On Kripke’s Puzzle about Time and Thought

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Kripke [Kp] formulates the following puzzle.

At any moment of time, Kripke might be thinking of a certain set of times. For example, the set of all times when TV was unknown. Or the set of all times when interplanetary travel will be commonplace and the like. Kripke proceeds.

However, there is a problem: suppose I think at a certain time \( t_0 \) of the set \( S_0 \) where \( S_0 \) contains all times \( t \) at which I’m thinking of a given set \( S_t \) of times, and \( S_t \) does not include \( t \) itself. In conventional notation:

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S_0 = \{ t | S_t \text{ exists} \& t \notin S_t \}
\]

Now, I am thinking of \( S_0 \) at a certain time \( t_0 \). Is \( t_0 \) a member of \( S_0 \) or not? The reader can fill in the resulting paradox for herself.

Before addressing Kripke’s problem, let us turn to another Harvard philosopher, namely Hilary Putnam who is famous for not being able to distinguish a beech from an elm. Suppose that Putnam is looking at a tree in a friend’s backyard and says, “I think that tree might be a beech.”

One question which might be raised here is \textit{What does thinking of something amount to?} It is not clear to me what Kripke’s notion of ‘thinking of something’ is. I have used an approach where syntax is an intermediary to semantics which is then used to think of things. Thus I shall take the point of view that thinking of some \( X \) is mentally repeating some words intended to denote \( X \). If there is such an \( X \), and is denoted by the expression one has mentally repeated then in normal circumstances one has succeeded in thinking of \( X \). However, surely that is not the only way. Perhaps one thinks of someone by having a picture of him in one’s mind. So I might think of Quine, not by saying the word to myself but remembering him. But remembering how? In his office? Giving a lecture at CUNY? If I remember him giving a lecture and someone else remembers him walking through Harvard yard, then are we thinking of different persons? If I read Borges’ \textit{The Aleph} in English and Adriana reads it in Spanish then when we think about \textit{The Aleph} are we thinking of the same book? I shall avoid such questions by simply assuming that thinking of Quine amounts to saying the word to oneself provided one satisfies the required conditions viz: one has met Quine or read one of his papers or met someone who knew Quine, or whatever. A second reason for going the linguistic route is that while at least a weak case can be made that one can think of Quine by having a mental image of him, it seems implausible that one can think of \( S_0 \) without going the linguistic route. [Sm] discusses some of these questions though in a different context.
The friend responds, “Do you mean to say that my tree is a member of the set of all beech trees?”, and Putnam responds, “Yes, just that. I think your tree is a member of the set of all beech trees.”

Now Putnam does not know whether the tree in question is a beech or not. May we nonetheless say that Putnam is thinking of the set B of beech trees and wondering if the tree in question belongs to B?

Surely yes. Putnam does not need to be able to tell a beech tree by sight in order to think of the set B, just as we can think of Aristotle without having the ability to recognize him by sight. Here is the quote from Putnam:

Suppose you are like me and cannot tell an elm from a beech tree. We still say that the extension of ‘elm’ in my idiolect is the same as the extension of ‘elm’ in anyone else’s, viz., the set of all elm trees, and that the set of all beech trees is the extension of ‘beech’ in both of our idiolects. Thus ‘elm’ in my idiolect has a different extension from ‘beech’ in your idiolect (as it should). Is it really credible that this difference in extension is brought about by some difference in our concepts? My concept of an elm tree is exactly the same as my concept of a beech tree (I blush to confess).

And again:

The last two examples depend upon a fact about language that seems, surprisingly, never to have been pointed out: that there is division of linguistic labor. We could hardly use such words as ‘elm’ and ‘aluminum’ if no one possessed a way of recognizing elm trees and aluminum metal; but not everyone to whom the distinction is important has to be able to make the distinction. Let us shift the example; consider gold. Gold is important for many reasons: it is a precious metal; it is a monetary metal; it has symbolic value (it is important to most people that the “gold” wedding ring they wear really consist of gold and not just look gold); etc. Consider our community as a “factory”: in this “factory” some people have the “job” of wearing gold wedding rings; other people have the “job” of selling gold wedding rings; still other people have the job of telling whether or not something is really gold. It is not at all necessary or efficient that every one who wears a gold ring (or a gold cufflink, etc.), or discusses the “gold standard,” etc., engage in buying and selling gold. Nor is it necessary or efficient that every one who buys and sells gold be able to tell whether or not something is really gold. It is not at all necessary or efficient that every one who has occasion to buy or wear gold be able to tell with any reliability whether or not something is really gold.

The foregoing facts are just examples of mundane division of labor (in a wide sense). But they engender a division of linguistic labor: every