposition, it next seems reasonable that in some statements the factual component should be null; and these are the analytic statements. But, for all its a priori reasonableness, a boundary between analytic and synthetic statements simply has not been drawn. That there is such a distinction to be drawn at all is an unempirical dogma of empiricists, a metaphysical article of faith.[1]

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[1] Willard Van Orman Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View. 9 Logico-philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 36-37.

As a consequence, Quine gives his empiricism a pragmatic turn. There is no longer any necessary truth, but only some 'web of beliefs' which can be more coherent or less coherent. This is the reason why Quine claimed that the search for an object's essential properties would be in vain. For him, the external world is accessible via descriptions only: If there is necessity in logic at all, it must be *de dicto*, since this type of necessity is reducible to a semantic predicate. Therefore, Quine accepts necessity *de dicto* at least "for the sake of argument"[2], while he in fact rejects a modal calculus as a whole – at least he did so in his early papers on modal logic. Quine's idea of a pure descriptive necessity is best illustrated by his famous example of a cycling mathematician, respectively, a mathematical cyclist:

> Mathematicians may conceivably be said to be necessarily rational and not necessarily two-legged; and cyclists necessarily two-legged and not necessarily rational. But what of an individual who counts among his eccentricities both mathematics and cycling? Is this concrete individual necessarily rational and contingently two-legged or vice versa? Just insofar as we are talking referentially of the object, with no special bias toward a background grouping of mathematicians as against cyclists or vice versa, there is no semblance of sense in rating some of his attributes as necessary and others as contingent.[3]

Quine regards the cycling mathematician, taken as a person, neither as rational nor as two-legged. Only after one has considered the descriptions 'mathematician' and 'cyclist', does he become necessarily rational, respectively, two-legged. Kripke summarizes this position as follows:

> Whether a *particular* necessarily or contingently has a certain property depends on the way it's described.[4]

Kripke also showed that Quine's approach (which might well be called 'anti-essentialist empiricism') does require a descriptive account of reference, as suggested by Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell. Therefore, it is counter-intuitive. He illustrates this counter-intuitivism

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[2] Christopher Hughes, *Kripke. Names, Necessity, and Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 81-82.
[3] Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 199.
[4] Saul Kripke: *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 40 (original emphasis).

in *Naming and Necessity* with an example from the U.S. presidential election in 1968:

> Suppose that someone said, pointing to Nixon, 'That's the guy who might have lost'. Someone else says 'Oh no, if you describe him as 'Nixon', then he might have lost; but, of course, describing him as the winner, then it is not true that he might have lost'. Now which one is being the philosopher, here, the unintuitive man? It seems to me obviously to be the second.[5]

A similar reasoning applies to Quine's cycling mathematician: If he is described as a 'mathematician', he is necessarily rational. If he is described as a 'cyclist', he is necessarily two-legged. But it would be absurd to answer the question whether a certain person, for example Smith, is necessarily two-legged in the following way: 'If you describe Smith as a cyclist, he is necessarily two-legged. But if you describe him as a mathematician, then he is not.' Therefore, Quine's anti-essentialist understanding of modality must be rejected because it presupposes a counter-intuitive way of language use.

To stick to the jungle metaphor, we might regard Quine as the worried father who thought that our metaphysical adventure of exploring essentialism is far too costly, dangerous or philosophically pointless. With Kripke, we could say that it is our job to convince Quine of the philosophical benefits of such a trip by appealing to some fundamental intuitions – which is what I will try to do in the following parts of my paper.

## 2. Waiting for departure: A plea for intuition-grounded philosophy

Of course, intuition-grounded argumentation causes doubts among many philosophers. The main objection could be summarized as follows: Intuitions are purely subjective and therefore random – and such subjectivity cannot lead to philosophical insight. However, Kripke gives, first and foremost, a semantic analysis of language. This means, he reflects on what people do, in fact, express when they utter a certain sentence. However, a good semantic analysis goes hand in hand with the intuitions which language users have about their own language. For that

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[5] Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 10.

reason, we can well reject any analysis which does not appeal to our intuitions.

To put it more theoretically, we might say that intuitions lead to a 'reflective equilibrium' as John Rawls calls the relating balance of intuitions and theory in moral philosophy.[6] This basically means that a counter-intuitive theory is not a good theory since it does not apply to most, and definitely not to all, cases of language use. Hence, Kripke gives a well-founded argument to reject Quine's anti-essentialist understanding of necessity.

