

Note: The footnotes are not optional in this reading.
Pay special attention to footnotes 56 and 57!

The Necessity of Origin

by Saul Kripke (excerpted from *Naming and Necessity*, 1980)

[C]ould the Queen—could this woman herself—have been born of different parents from the parents from whom she actually came? Could she, let's say, have been the daughter instead of Mr. and Mrs. Truman? There would be no contradiction, of course, in an announcement that (I hope the ages do not make this impossible), fantastic as it may sound, she was indeed the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Truman. I suppose there might even be no contradiction in the discovery that—it seems very suspicious anyway that on either hypothesis she has a sister called Margaret—that these two Margarets were one and the same person flying back and forth in a clever way. At any rate we can imagine discovering all of these things.

But let us suppose that such a discovery is not in fact the case. Let's suppose that the Queen really did come from these parents. Not to go into too many complications here about what a parent is, let's suppose that the parents are the people whose body tissues are sources of the biological sperm and egg. So you get rid of such *recherché* possibilities as transplants of the sperm from the father, or the egg from the mother, into other bodies, so that in one sense other people might have been her parents. If that happened, in another sense her parents were still the original king and queen. But other than that, can 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 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 then 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. One can only become convinced of this by reflection on how you would describe this situation. (That, I suppose, means in many cases that you won't become convinced of this, at least not at the moment. But it is something of which I personally have been convinced.)

How could a person originating from different parents, from a totally different sperm and egg, be *this very woman*? One can imagine, *given* the woman, that various things in her life could have changed: that she should have become a pauper; that her royal blood should have been

unknown, and so on. One is given, let's say, a previous history of the world up to a certain time, and from that time it diverges considerably from the actual course. This seems to be possible. And so it's possible that even though she were born of these parents she never became queen. Even though she were born of these parents, like Mark Twain's character⁵⁴ she was switched off with another girl. But what is harder to imagine is her being born of different parents. It seems to me that anything coming from a different origin would not be this object.

In the case of this table,⁵⁵ we may not know what block of wood the table came from. Now could *this table* have been made from a completely *different* block of wood, or even of water cleverly hardened into ice-water taken from the Thames River? 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.^{56 57}

⁵⁴ In *The Prince and The Pauper*.

⁵⁵ Of course I was pointing to a wooden table in the room.

⁵⁶ A principle suggested by these examples is: *If a material object has its origin from a certain hunk of matter, it could not have had its origin in any other matter.* Some qualifications might have to be stated (for example, the vagueness of the notion of hunk of matter leads to some problems), but in a large class of cases the principle is perhaps susceptible of something like proof, using the principle of the necessity of identity for particulars. Let 'B' be a name (rigid designator) of a table, let 'A' name the piece of wood from which it actually came. Let 'C' name another piece of wood. Then suppose B were made from A, as in the actual world, but also another table D were simultaneously made from C. (We assume that there is no relation between A and C which makes the possibility of making a table from one dependent on the possibility of making a table from the other.) Now in this situation $B \neq D$; hence, even if D were made by itself, and no table were made from A, D would not be B. Strictly speaking, the 'proof' uses the necessity of distinctness, not of identity. However, the same types of considerations that can be used to establish the latter can be used to establish the former. (Suppose $X \neq Y$; if X and Y were both identical to some object Z in another possible world, then $X = Z$, $Y = Z$, hence $X = Y$.) Alternatively, the principle follows from the necessity of identity plus the 'Brouwersche' axiom, or, equivalently, symmetry of the accessibility relation between possible worlds. In any event, the argument applies only if the making of D from C does not affect the possibility of making B from A, and vice-versa.

⁵⁷ In addition to the principle that the *origin* of an object is essential to it, another principle suggested is that the *substance* of which it is made is essential. Several

These are only examples of essential properties. I won't dwell on them further...

complications exist here. First, one should not confuse the type of essence involved in the question 'What properties must an object retain if it is not to cease to exist, and what properties of the object can change while the object endures?', which is a temporal question, with the question 'What (timeless) properties could the object not have failed to have, and what properties could it have lacked while still (timelessly) existing?', which concerns necessity and not time and which is our topic here. Thus the question of whether the table could have *changed* into ice is irrelevant here. The question whether the table could *originally* have been made of anything other than wood is relevant. Obviously this question is related to the necessity of the origin of the table from a given block of wood and whether that block, too, is essentially wood (even wood of a particular kind). Thus it is ordinarily impossible to imagine the table made from any substance other than the one of which it is actually made without going back through the entire history of the universe, a mind-boggling feat. (Other possibilities of the table not having been wooden originally have been suggested to me, including an ingenious suggestion of Slote's, but I find none of them really convincing. I cannot discuss them here.) A full discussion of the problems of essential properties of particulars is impossible here, but I will mention a few other points: (1) Ordinarily when we ask intuitively whether something might have happened to a given object, we ask whether the universe could have gone on as it actually did up to a certain time, but diverge in its history from that point forward so that the vicissitudes of that object would have been different from that time forth. *Perhaps* this feature should be erected into a general principle about essence. Note that the time in which the divergence from actual history occurs may be sometime before the object itself is actually created. For example, I might have been deformed if the fertilized egg from which I originated had been damaged in certain ways, even though I presumably did not yet exist at that time. (2) I am not suggesting that only origin and substantial makeup are essential. For example, if the very block of wood from which the table was made had instead been made into a vase, the table never would have existed. So (roughly) *being a table* seems to be an essential property of the table. (3) Just as the question whether an object *actually* has a certain property (e.g. baldness) can be vague, so the question whether the object essentially has a certain property can be vague, even when the question whether it actually has the property is decided. (4) Certain counterexamples to the origin principle appear to exist in ordinary parlance. I am convinced that they are not genuine counter-examples, but their exact analysis is difficult. I cannot discuss this here.