OBITUARIO/OBITUARY

Saul Kripke's Groundbreaking Philosophy

Manuel García-Carpintero

I. INTRODUCTION: GROUNDBREAKING PHILOSOPHY?

Saul Kripke passed away in September last year. He was undoubtedly one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century. His work immediately comes to mind when one thinks of contemporary innovative research in philosophy – work that changes the direction of a discipline. It answers a question that often comes up in the evaluations of research by funding bodies, frequently raised by colleagues in scientific disciplines: What may count as "groundbreaking" (the crucial difference-making talismanic word in such affairs, opposed to "merely incremental") research in philosophy? Can there be such a thing?

The worry shouldn't arise if one thinks of philosophy along the *non-exceptionalist* lines of Quine's (1951) "Two Dogmas", according to which the discipline is straightforwardly continuous with science. A more nuanced version of non-exceptionalism was recently advocated by Williamson (2022), who assigns to philosophy a role vis-à-vis science analogous to mathematics. On these views, work like Stalnaker's (1978) *Two-Dimensional Semantics*, as deployed by Chalmers (1996) to articulate the "hard problem" of consciousness, or MacFarlane's (2014) *Assessment-relativism* – certainly the account of *de se*, first-personal thoughts by Lewis (1979) that MacFarlane develops – are good candidates for consideration as groundbreaking work in philosophy, for they constitute original, formally sophisticated proposals manifestly on topics in the purview of the discipline, which generated a huge amount of debate (relative to the comparatively small numbers of professional practitioners) in academic

journals and conferences. Whether the proposals were on the right track or not is irrelevant: they contributed to expanding our knowledge just by precisely articulating new, *prima facie* worth-considering hypotheses to account for given sets of data.

The Achilles heel of these claims is immediately pointed out by our scientific colleagues. It is true that groundbreaking proposals in science may be proved wrong and discarded, but not all are. Many stay as gained truths, and those discarded are ignored forever. Can this be said of any examples in philosophy? *Exceptionalists* about philosophy – the majority in the profession, judging by the proportion of those who believe in *a priori* knowledge and analytic truths according to representative surveys *<https://philpapers.org/surveys/results.pl>* – are very sensitive to this concern. On a version I endorse [cf. Beebee (2018)], theoretical proposals in philosophy are rational reconstructions of conceptual landscapes – i.e., straightforward fictions. Using the method of reflective equilibrium, they articulate fictional narratives which, if explicitly rationally marshalled, would result in impressions and diagnoses akin to those that our own conceptual endowment intuitively issues, in particular about imaginary situations devised in clever thought experiments. Philosophical theories thus understood don't aim at truth and would be foolish to claim it for themselves. Very different stories may systematize the same conceptual terrain equally well; no fact of the matter picks out one among them. Familiarizing ourselves with several of them, as different as they may be, greatly helps our understanding because it conveys a wider survey of the only genuine facts in the domain: those impressions and diagnoses about concrete cases that our conceptual capabilities generate. Hence, no interesting proposal in the history of the discipline should be permanently put aside.

How can there be groundbreaking theoretical proposals from this perspective? Recently I have been following current debates on "inner awareness", "mineness" or "pre-reflective self-awareness" – those generic features of phenomenally conscious states that distinguish mine from yours, even if the specific chromatic, auditory, or spatiotemporal *qualia* that characterize them are the same for you and me. It turns out that versions of some of the "new", most hotly debated proposals can be found (cashed out in wildly different terminologies, which admittedly makes the identification problematic) already in Aristotle [Caston (2002)] or Avicenna [Kaukua (2021)]. How then can the new versions be "groundbreaking"? From the exceptionalist perspective, that they may come mathematically articulated with the technical prowess admired in some highly regarded departments, and instilled in their graduates, is neither

here nor there; formal presentations may just be smokescreens for what, deep down, is unilluminating banality.