However, it seems that Kripke regards intuitions as the unique way which leads to philosophical evidence:

> Of course, some philosophers think that something's having intuitive content is very inconclusive evidence in favor of it. I think it is very heavy evidence in favor of anything, myself. I really don't know, in a way, what more conclusive evidence one can have about anything, ultimately speaking.[7]

Consequently, not only Kripke's refutation of Quine is intuition-grounded, but also his own account of essentialism – if one wants to call the "better picture"[8] Kripke draws in *Naming and Necessity* an account or a theory at all. Anyway, Christopher Hughes claims correctly that Kripke's essentialism neither refers to Aristotle nor to Thomas Aquinas (only to mention two famous essentialists in history), but rather to "the man on the Clapham omnibus"[9]. For this stereotype bus passenger, it is intuitively evident that individuals have some properties which are contingent and some others which are necessary. According to this, Richard Nixon, for example, has the contingent property of being elected as U.S. president in 1968. But he has the necessary property of being human – and not an aardvark or any other non-human creature.[10] Kripke's intuitions do not only apply to individuals, but also to natural kinds. For example, 'being $H_2O$' is a necessary property of water, while 'being liquid' is not. I will come back to this example later.

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[6] Cf. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).
[7] Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 42.
[8] Ibid., 94.
[9] Hughes, *Kripke*, 84.
[10] Cf. Robert Stalnaker, "Possible Worlds Semantics: Philosophical Foundations," in *Saul Kripke,* ed. Alan Berger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 100-115.

By such an intuitive reasoning, Kripke overcomes an anti-essentialist dogma in philosophy which was established by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and which heavily influenced Quine and other 'early analytic philosophers' like Bertrand Russell or Ludwig Wittgenstein. However, Kripke's idea of essentialism remains utterly vague, since he – in his characteristic way of presenting philosophic ideas – only presents a few examples of essential properties and does not give any sufficient principles or general statements on his account. Because of this vagueness, one is well-justified in calling Kripke's intuitive essentialism a 'metaphysical jungle' – of course, without the negative connotations Quine had in mind by using this metaphor. On the contrary, a trip to Kripke's jungle is very promising for contemporary philosophy – not only in terms of logic and philosophy of language, but also as a milestone on the way to a refreshed Aristotelian metaphysics. Therefore, I will, in the next part of this paper, sketch some general remarks on Kripke's intuitive examples which might be seen as the entering step into this adventurous jungle.

## 3. Entering the Jungle: General remarks on Kripke's essentialism

So far, I have pointed out that Kripke's intuitions lead him to a metaphysical position which is, in general, called essentialism or sometimes even Aristotelian essentialism. But what is exactly meant by these terms? Here is Quine's definition:

> Aristotelian essentialism. This is the doctrine that some of the attributes of a thing (quite independently of the language in which the thing is referred to, if at all) may be essential to the thing, and others accidental. E.g., a man, or talking animal, or featherless biped (for they are in fact all the same things), is essentially rational and accidentally two-legged and talkative, not merely qua man but qua itself.[11]

This definition is quite adequate to describe Kripke's approach. Hughes characterizes this essentialism therefore as 'moderate', which means that it stands between hypo-essentialism and hyper-essentialism (cf. Hughes 2004:108-110). On the one hand, hypo-essentialism refers to a

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[11] Quine, Willard Van Orman, "Three Grades of Modal Involvement," in *The Ways of Paradox and other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1966), 173-174.

theory that claims that only trivial properties are necessary, as for example 'being self-identical', 'being red or not red', 'being warm if being hot' etc. – i.e. properties all individuals have. On the other hand, hyper-essentialism claims that each individual has all of its properties necessarily – a view one might well ascribe to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. However, neither hypo-essentialism nor hyper-essentialism is what Kripke has in mind – his essentialism is moderate and therefore in accordance with the given definition by Quine. It seems that Kripke takes 'essential' and 'necessary' as synonyms – even though the Aristotelian tradition defines essential properties as properties which are non-trivial and still necessary. I will not distinguish between them either, even though I focus only on non-trivial necessary properties (as Kripke obviously does as well).

Kripke mentions a simple principle which gives a certain hint in order to find out which properties are necessary and which are not: the necessity of origin. He introduces it in a footnote of Naming and Necessity as follows:

> If a material object has its origin from a certain hunk of matter, it could not have had its origin in any other matter.[12]

Kripke comes to this principle by help of two intuitive examples: his wooden table and Queen Elizabeth II:

> We could conceivably discover that, contrary to what we now think, this table is indeed made of ice from the river. But let us suppose that it is not. Then, though we can imagine making a table out of another block of wood or even from ice, identical in appearance with this one, and though we could have put it in this very position in the room, it seems to me that this is not to imagine this table as made of wood or ice, but rather it is to imagine another table, resembling this one in all external details, made of another block of wood, or even of ice.[13]

