ON CONSIDERING A POSSIBLE WORLD AS ACTUAL

by Robert Stalnaker and Thomas Baldwin

II — Thomas Baldwin

Abstract Two-dimensional possible world semantic theory suggests that Kripke’s examples of the necessary a posteriori and contingent a priori should be handled by interpreting names as implicitly indexical. Like Stalnaker, I reject this account of names and accept that Kripke’s examples have to be accommodated within a metasemantic theory. But whereas Stalnaker maintains that a metasemantic approach undermines the conception of a priori truth, I argue that it offers the opportunity to develop a conception of the a priori aspect of stipulations, conceived as linguistic performances. The resulting position accommodates Kripke’s examples in a way which is both intrinsically plausible and fits with Kripke’s actual discussion of them.

Stalnaker throws down a challenge to us. He argues that the obvious way of accommodating Kripke’s metaphysico-epistemological hybrids—necessary a posteriori truths (‘Hesperus = Phosphorus’) and contingent a priori ones (‘Jack the Ripper was responsible for the East End murders’) —within the well-established context of two-dimensional possible world semantics is unsatisfactory. But, he proceeds, once we adapt the theory to accommodate Kripke’s hybrids, we find the initial phenomena are called into question since the conception of a priori truth they employ is undermined. Hence he is led to his conclusion, with its provocative association of Kripke with Quine: ‘The account of the phenomena, and of the apparatus used to describe them, that I want to defend (and to attribute to Kripke) can be seen as a variation on, and development of, the sceptical lesson about a priori knowledge and truth taught by Quine’ (Stalnaker, 2001: 142).

Thus, according to Stalnaker, we have to choose between rejecting Kripke’s hybrids outright or making sense of them in a way which brings with it Quine’s skepticism about the a priori. This looks like a choice between a rock and a hard place; it is as if all the worlds worth considering as actual are Quine-worlds.
Though that may be the view from Cambridge MA (and to British philosophers it often seems like the view from the USA generally) I think that the possibilities are not in fact so limited, and that there is a way of adapting ‘the apparatus used’, i.e. two-dimensional semantic theory, so that one can do justice to Kripke’s hybrids without providing a basis for Quine’s scepticism.

Into the Second Dimension. Stalnaker provides a brief outline of the semantic theory which provides the background to his discussion—two dimensional possible world semantics. My own comments about this theory are directed at those not already familiar with the theory and are primarily intended to explain the intuitive motivation of the theory.

We all learned back in our first year of philosophy that even if anything can be doubted it does not follow that everything can be doubted. The ‘things’ in question here are the things we believe, and so the distinction we were taught to make was that between: (i) for anything we actually believe, it is possible to doubt it; and (ii) it is possible to doubt everything we actually believe. This distinction is important not only for epistemology; it also shows us that we do not simply employ ‘actually’ as a wide scope indicator. Hence in order to understand what is going on in statements such as (ii) we need an account of the role of ‘actually’ as it occurs within the scope of a modal operator. It is intuitively obvious what the account is to be: the extension of the term ‘what we actually believe’ is to be determined by reference to the actual world and not by reference to the possible worlds whose existence is affirmed by the phrase ‘it is possible that ...’. Hence we need, as it is said, a ‘two-dimensional’ possible world semantics for such statements, where one dimension specifies the world that is taken as actual and the other specifies the counterfactual world(s) being considered as merely possible.

Narrow scope ‘actually’-statements are not, on the face of it, a prominent feature of our language; so it might seem that the two-dimensional apparatus required for them, and developed by Lloyd Humberstone and Martin Avies (Avies & Humberstone, 1980), is of specialist interest only. David Kaplan showed, however, that this apparatus is also required for an absolutely fundamental feature of language—demonstratives. Take an utterance
by me now of ‘He lives in Leeds’ while I demonstrate John Divers. Although what I have said is true, there are two quite different ways in which, by making that utterance, I might have said something false. One way is that it might be that John Divers does not live in Leeds; the other way is that I might have demonstrated Bob Stalnaker when speaking. Hence, Kaplan concluded, we need two different world indices to keep track of what is going on: one, an actual world index, to fix the items demonstrated by the speaker; the other, a counterfactual world index, to identify the world by reference to which the truth of what is thereby said is to be evaluated (Kaplan, 1989 (1977): 513).