II. KRIPKEAN TURNING POINTS

Certainly, from a very early age Kripke had the technical proficiency of the most competent graduates of such departments, as he showed as a teenager by extending the model-theoretical techniques that Tarski and others had developed for elementary First Order Logic to quantified modal logic, proving the soundness of a formal system that he devised and its completeness relative to a class of models for them which he also characterized. These results decisively contributed to popularizing the intuitive notion of a *possible world* (a full way the world might have been, given a representational system for it) as a useful theoretical tool in philosophy and in linguistic semantics to characterize core aspects of conceptual systems, like their contents or truth-conditions. The notion, originally introduced in philosophy by Leibniz, had previously been recruited for similar purposes by Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus* and then by Carnap under the latter's influence. But Kripke also soon manifested the deepest form of philosophical understanding, first engaged in reflection about conceptual systems thus characterized; it appears in his exemplary groundbreaking contributions to philosophy as we now practice it.

Karl Popper and Willard V. O. Quine – two of the most prominent philosophers in the 1960s when Kripke was considering these matters, if not the most influential at the time – shared a common contempt for *Aristotelian essentialism*. This is not the place to dwell on what exactly they meant by that; in fact, I don't think they themselves were very clear about it [cf. Büttemeyer (2005), García-Carpintero & Pérez Otero (1999)]. *Prima facie* surprisingly for a school of philosophy that prides itself on its clarity and argumentative rigor, I don't think there is any decent argument against the doctrine to be found in Popper or Quine; they didn't even offer any clear articulation of a substantive view to argue against. It all seems sheer prejudice. The contempt was clear in Popper's and Quine's tirades against Aristotelian definitions (say, in Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. II and *Unended Quest*, or in Quine's "Reference and Modality" and "Three Grades of Modal Involvement"), as was the empiricist, Humean prejudice against substantive modal claims behind it.

Popper and Quine would certainly oppose the view that individuals and kinds have "real definitions": definitions that, being only knowable in part by empirical means, nonetheless capture their essence, what is

constitutive of them, and entail thereby the necessary truth of *de re* claims about them. Mind you, the fact that their rejection of essentialism thus understood was clearly based on pure philosophical prejudice didn't mean that it wouldn't have any influence. It would be naïve these days to expect that such strongly negatively charged attitudes expressed by powerful individuals would have an impact commensurate with their problematic intellectual grounds. I can testify, anecdotally, to the impact that the study of Quine's works on modality had on me as a PhD student, as it did at the time Popper's autobiography, making me partake for a while their rejection of that nebulously understood doctrine. Büttemeyer (2005) quotes similar testimonies, and the negative appraisal of the view he still cannot distance himself from is also telling, in spite of his compelling criticism of its philosophical foundations.

Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* lectures, and then the published version, with help from related work by Hilary Putnam and Tyler Burge, changed all that. It is not that they effected a replacement of an empiricist set of assumptions by alternative, metaphysics-friendly attitudes as shared prejudices in the discipline. In my appraisal, their work explains the current openness of Analytic Philosophy to all kinds of views, Popperian and Quinean empiricism among them – the reason why we are entitled to consider our "continental" colleagues who refer to analytic philosophers generically as "positivists" straightforwardly uninformed and ignorant. Williamsonian non-exceptionalists are right, however, that what caused such a change, making Kripke's work paradigmatically groundbreaking is, crucially and constitutively, the mathematical rigor through which he articulated his views, by assuming the possible worlds framework. Fine (1994), (1995) later contributed to the precise formal articulation of the picture, also expanding our understanding. Just compare to this work (which in the lectures Kripke nonetheless managed to present in plain English, accessible to readers unfamiliar with the formal possible worlds framework) Popper's muddled grappling with meanings (in his opposing to Aristotelian definitions a "methodological" nominalism he was sympathetic towards [cf. again Büttemeyer (2005)], or Quine's fumbling with the "third grade" of modal involvement, i.e., *de re* necessities [cf. García-Carpintero & Pérez Otero (1999)].