> [C]ould the Queen – could this woman herself – have been born of different parents from the parents from whom she actually came? [...] [C]an we imagine a situation in which it would have happened that this very woman came out of Mr. and Mrs. Truman? They might have had a child resembling her in many properties. Perhaps in some possible world Mr. and Mrs. Truman even had a child who actually became the Queen of England and was even passed off as the child of other parents. This still would not be a situation in which this very woman whom we call 'Elizabeth II' was the child of Mr. and Mrs. Truman, or so

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[12] Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 114, fn. 56.
[13] Ibid., 113-114.

it seems to me. It would be a situation in which there was some other woman who had many of the properties that are in fact true of Elizabeth. Now, one question is, in this possible world, was Elizabeth herself ever born? Let's suppose she wasn't ever born. It would than [sic!] be a situation in which, though Truman and his wife have a child with many of the properties of Elizabeth, Elizabeth herself didn't exist at all.[14]

By analyzing these examples, it becomes obvious that Kripke does not establish a so-called 'principium individuationis', as is suggested in some literature – especially in some German literature – on Kripke.[15] According to this principle, a certain property, if necessary, can only be held by a certain individual. It raises the question whether an individual can be identified (or even transworld-identified) by its essential properties – or more precisely: by its necessary origin. It can be stated without any doubt that Kripke denies a principium individuationis in his analysis of the wooden table example above since he writes in a footnote of Naming and Necessity:

> [I]f the very block of wood from which the table was made had instead been made into a vase, the table never would have existed.[16]

Even though the table has the essential property of being made from the very block of wood, the very block of wood might have been used to produce something different. Being made of the very block of wood does therefore not identify Kripke's table.

Also, the example of Queen Elizabeth II cannot be seen as an example of a principium individuationis. Even though Kripke claims that there is no possible world in which Elizabeth II comes from other parents, her very parents do not make her special among other individuals: Her younger sister Margaret was born of the same parents. Even if we take the more precise wording of "from a totally different sperm and egg" instead of "from different parents"[17], Hägler's

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[14] Ibid., 112-113.

[15] Cf. Rudolf-Peter Hägler, *Kritik des neuen Essentialismus: Logisch-philosophische Untersuchungen über Identität, Modalität und Referenz* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1994), and Christof Rapp, *Identität, Persistenz und Substantialität: Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von sortalen Termen und aristotelischer Substanz* (Freiburg and München: Alber, 1995).

[16] Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 115, fn. 57.

[17] Cf. ibid., 112-113.

assumption that Kripke established a *principium individuationis* is simply not true: We might stipulate a possible world in which Elizabeth II has a monozygotic twin sister. Hence it is only a contingent and not a necessary fact that the fusion of the very ovum with the very sperm leads to Elizabeth II. It is solely necessary that Elizabeth II comes from the fusion of the very ovum with the very sperm – or in other words: 'being a result of this very fusion' is a necessary property of Elizabeth II. This is the way we have to understand Kripke's principle of the necessary origin.

However, it fits best to Kripke's intuition-based way of argumentation that he elaborates this principle in a footnote only – and criticizes it himself in the preface, which was added a few years later, as requiring further discussion.[18] As I already adumbrated, it is Kripke's philosophical goal to draw 'better pictures' and not to elaborate fully consistent theories.

The contemporary 'new essentialism' which focuses on the classical Aristotelian substance ontology declines Kripke's necessity of origin. It is claimed that substances (an Aristotelian term which Kripke avoids on purpose[19]) have to be ontologically independent. But how can Kripke's table or Elizabeth II be ontologically independent if individuals come to existence by their necessary origin? This is how we are to understand the following objection by E. J. Lowe:

> I must reject the Kripkean thesis of the 'necessity of origin' – according to which, for example, it is part of the essence of a living organism, such as an elm tree, that it grew from a certain seed. For the seed is presumably not to be identified with the mature tree. However, I do consider this thesis to be mistaken. I am happy to concede, perhaps, that the tree could not have grown from a different seed, but I am not prepared to concede that it did have to grow from this seed, because it seems to me perfectly intelligible to suppose that this very tree could have existed from eternity, or could have come into existence *ex nihilo*.[20]

But even if we were to accept the necessity of origin as an intuitive principle of essentialism, it does only apply to individuals, but not to natural kinds. However, Kripke also pursues a natural kind essentialism

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[18] Cf. ibid., 1.
[19] Cf. ibid., 114-115, fn. 57.
[20] Jonathan Lowe, "Substance and Identity," in *Substanz*, ed. Käthe Trettin (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2005), 42.

as I already mentioned when I referred to Kripke's famous 'Water is $H_2O$' example. Kripke derives the natural kind essentialism from his reference theory (if we may call it a theory at all and not a picture!). For Kripke, both proper names and natural kind terms are rigid designators: They refer to the same individual, respectively natural kind, in all possible worlds, given that the very objects exist. Taking this approach to reference theory for granted, individuals do not only have essential properties of their own, but also as part of the natural kind they belong to. For example, a certain drop of water out of the River Thames belongs to the natural kind 'water' – therefore it shares the essential property of being $H_2O$.