Kaplan went on to develop a two-dimensional modal logic of demonstratives which implies that there is a sense in which sentences such as ‘I exist’ are logically true despite being contingent. This conception of logical truth makes essential use of both dimensions of the two-dimensional apparatus: it starts from the first ‘actual world’ dimension, by allowing that any world is available for consideration as the actual world; and then, instead of evaluating the truth of what is thus said with respect to all counterfactual worlds, it just evaluates what is said with respect to the very world that is already being considered as the actual world. Thus we are to evaluate the truth of ‘I exist’ with respect to that very world which we are considering as actual in determining who the speaker is. As a moment’s reflection will show, whatever world is being considered as actual, the sentence will be evaluated as true; hence, despite being contingent, it counts as ‘logically true’.

So far I have mentioned the work of Humberstone and Davies and of Kaplan; but Stalnaker’s early work should also now be introduced. Kaplan’s conception of logical truth within the two-dimensional logic of demonstratives exactly matches Stalnaker’s conception of a necessary ‘diagonal’ proposition (Stalnaker, 1999 (1978): 83). Stalnaker uses two spatial dimensions to represent the two ways in which worlds enter into the evaluation of statements, and this enables him to display the complexity of these evaluations very neatly. Thus he displays the structure of one of Kripke’s examples of the contingent a priori by inviting us to consider utterances of the sentence ‘This rod is one metre long’ by some suitable standard-setting authority in the following three possible worlds: in world (1) the demonstrated rod is one metre
long; in world (2) the same rod is two metres long; in world (3) the rod is three metres long. Then the two-dimensional evaluation matrix is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>counterfactual worlds</th>
<th>w(1)</th>
<th>w(2)</th>
<th>w(3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>w(1)</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>actual worlds</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>w(2)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w(3)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>T</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The top line here records the fact that, where the utterance is considered as made in the situation in which the demonstrated rod is in fact one metre long, what is then said is true in that situation but would have been false had the rod been two or three metres long. The second line records the evaluations of what is said when it is considered as made in the different situation in which the demonstrated rod was two metres long; and so on.

It is easy to see from the matrix why Stalnaker dubs the proposition defined by the evaluations resulting from the \( \langle w(n), w(n) \rangle \) pair of indices the ‘diagonal’ proposition; and equally easy to see why a proposition whose values form a diagonal line of ‘T’ s can be thought of as a ‘necessary’ proposition despite the fact that each horizontal line of the matrix includes some ‘F’ s and therefore represents a contingent proposition. Stalnaker maintains that the necessity of this diagonal proposition captures what Kripke had in mind when he called the statement ‘a priori’; but I want to leave the issue of the implied connections here with the epistemological a priori/a posteriori distinction to one side for a moment while I complete this introductory sketch of the two-dimensional theory.

Stalnaker connects his exposition here of the theory to David Chalmers’ distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ propositions (Chalmers, 1996: 57). The ‘primary’ proposition expressed by a sentence is that represented by the diagonal of one of Stalnaker’s matrices, which themselves represent the full two-dimensional ‘propositional concept’ of the sentence; the ‘secondary’ proposition expressed by a sentence is that typically represented by the top (horizontal) line of the matrix where just one world, that which is in fact actual, is being considered as actual
and the truth of the sentence is then evaluated with respect other counterfactual worlds. I have no quarrels with the substance of this but I do have a strong preference for Frank Jackson's alternative terminology (Jackson, 1998: 76), according to which the diagonal primary proposition is called the ‘A-proposition’ (‘A’ for actual) and the horizontal secondary proposition is called the ‘C-proposition’ (‘C’ for counterfactual), and I shall employ this terminology.

One of the merits of this semantic theory is that in principle it associates two propositions with a given sentence; thus it offers two complementary ways of specifying its meaning without any suggestion of ambiguity or conflict. An account of the C-proposition expressed by a sentence will exhibit its truth-conditions where these are conceived as the possible circumstances in which what is said by an utterance of the sentence in a given situation would be true. An account of the A-proposition expressed by the same sentence will, by contrast, exhibit the ways in which the truth of the same sentence is dependent upon the situation in which it is uttered. Where the truth of a sentence is not context-dependent the A- and C-propositions will be the same, the propositional concept expressed by such a sentence is represented by a Stalnaker-matrix in which the top horizontal line is repeated downwards, so that the diagonal A-proposition is the same as the horizontal C-proposition. But for context-dependent sentences the two are not the same. In these cases, the A-proposition intuitively captures our antecedent understanding of the sentence by showing the way in which its truth is dependent upon its actual world context, whatever that is; whereas the C-proposition captures its meaning conceived as what is said, its truth-conditions, in a given context.