As Kripke shows, if we think of conceptual systems along the lines of David Lewis's (1975) "languages" (abstract assignments of "meanings" to "expressions"), there is nothing untoward in assigning to expressions like proper names and natural kind terms as "meanings" the objects or natural kinds (understood along Aristotelian lines, as defined

by empirically ascertained essences) that they may be taken to refer to. The possible worlds framework offers a "proof of concept", by providing a formally precise way to articulate this picture. This disposes right away of the only Popperian and Quinean considerations one may find at least intelligible. As Kripke famously put it, the expressions are "rigid designators": they pick out the same entities relative to any possible world at which the propositions they help to express are to be evaluated for truth or falsity, because this is just what the expressions mean in the relevant language. This is perfectly understandable and clear-cut. The remaining question, as Stalnaker (1997) rightly argues, is whether a semantics with this shape truly characterizes the conceptual systems we are endowed with; and the philosophical question about this "metasemantic" or "foundational-semantic" worry is: what sort of facts may issue an answer? Kripke's compelling "causal-historical" picture of reference-fixing suggests a partial account.

III. KRIPKE'S PHILOSOPHY OF PHILOSOPHY

Earlier I presented the exceptionalist picture I favor in a fictionalist ideology. This shouldn't be taken to imply that there is no truth or falsity in philosophy. I have been disparaging Popper's and Quine's views about real definitions as, at least, very inadequate models, conceptually muddled and lacking in argumentation if not altogether false. After all, the most basic, truth-seeking sciences also make heavy use of models that in themselves are plain fictions. But I don't think this parallel ultimately contradicts exceptionalism, because I take it that scientific models are meant to convey truths (in the way fictions in general may do so) about underlying causal-explanatory processes, while philosophical theories lack the methodological resources to aspire to that. Now, given that there should be causal-explanatory accounts of the data that philosophical theories aim to provide rational reconstructions for (those "impressions and diagnoses" issued by our conceptual endowment), we are entitled to reject muddled reconstructions not just as inadequate but as offering no glimpse of truth. For another example, and not to constrain myself to the rosy picture of the achievements of their subject that obituaries are prone, this applies to a view held by Kripke. This is the view of fictional discourse as the pretense of serious assertoric discourse that Kripke took for granted in his lectures on *Reference and Existence*, coetaneous with *Naming and Necessity*, whose publication he withheld until re-

cently [Kripke (2013)]. He was not alone in that error. The view, articulated by Searle (1975), was assumed as a matter of course by almost all analytic philosophers since Frege, until Kendall Walton's work called attention to its deep flaws [cf. García-Carpintero (2022)].

Philosophical theories are in my view aptly understood on the model of interpretations of complex fictions like, say, *Mulholland Drive*. In this case, there is a by now standard interpretation that I find superior to others, on which the first segment (about two hours long) is a dream of Diane Selwyn's, whose real situation is shown in the final half an hour, [cf. Hayles & Gessler (2004), pp. 491-7]. There is another less standard alternative, a "no dream" surrealist interpretation that some viewers prefer [Hudson (2004), Klock (2017)]. But the data that their proponents mention is easily explained by the dream theory, and the usual motivation (a general preference for the non-explained in fiction) is not well justified for this specific case. However, there are good examples of fictions for which there are no deciding factors to choose between interpretations as dramatically different as the two just mentioned. James's *Turn of the Screw* is the standard example. If we consider interpretations that are less dramatically different, we will find examples for all fictions, I submit. We cannot in fact rule out the possibility that a version of the "no dream" interpretation that ties up the loose ends in existing ones can be upheld as in a sufficiently good reflective equilibrium. What is explicitly represented in fictions corresponds in the case of their interpretation to the facts that philosophical theories try to rationally systematize – the clear-cut applications of our concepts in well-imagined thought experiments. Fiction-interpretation and philosophical theories are on equal footings because, in my view, there is in the nature of the undertakings nothing factual beyond such facts to decide among alternatives.