Hereby, it is important to understand that the reference of a natural kind term "depends upon the actual nature of the particular things that serve as paradigms"[21] – as stated by Hilary Putnam who shares similar views as Kripke on reference theory and essentialism. To illustrate the view of both authors by the water example, we can say that the reference of the natural kind term 'water' was fixed by pointing to a certain glass of water (or a certain river, lake, see or whatsoever). Afterwards we find out that either the very water, which fixed the reference, or another paradigm of this natural kind has the property of being $H_2O$. Since this property is – according to Kripke – essential, we cannot imagine a possible world in which water does not consist of $H_2O$ molecules. Kripke illustrates this by his example of fool's water:

> If there were a substance, even actually, which had a completely different atomic structure from that of water, but resembled water in these respects, would we say that some water wasn't $H_2O$? I think not. We would say instead that just as there is a fool's gold there could be a fool's water; a substance which, though having the properties by which we originally identified water, would not in fact be water.[22]

But as I see it, the intuitive essentialism of natural kinds is somehow ill-founded: Kripke's essentialism of individuals has at least a more or less plausible principle to find out the essential properties of a certain object – the necessity of origin. But $H_2O$ can hardly be said to be the origin of water – neither is 'being an animal' (to take another of Kripke's

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[21] Hilary Putnam, "Meaning and Reference," in *The Journal of Philosophy* 70, no. 19 (1973), 711.
[22] Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 128.

examples) the origin of a tiger, even though it is the essential property of every tiger, so to speak something that all tigers have in common. The problem I am targeted on is that Kripke does not give us a single hint how we should find out which of the various properties of a natural kind are essential and which are only contingent. He gives only examples which he believes to be intuitively evident like 'A tiger is necessarily an animal' or 'Water is necessarily $H_2O$'. But especially the latter example, is in my opinion, problematic: It is not very probable that the man on the Clapham omnibus would regard the statement 'Water is necessarily $H_2O$' as intuitively evident, not even 'Water is $H_2O$' without claiming its necessity. For most people, it is probably more intuitive to say that 'Water is liquid' is a necessary truth, particularly because water, as one finds it in nature, is rarely pure $H_2O$.

However, I am not sure whether it is useful to criticize any particular examples and therefore do not want to continue with that. The main problem of Kripke's essentialism, which I wanted to point out, is that Kripke refuses to name any proper principles to distinguish essential from contingent properties (both for individuals and natural kinds).

Nevertheless, the vagueness of Kripke's intuitive examples was enough to overcome the anti-essentialist paradigm in philosophy – and thus helped to revive Aristotelian essentialism in contemporary discussions. I will come back to this observation in my final outlook.

## 4. A postcard to Quine: Summary and outlook

In my paper, I tried to develop my point that Kripke revived the Aristotelian idea that individuals and natural kinds have some of their properties necessarily and others contingently. I showed how Kripke rejected the counter-intuitive anti-essentialism which is first and foremost associated with Quine, but has a long tradition going back to Kant[23]. Kripke showed that the anti-essentialists contradict some fundamental intuitions about language use, and he also builds a vague essentialist theory on these intuitions. In the last part of my paper, I

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[23] Cf. Richard Rorty "Kripke vs. Kant," in *London Review of Books* 17, no. 2 (1980), 4-5, and Hägler, *Kritik des neuen Essentialismus*.

tried to sketch some general remarks on Kripke's essentialism. It hopefully became clear why its vagueness makes philosophers even today feel as if they were in a metaphysical jungle.

However, even though the 'new essentialism' movement does not totally agree with the views Kripke elaborated in *Naming and Necessity* and his later works, we can well say that Kripke's analysis was a milestone on the way to bring contemporary substance ontology into vogue again. Richard Rorty writes in his review of *Naming and Necessity*:

> Just when it seemed that the [anti-essentialist] dialectic which Kant began had culminated in universal acceptance of the relaxed pragmatism of Wittgenstein and Quine, Kripke exploded his bomb.[24]

In my paper, I tried to analyze the essentialist bomb Kripke exploded by simply following his fundamental intuitions. I am convinced that an impartial and open-minded reception of Aristotle and other important essentialists in history would not be possible today without Kripke – or at least, it would be more difficult to speak about an individual's essential properties. Without Kripke, philosophy today would still be banned to the pragma-empiric jungle of Quine and other early analytics.

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