When the matter is presented in this way it will be obvious how tempting it is to associate the A/C distinction with a distinction between epistemological and metaphysical conceptions of content, and thus with Kripke's distinctions between the a priori and the necessary. Indeed Stalnaker here makes just this association (Stalnaker, 2001: 150); but the moral of his paper is that we need to be cautious about this association, and I think that this is right. After all, the A/C distinction arises from the two dimensions of two-dimensional possible world semantics and there is, on the face of it, nothing epistemological about the role of either dimension.
II

Actual Necessity and the A Priori. One way to clarify the issues here is to consider the completely trivial cases of the necessary posteriori and the contingent a priori which are thrown up by the two-dimensional logic of actuality.

This logic includes the following logical truth:

$$\text{If } p \text{ then (Necessarily Actually } p)$$

Hence take any a posteriori truth you like—e.g., ‘York is a pretty city’; then ‘Actually, York is a pretty city’ is an example of the necessary a posteriori. This sounds odd at first, but it simply reflects the fact that ‘Actually’ is a rigidifying operator which projects the value assigned to a sentence at a ‘diagonal’ index \(\langle w(i), w(i) \rangle\) across all the counterfactual worlds with the same initial, actual world, index-i.e., for any \(w(j)\) the value of ‘Actually, \(p’\) at \(\langle w(i), w(j) \rangle\) is the value of ‘\(p’\) at \(\langle w(i), w(i) \rangle\). In Stalnaker’s terms ‘Actually’ expresses an operator which takes the values along the diagonal of the matrix for ‘\(p’\) and spreads them horizontally along each line to form the matrix for ‘Actually \(p’\’ (Stalnaker, 1999 (1978): 82 note 6).

When one first encounters this rigidifying operator it sounds like the fabled philosopher’s stone, something that at the stroke of a pen converts the dross of ordinary life into gold standard necessity—truth in all possible worlds. The truth of the matter, however, is rather more humdrum; for ‘Actually \(p’\) is true in all worlds simply because it reflects, within each counterfactual world, the ordinary truth of ‘\(p’\’ within the actual world. It is not as though we are to contemplate the space of possibilities and work out (however one does such things) that ‘Actually \(p’\’ is true in all of them without considering whether \(p’\) is true in the actual world. Thus the necessity of the C-proposition is in this case, as Evans put it, merely ‘superficial’ (Evans, 1985 (1979): 211).

Still it is the real thing, truth in all worlds, and since, where ‘\(p’\’ is empirical, ‘Actually \(p’\’ is also empirical (rigidification does not affect the epistemological status of a truth), some modification of the traditional thesis that necessary truths are a priori is required. One approach here would be to hold that the necessity of all truths whose C-necessity is not dependent upon the role of rigidifying operators (such as ‘Actually’) is a priori. But this
response seems unacceptably ad hoc; furthermore, as we shall see, it is not clear that it generalises to the Kripke hybrids. A better response draws on the fact that the role of rigidifying operators is itself an a priori matter, since it is an a priori truth that if \( p \) then (Necessarily Actually \( p \)). This suggests a different and preferable modification of the traditional thesis: namely, that in the case of any necessary truth, even if the truth itself is not a priori, its necessity is an a priori matter.

For examples of the contingent a priori the logic of actuality suggests sentences of the form \( \langle p \equiv \text{Actually } p \rangle \), where \( \langle p \rangle \) itself expresses a true contingent C-proposition. For the truth (in the actual world) of this C-proposition ensures that the C-proposition expressed by ‘Actually \( p \)’ is necessary; for this reason, although the C-proposition expressed by \( \langle p \equiv \text{Actually } p \rangle \) is true in the actual world, it is not itself a necessary truth. Yet the truth of \( \langle p \equiv \text{Actually } p \rangle \) is, intuitively, an a priori matter: since truth tout court is truth in the actual world, no empirical inquiry is needed to establish that ‘York is a pretty city’ is true iff ‘Actually, York is a pretty city.’

