

Are Left and Right Rigid Designators?

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What do the political concepts ‘right’ and ‘left’ mean, and what is the disagreement between leftists and rightists about? I will argue that these paired concepts are rigid designators, and a comparative analysis with some examples of Kripke (1980) will be made in order to make my point against the mainstream view that left and right are synonymous with opposite sets of ideologies.

According to Kripke (1980), a sentence is true *a priori* whenever its truth can be known without the aid of empirical evidence; it is true *a posteriori*, otherwise. And a true sentence is necessary whenever it is true in every possible world; it is contingently true, otherwise. One essential contribution of Kripke to contemporary debates in analytic philosophy is the view that truth-statements may be necessary without being *a priori* and contingent without being *a posteriori*.

Now let us apply this theoretical picture to the area of political concepts. What do the concepts ‘left’ and ‘right’ mean, and how are they to be defined in terms of what has been said previously? First, I take the sentence

(3) Right is whatever (political attitude that) is in power

to be a necessary *a priori* (i.e. an analytical) truth-statement: it is necessary, in the sense that right is in power in every possible world and could not be otherwise in any such world; and it is *a priori*, insofar as this concept results from a conventional definition of social sciences. At the same time, I take the sentence

(4) Right is conservatism

to be a contingent *a priori* sentence: although it is true by virtue of the historical course of events that led from the French revolution of 1789 to nowadays, it could have turned out that right referred to a non-conservative (i.e. progressive) political attitude in case the concepts of left and right would have been interchanged in their

functional use. Kripke would say that the concept of conservatism was used to ‘fix the reference’ of the concept of right, just as the stick *S* was used to fix the referent of meter; but that does not provide any specific sense to the concept of meter, and the same can be said about the concept of right (and its opposite of left).

The paper wants to develop a twofold view: left and right are rigid designators; (not) being in power is an essential property of (left) right, whereas ideological concepts are accidental properties of them. A number of objections to these will be reviewed, including the commonsensical belief that left-wing parties may be in power. This belief will be blamed for relying on a confusion between fixing a reference (by means of ideological concepts) and giving its meaning.

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