Kripke's own attitude to philosophy seems to me closer to exceptionalism than its opposite. I'll give four reasons for this. The first is the crucial value he places on intuitions as data in philosophy. The reader may just check occurrences of "intuition" and "intuitive" throughout *Naming and Necessity*, culminating in the famous declaration, "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" [Kripke (1980), p. 42].

A second consideration is the extreme care with which he avoids anything but the most nuanced commitments to theoretical views in phi-

losophy. Compare the dogmatic defense of Millianism (the view that *only* its referent is the meaning of a proper name) by the likes of Nathan Salmon or Scott Soames, leading them to embrace extravagant views such as that it is known *a priori* that Hesperus is Phosphorus – for which they have been unable to provide compelling reason – with Kripke's attitude towards the view. It is true that Kripke's (1979) *A Puzzle about Belief* can be read as providing reasons for Millianism, even though officially it just questions a consideration against it; but it is also true that, as far as I know, he never endorsed the view in print. If I can tell a personal anecdote at this point, my first encounter with Kripke was scary: after a talk at which I criticized Kripke's Millian intimations, carefree as one is when one thinks that the person one is criticizing is not in the audience, I was shocked when, after the talk, the chair invited "professor Kripke" to open the discussion … he had entered the room without my realizing. Almost equally shocking to me at the time was that he expressed some sympathy for my objections, showing only interest in finding out how my non-Millian appeal to reference-fixing presuppositions as an additional level of meaning in addition to referents [García-Carpintero (2000), (2021)] would handle some problematic cases. It is also revealing in this respect to compare Kripke's deflationary take on the ontology of possible worlds with David Lewis's incredulous stare-provoking views, supported only by tenuous Quinean non-exceptionalist considerations.

Kripke's attitude towards *a priori* knowledge constitutes a third piece of evidence. His defense of *de re*, *a posteriori* necessities appears to conflict with a rationalist view that *a priori* knowledge is the source of modal knowledge. Famously, however, he suggested that *a posteriori* necessities like *water is H_2O* might be derivable from *a priori* truths like *water is waterish* (i.e., has the weighted set of observable features constituting its "stereotype") and *a posteriori* contingencies like *being waterish is in fact being H_2O*, plus conceptual truths about natural kind concepts [cf. García-Carpintero & Macià (2006)]. The suggestion is made in his carefully non-committal way, but, equally famously, he invoked it to question the mind-body theoretical identities that physicalism about consciousness posits (an argument that Chalmers (1996) develops at length), which shows that Kripke took it seriously enough [Shoemaker (2011)].

Finally, Kripke's attitude to the history of philosophy contrasts with non-exceptionalism. Philosophers enthralled by the latter view tend to take towards non-fashionable views the attitude that scientists have vis-à-vis discredited theories. A good case in point is the belief in sense-data – features of conscious experiences, like a reddish circular patch, which are

intuitively present in the experience even if it is hallucinatory and there is no real red circle before the subject. The view, which was shared by most analytic philosophers at the beginning of the previous century including Moore, Russell and the early Wittgenstein, is now dismissed as clearly wrong by philosophers who, in my experience, are unable to articulate better reasons against it than the sort of prejudices (even if now arising from opposite allegiances) I denounced in Popper and Quine. Once more, it is revealing to find Kripke taking the view seriously, albeit critically, in several of his writings like the aforementioned lectures *Reference and Existence*, Kripke's (1982) postscript on "Wittgenstein and Other Minds" and Kripke (2011a).

Most other views that Kripke defended in his published and unpublished work were as groundbreaking as the work on meaning and content I have been focusing on, in related ways combining philosophical depth and formal rigor, with a similarly profound impact on the discipline. Fortunately, in recent times he was more open than he had been earlier to the publication of his talks [Kripke (2011b), (2013)], and some inklings about what still remains to be made public can be glimpsed from the commentaries on his work compiled by Berger (2011), whose authors had access to unpublished material in Kripke's archives.