One way to rephrase this claim to a priori status is to note that we do not have to know which possible world is actual in order to know that \( \langle p \equiv \text{Actually } p \rangle \) is evaluated as true with respect to whatever world is the actual world. This, of course, represents the fact that the diagonal A-proposition expressed by \( \langle p \equiv \text{Actually } p \rangle \) is necessary. Hence, as Stalnaker suggests, it is plausible to hold that the necessity of the A-proposition explains why the sentence is taken to express an a priori truth; and in such cases the apparent discomfort of combining apriority with contingency is defused by remarking that the contingency in question is only the ‘superficial’ contingency (in Evans’s sense) of the C-proposition expressed by the same sentence. Thus in this context the A/C strategy of providing a basis for differing evaluations of ‘what is meant’ by some sentence without any imputation of ambiguity seems wholly successful.

Yet what remains unclear is how far this explanation is to be generalised. Is the traditional thesis that all a priori truths are necessary, the converse of that considered just now, to be in this case corrected as the thesis that all a priori truths are A-necessary? And are we to suppose that all sentences which express A-necessary propositions thereby express a priori truths? These
questions raise the question as to how widely the apparatus of two-dimensional semantic theory can be applied; in particular, whether it accounts well for all prima facie plausible cases of the contingent a priori and the necessary a posteriori.¹

III

Russell’s Revenge. In Naming and Necessity Kripke argued, first, that descriptive theories of names of the kind advanced by Russell and refined by Searle and others are untenable; and second, against Quine, that there are some hybrid truths involving the use of names which are necessary and a posteriori and others which are contingent and a priori. We are now in a position to see that these claims stand in some tension. For if the status of the hybrid truths is to be accounted for within the framework of two-dimensional possible world semantics along the lines just discussed, then the use of names in stating these hybrid truths has, somehow, to be understood in such a way that it provides a foothold for the two-dimensional theory. And the obvious way of achieving this is precisely to hold that there is some indexical/demonstrative feature implicit in the use of names which, when made explicit, implies that the name has some descriptive content that is rigidified by the implicit indexical/demonstrative. For example, drawing upon Kaplan’s rigidifying operator ‘dthat’ (but see Stalnaker, 2001: 153 note 16), the suggestion might be that we should understand normal uses of ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ as if they were short for ‘dthat (Hesperus)’ and ‘dthat (Phosphorus)’ where these occurrences of ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ are taken to have some descriptive content (which does not need to be further specified) so that we can allow that the A-proposition normally expressed by ‘Hesperus = Phosphorus’, but

¹. In what follows I concentrate on the types of hybrid introduced by Kripke and discussed by Stalnaker. There are of course many other types of putative contingent a priori truth, most notably ‘framework’ propositions such as ‘The earth has existed for many years’, presuppositions of our capacities such as ‘Memory is normally a reliable way of forming beliefs’, and propositions concerning ‘response-dependent’ concepts such as colours—e.g., ‘Under standard conditions, things which look red are red.’ Each of these types raises many complex issues, and dealing properly with them would take me well away from the focus of Stalnaker’s paper. For what it is worth, however, I do take the view that there are here cases of contingent a priori truth. Whether there is anything in each case comparable to the necessity of an A-proposition is debatable: in the case of response-dependent concepts it is easy to see how something analogous might be constructed, but in the other cases the connections seem to me rather more remote.
now glossed as ‘dthat (Hesperus) = dthat (Phosphorus)’, is contingent (and thus empirical) even though the C-proposition it expresses is necessary.

The type of case to which this approach has been most commonly applied concerns natural kind terms such as ‘water’. Many years ago Putnam famously affirmed that ‘‘Water’’ is indexical (Putnam, 1974: 451), though it is not altogether clear that he grasped the implications of this claim. More recently Chalmers has affirmed that ‘‘water’’ is conceptually equivalent to ‘dthat (watery stuff)’’ (Chalmers, 1996: 59); and Jackson implies much the same view when he maintains that the truth of the A-proposition expressed by ‘Water is H₂O’ depends on whether the watery stuff with which the speaker is acquainted is H₂O or something else, perhaps XYZ (Jackson, 1998: 75–6). For on this view a speaker on Twin Earth who utters, perhaps at an early stage of chemical investigation, ‘Water is H₂O’ says something false even though his use of ‘Water’ is entirely in accordance with our use of it.

Tyler Burge argued that this position is to be rejected precisely it has this implication. He takes it to be clearly incorrect to suppose that the inhabitants of Twin Earth ‘would make no mistake in speaking English and calling XYZ ‘water’’ (Burge, 1982: 104)). Others who have, at least by implication, rejected the indexical view of natural kind terms include Kaplan (Kaplan, 1989: 606) and Kripke, who holds that in giving the content of a ‘loose and inaccurate statement’ (Kripke, 1980: 142) such as that it might have turned out that water is not H₂O, we have to respect the fact that in absolutely all possible worlds in which there is water it is H₂O. For both Kaplan and Kripke, therefore, the status of ‘water’, and ‘Hesperus’, as genuine names (terms of ‘direct reference’) precludes the Putnamian indexical treatment of them. The price they pay for this abstinence, however, as Kaplan recognises, is that they cannot straightforwardly draw on the resources of two-dimensional possible world semantics to elucidate the status of Kripke’s hybrids.

IV

Throwing Away the Baby. Stalnaker makes it clear at the end of his paper that he also rejects the conception of names as implicit indexicals. Following Kaplan, however, he suggests that the
apparatus of the two-dimensional theory can be applied at a higher level, the level of ‘metasemantics’, to elucidate the status of the Kripkean hybrids. But he also holds that in taking this approach we are doomed to follow Quine in rejecting the conception of the a priori. As I indicated at the start, I am not persuaded that Stalnaker has given us good reasons for this conclusion; but let us follow the course of his discussion.

The case on which Stalnaker concentrates most of his attention is Evans’s example of the contingent a priori—‘Julius invented the zip’ (Evans, 1985 (1979): 181). The issue, as ever, is whether ‘Julius’ is in some way indexical, and Stalnaker uses the distinction between semantic and metasemantic accounts of Evans’s dubbing of Judson to clarify this issue. On a semantic account of the matter, Evans, by dubbing Judson in the way he did, simply introduced the term ‘Julius’ as an abbreviation of the description ‘the actual inventor of the zip’. This seems indeed to be the way in which Evans himself thought of the matter—for example, he says that the property of being Julius just is the property of being the actual inventor of the zip (Evans, 1985 (1979): 211). Hence it was entirely appropriate for Evans to rely on two-dimensional possible world semantics to elucidate the contingent a priori status of ‘Julius invented the zip.’

Stalnaker argues that this semantic approach to Evans’s dubbing is unsatisfactory: once we think about the use of ‘Julius’ by speakers (such as Stalnaker’s Jones) who have picked up the habit of using the name in accordance with Evans’s dubbing although they have not read Evans or heard about his discussion, the treatment of the name as an abbreviation will not be true of their understanding of it, since, although they accept that Julius invented the zip, they do not regard this as an a priori truth. I agree with Stalnaker about this; indeed I think we have to be prepared to countenance a stronger thesis, that someone whose understanding of ‘Julius’ was based upon Evans’s dubbing might nonetheless come to think that Julius did not invent the zip. Consider Kripke’s example of ‘Jack the Ripper’: this name was introduced as a name for the person responsible for some especially notorious murders in the East End of London in 1888. We can readily imagine that subsequent inquiries lead the police to form a definite conception of someone whom they think to be responsible for these murders although they remain ignorant of
his precise identity; but we can then go on to suppose that, without undermining their sense of this person’s identity, whom they still call ‘Jack the Ripper’, they come to doubt whether he was in fact responsible for the most notorious of the East End murders (though perhaps they still hold him responsible for a few of them and for some previously unknown murders).

The moral of these tales is that a purely semantic conception of dubbing is too simple; instead, according to Stalnaker, we need to think about dubbing in ‘metasemantic’ terms in order to arrive at an account of the way in which ‘Julius’ acquired its meaning by means of a linguistic act performed more than twenty years ago by Evans. This is surely right. But, by abandoning the indexical treatment of ‘Julius’ inherent in the semantic approach, we are now left without any obvious way of explaining the contingent a priori status of ‘Julius invented the zip’.