In addition to his very significant work on truth, I'd like to mention in this regard his later work on meaning, Kripke (1982). I heard from people close to him that he was dissatisfied with that work, and I agree with commentators that his claims of non-factualism regarding the "skeptical solution" he suggested to the "skeptical challenge" that he found in Wittgenstein's later work don't live up to the standards he set in most of his work [Wilson (2011)]. The challenge is a broad one about the "metasemantics" of our languages and conceptual systems, and I believe it has a straightforward factualist solution compatible with the stakes the challenge sets up. But the challenge (whether or not it is really to be found in Wittgenstein, or is Kripke's own) is serious enough; whatever historians of philosophy decide on the interpretative issue, Kripke's discussion certainly helps us to have a better grasp of what Wittgenstein is up to in his notoriously opaque remarks; and, beyond these two points, it had another profound groundbreaking impact on analytic philosophy: it brought to the limelight the issue – to be sure raised by Wittgenstein, and also by Austin whether or not independently of him, see Harris & Unnsteinsson (2017) – whether, and the extent to which if so, meaning is normative. It thus very significantly contributed to the enormous in-

crease in the study of the social aspects of language that so significantly characterizes the current philosophical landscape.

I only had one short relatively close contact with Kripke during the few days he spend in Barcelona in 2005, when he gave the series of talks that he mentions in Kripke (2011a). I found it difficult to engage with him; he behaved in the way some mathematical geniuses do, ignoring the expectations and desires of audiences at talks and of occasional companions at conference dinners. He was certainly knowledgeable about many more topics than philosophy. At one of those occasions, he manifested a much deeper knowledge of the history of Spain than I have, understandably with a particular interest in the unfortunate treatment of Jewish people in these lands. My impression was that the very few remarks I managed to intersperse in his expositions were just used as hints to suggest new directions, not contributions to a common communicative undertaking. However, several friends whose opinions I deeply value and trust and who were close to him considered Kripke warm, affectionate, genial and rewarding company. The same can hardly be said of many academics, gifted and influential as he was or otherwise.

LOGOS-BIAP, Departament de Filosofia
Universitat de Barcelona
Montalegre 6-8, 4ª planta
08001 Barcelona
E-mail: m.garciacarpintero@ub.edu

REFERENCES

BEEBEE, HELEN (2018): "Genre, Interpretation and Evaluation", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 118 (1), 1-24.
BERGER, ALAN (2011): *Saul Kripke*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
BÜTTEMEYER, WILHELM (2005): "Popper on Definitions", *Journal for General Philosophy of Science* 36, 15-28.
CHALMERS, DAVID (1996): *The Conscious Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CASTON, VICTOR (2002): "Aristotle on Consciousness", *Mind*, 111, 751-815.

FINE, KIT (1994): "Essence and Modality," in *Philosophical Perspectives* 8, *Logic and Language*, J. Tomberlin (ed.), Atascadero, Cal.: Ridgeview.

— (1995): "The Logic of Essence," *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 24, pp. 241-273.

GARCÍA-CARPINTERO, MANUEL (2000): "A Presuppositional Account of Reference-Fixing," *Journal of Philosophy* XCVII (3), 109-147.

— (2021): "Reference-fixing and Presuppositions", in S. Biggs & H. Geirsson (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Reference*, London: Routledge, 179-198.

— (2022): "Predelli on Fictional Discourse", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 80, 83-94.

GARCÍA-CARPINTERO, MANUEL & MACIÀ, JOSEP (2006): "Introduction", in *ibid.* (eds.), *Two-Dimensional Semantics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-21.

GARCÍA-CARPINTERO, MANUEL and PÉREZ OTERO, MANUEL (1999): "The Ontological Commitments of Logical Theories", *European Review of Philosophy* 4, 157-182.