If I understand Stalnaker correctly he thinks that we can legitimately abandon this quest because, in taking up a metasemantic approach, we adopt a position which ‘will not provide any non-vacuous account of a priori truth’ (Stalnaker, 2001: 155). It is here that I am not persuaded. Suppose we switch to a prima facie uncontentious case of an a priori truth, ‘The actual inventor of the zip invented the zip (if anyone did)’: does the possibility of a metasemantic approach to language show that this sentence is not standardly used by us to express an a priori truth? I do not think we have been given any reason to think that this is the case; indeed, I would have thought that it is a constraint on an acceptable metasemantic theory that it should allow for the use of language to express a priori truths in cases such as this.

Take now Evans’s case ‘Julius invented the zip (if anyone did),’ I have agreed with Stalnaker that the role of Evans’s dubbing is to be elucidated in the context of a metasemantic theory. I have also agreed with him that the sentence can be properly used in accordance with the practice Evans established without its being used, on such an occasion, to express an a priori truth. But it does not follow that a metasemantic theory does not provide a perspective according to which we can judge that Evans’s original dubbing was an occasion on which the sentence, as then used by him, expressed an a priori truth. On the contrary I think it is one of the merits of a metasemantic perspective that it makes possible a treatment of aprioricity as a passing trait of the use of sentences. Stalnaker suggests that ‘knowledge is a priori if it is
knowledge that derives from a decision rather than a discovery’ (Stalnaker, 2001: xxx); we can interpret this, I think, as implying that a sentence expresses an a priori truth where it is itself a stipulation—as Evans’s dubbing surely was. This then suggests a metasemantic perspective which, unlike a purely semantic one, provides for the possibility of what one might think of as a per-formative conception of the a priori, that is, a conception of the a priori as an aspect of linguistic performances such as stipulations. The hypothesis will be that where a word acquires its meaning through a stipulation, the sentence whose utterance is the stipulating performance expresses an a priori truth on that occasion, but afterwards, once its reference has been fixed and the word has been launched upon its career, subsequent use of the same sentence, even though it derives from the initial stipulation, need no longer express an a priori truth.

One way to think about this suggestion is to place it in the context of what I take to be an important truth enunciated by Quine in the context of his criticisms of the positivist conception of the a priori: ‘Conventionality is a passing trait, significant at the moving front of science but useless in classifying the sentences behind the lines. It is a trait of events and not of sentences’ (Quine, 1966 (1960): 112). If we think of linguistic conventions, like stipulations, as ways of using language which, at the occasion of the convention, express a priori truths, then one conclusion to draw is that, in this respect, aprioricity ‘is a trait of events and not of sentences’. A further conclusion is that, if semantics is a theory about the meaning of sentences, whereas metasemantics is a theory about the ways in which sentences get their meaning, it is precisely within metasemantics that we might hope to find an account of the a priori aspect of the performative events such as stipulations and conventions through which words and sentences get their meaning. Hence, contrary to what Stalnaker maintains, the adoption of a metasemantic perspective should enable us to develop an account of the a priori structure of language instead of making this impossible.

The argument as presented so far does not address Stalnaker’s claim that once metasemantics is formulated as a revised two- or three-dimensional possible world theory there is no way to capture a significant conception of aprioricity within the theory. This is a conception of metasemantics according to which meanings, now conceived as one- or two-dimensional semantic values (Stalnaker’s propositional concepts), occur as values of functions...
which represent the ways in which these meanings are dependent upon features of the use of expressions in the world considered as actual. Thus with respect to ‘Julius’ the dubbing function takes as value, for a world in which ‘Julius’ is dubbed as Evans dubbed it, the semantic value of being a name for the inventor of zip; in other worlds ‘Julius’ will take quite different semantic values for the same function (e.g., perhaps there is a world in which Stalnaker dubs Kaplan’s dthat-operator ‘Julius’).

Given this conception of metasemantics it will of course follow, as Stalnaker says here (Stalnaker, 2001: 155), that where the A-proposition expressed by a sentence is defined by reference to the worlds considered as actual for the purpose of metasemantic inquiries, such a proposition is a necessary truth only where the sentence would express a truth whatever it meant. Stalnaker infers that the fact this is ‘a notion without any application’ implies that, within metasemantics, a priori truth is itself ‘a notion without any application’. It is as if, in switching to a metasemantic perspective, we find that we have opened Pandora’s box since we are required to employ a conception of a priori truth whose basis is much as before—the necessity of an A-proposition—despite the fact that we are now required to take into account possibilities such as that ‘tiger’ refers to sofas and that speakers use ‘you’ to refer to themselves. But this is a non-sequitur: the hypothesis that within a two-dimensional semantic theory, the necessity of the A-proposition expressed by a sentence is a reason for thinking that the sentence expresses an a priori truth does nothing to show that anything similar applies within metasemantics as Stalnaker conceives it. Stalnaker’s point about the vacuousness of the thought that a sentence expresses a necessary A-proposition just shows, on the contrary, that this is not a sensible way of thinking about a priori truth in the context of metasemantic theory.

One can go further: the approach to the a priori that Stalnaker wants to transfer from semantics to metasemantics is appropriate only if one is thinking of sentences as the primary vehicles of a priori truth. But once one makes the transition to metasemantics one should be considering, as Quine’s thesis implies, events and not sentences. And what it might be for a type of event, a linguistic performance whereby an expression comes to acquire a meaning, to have an a priori aspect is not, I suspect, something that is going to be elucidated by reference to the values of a function
which just lists the results of possible events of this type, such as
the meanings an expression would acquire through all possible
stipulations.

This response to Stalnaker does not complete the argument;
but to take matters further we need to leave ‘Julius’ and return
to ‘Hesperus’.

V

The Metasemantic A Priori. If we agree with Stalnaker that there
is no indexical, or demonstrative, aspect implicit in our use of
names, that they are terms of direct reference so that ‘as the
simple story says, the semantic value of a name is just its referent’
(Stalnaker, 2001: 156), then what are we to say about the empiri-
cal status of ‘Hesperus = Phosphorus’? The two-dimensional
semantic theory does not help, since the matrix for the prop-
ositional concept will be just an undifferentiated array of ‘T’s
(with, perhaps, some gaps for worlds in which Venus does not
exist— but we do not need to consider this complication). Hence
that theory tells us that the A-proposition expressed by the sen-
tence is necessary; but the sentence is not an a priori truth.

Stalnaker’s response is that questions of a priori status are not
to be handled at the level of semantic theory; instead they belong
to metasemantics. Hence, he suggests (if I understand his final
paragraph correctly) that the adoption of a metasemantic per-
spective enables one to save the appearances by making it intelli-
gible that it can strike us that ‘Hesperus = Phosphorus’ expresses
an empirical truth despite the facts that, if we judge in accord-
ance with the correct semantic theory, the sentence expresses a
necessary A-proposition, and that metasemantic theory provides
no firm grounding for a non-vacuous conception of a priori
truth. I am, I confess, not sure what to make of this second point:
if metasemantic theory ‘will not provide any non-vacuous
account of a priori truth’ (Stalnaker, 2001: 155), then I do not
see how it can ‘provide an explanation for the phenomena that
Kripke’s work brought to light’ (Stalnaker, 2001: 155)— such as
the empirical status of ‘Hesperus = Phosphorus.’ But if one looks
to the details of Stalnaker’s final paragraph, he in fact uses points
from his own work in pragmatics (now redescribed as metasem-
antics) to explain how there can be sensible disagreement as to
whether ‘Hesperus = Phosphorus’ is true. I do not question the substance of Stalnaker’s suggestions here; but they concern a different matter—the possibility of sensible disagreement, not the apparent possibility of empirical truth. There can be sensible disagreements concerning truths of mathematics, but a pragmatic account of how they are possible is surely not a way of explaining how it might strike people that mathematics is empirical.

It is, I think, clear that what we need here is an approach which elucidates the way in which ‘Hesperus = Phosphorus’ expresses an empirical truth despite the fact that we are just dealing here with non-descriptive names. Kripke provides some help:

Being put in a situation where we have exactly the same evidence, qualitatively speaking, it could have turned out that Hesperus was not Phosphorus; that is, in a counterfactual world in which ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ were not used in the way we use them, as names of this planet, but as names of some other objects, one could have had qualitatively identical evidence and concluded that ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ named two different objects (Kripke, 1980: 104).

Kripke introduces here the conception of a world’s being such that it satisfies a ‘qualitative’ condition which constitutes evidence for the presence of Hesperus and Phosphorus; and because there are counterfactual worlds which satisfy this condition in which ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ name different objects, he suggests, we can properly regard the truth which we express as ‘Hesperus = Phosphorus’ as an empirical truth, even though in these counterfactual worlds ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ are not used as we use them.