HARRIS, D. W. & UNNSTEINSSON, E. (2017): "Wittgenstein's Influence on Austin's Philosophy of Language", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 26 (2), 2017, 371–95.

HAYLES, N. K. and N. GESSLER (2004): "The Slipstream of Mixed Reality: Unstable Ontologies and Semiotic Markers in The Thirteenth Floor, Dark City, and Mulholland Drive", *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 119(3), 482-99.

HUDSON, JENNIFER (2004): "'No Hay Banda, and Yet We Hear a Band': David Lynch's Reversal of Coherence in Mulholland Drive", *Journal of Film and Video* 56, 17-24.

KAUKUA, JARI (2021): "The Heritage of Ibn Sīnā's Concept of the Self", in P. Kitcher (ed.), *The Self. A History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 55-72.

KLOCK, GEOFF (2017): "'Goodnight, Sweet Betty': Levels of Illusion in *Mulholland Drive* and *Hamlet*", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 34 (1), 50-65.

KRIPKE, SAUL (1979): "A Puzzle about Belief," in A. Margalit (ed.), *Meaning and Use*, 239-83, Dordrecht: D. Reidel.

— (1980): *Naming and Necessity*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

— (1982): *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Languages*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

— (2011a): "The First Person", *Philosophical Troubles*, 292-321, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

— (2011b): *Philosophical Troubles*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

— (2013): *Reference and Existence*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

LEWIS, DAVID (1979): 'Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*', *Philosophical Review* 88, 513-43.

MACFARLANE, JOHN (2014): *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

QUINE, W.V.O. (1951): "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", *Philosophical Review* 60 (1), 20-43.

RAWLS, JOHN (1972): *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

SEARLE, JOHN R. (1975): "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse", *New Literary History*, 6, 319-32.

SHOEMAKER, SYDNEY (2011): "Kripke and Cartesianism", in Berger, Alan (ed.), *Saul Kripke*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP., 327-342.

STALNAKER, ROBERT (1978): "Assertion," in P. Cole (ed.) *Syntax and Semantics* 9, New York: Academic Press, 315-332.

STALNAKER, ROBERT (1997): "Reference and Necessity," in C. Wright & B. Hale (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, Oxford: Blackwell, 534-554.

WILLIAMSON, TIMOTHY (2022): *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Blackwell.

WILSON, GEORGE (2011): "On the Skepticism about Rule-Following in Kripke's Version of Wittgenstein", in Berger, Alan (ed.), *Saul Kripke*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP., 253-289.

RESUMEN

Este obituario de Saul Kripke adopta como perspectiva el examen de por qué su obra en diversos ámbitos filosóficos (que incluyen la referencia, la verdad y el significado) debe ser considerada innovadora – incluso si se adopta una visión "excepcionalista" de la filosofía contrapuesta al "no-excepcionalismo" de Quine y sus seguidores que la hace continua con la ciencia – de acuerdo con el cual las "teorías" filosóficas son reconstrucciones racionales fictivas de dominios conceptuales. Se examina también la cuestión de si la actitud hacia la filosofía de Kripke puede clasificarse en una u otra categoría

KEYWORDS: *filosofía; anti-esencialismo; reconstrucciones racionales; modelos; ficción.*

ABSTRACT

This obituary for Saul Kripke adopts the perspective of exploring why his work on several philosophical topics (including reference, truth, and meaning) should be considered *groundbreaking* – even when one adopts an "exceptionalist" view of the nature of philosophy that rejects the "non-exceptionalism" of Quine and followers on which it is straightforwardly continuous with science – according to which philosophical "theories" are fictional rational reconstructions of conceptual domains. The issue is also examined whether Kripke's own philosophy of philosophy was to be classified in one or the other camp.

KEYWORDS: *Philosophy; Anti-Essentialism; Rational Reconstructions; Models; Fiction.*