This last point, that in these counterfactual worlds ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ are not used as we use them, shows that Kripke’s position is of the type that Stalnaker regards as metasemantic. But Pandora’s box is not here opened in the way that Stalnaker seems to regard as inevitable. Instead the range of possibilities concerning alternative uses of ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ that we are invited to consider is constrained by the need to respect the evidential requirements that inform our actual practice; it is because of this constraint that the existence of these alternatives implies that ‘Hesperus = Phosphorus’, as we use it, is an empirical truth. For Kripke, then, a metasemantic approach
can be used to sustain judgments concerning what is empirical or a priori where it takes into account the evidential implications inherent in our actual use of language.

But how much is presupposed in supposing that our use has these evidential implications? Is a Kripkean metasemantic approach actually Dummettian anti-realism under another name, with a tacit commitment to a conception of ‘canonical’ evidence? Such a position would, I take it, violate Stalnaker’s requirement that metasemantic inquiries should not assume ‘that the names for the planet have underlying senses to which we have a priori access’ (Stalnaker, 2001: 156). But it seems clear that it would be quite wrong to attribute any such position to Kripke, since it would violate his own sharp distinction between ‘fixing the reference’ and ‘giving the meaning’ of a name (Kripke, 1980: 59 note 22), a distinction which Stalnaker applauds. Thus what is needed here is a position which abjures any reliance upon ‘canonical’ evidence while yet vindicating the evidential constraint which ensures that the possibilities considered respect the implications of our actual use.

Kripke tells his story in a way which involves a return to a presumed actual reference fixing: ‘I see a certain star or a certain heavenly body in the evening and call it ‘Hesperus’, etc. (Kripke, 1980: 103). We can take from this the relevance of the actual ways in which reference was originally fixed, but Evans’s ‘Madagascar’ case (Evans, 1985 (1973): 11), and Stalnaker’s own development of Evans’s ‘Julius’ story, show that we should not rely too narrowly on historical sources when specifying the ways in which speakers fix the reference of the names they use. Instead, as Stalnaker’s own work in pragmatics exemplifies, we can think of the reference of a name being fixed conversation by conversation in a manner whose results are neither uniform nor unchanging but which nonetheless hang together as an intelligible tradition of reference to one and same thing. The content of such a theory, I suspect, will not differ much from that of a generalised historical-descriptive theory of names; its purport within a metasemantic context is not, however, to give a descriptive account of the meaning of a name, but to specify a tradition of reference fixing within which the speakers of a language use a name.

But why does a metasemantic theory of this kind issue in conclusions concerning what is empirical or not? Kripke does not
say: he takes it as obvious that where the reference of two names of the same thing is fixed in ways that are only empirically equivalent the truth of identity-statements involving the two names is itself an empirical matter. It is clear that the missing link here is a way of transferring the empirical status of the equivalence between the ways in which reference is fixed to the identity-statement itself. It is obvious that if reference fixing was a way of giving meaning the transfer would be immediate; but that option is not available. I suggest, however, that the hypothesis I proposed when discussing the way in which Evans fixed the reference of 'Julius', namely that the performance of a linguistic act of stipulation, or reference fixing, has an a priori aspect, can be used to make the connection here. For if we take it that, whenever a question of identity is raised, the speakers either fix the reference of the names afresh for the present context or reanimate older ways of fixing the reference, a temporary, pragmatic, a priori link will be constructed which transfers the empirical status (where it is empirical) of the equivalence between the ways in which reference is fixed to the identity statement itself.

This, then, is my suggestion: that we should appropriate a revised version of Stalnaker's conception of metasemantic inquiry for the counter-Quinean project of vindicating the a priori structure of our linguistic acts, and thereby the empirical status of many of our judgments. I am extremely conscious that this suggestion raises many more questions than I have here addressed. But I will say one thing in closing: I quoted at the start Stalnaker's provocative attempt to associate Kripke with Quine; I am certain, however, that the non-Quinean conception of the metasemantic a priori that I have proposed is a great deal closer to Kripke's actual position in Naming and Necessity than the Quinean skepticism that Stalnaker attributes to him.

References