

## Essentialist Conceptions of General Term Rigidity.

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Goal: to examine the proposal according to which so called rigid predicates should be understood as essentialist ones.

Essentialist predicate: a predicate is essentialist, if and only if, for any object and world, if it applies to a certain object in a particular world, it applies to that same object in all other worlds (or, at least, in all other worlds in which the object exists)

Intuitively, an essentialist predicate expresses a property that is such that it is an essential property of any object that has it.

History: 1980, first proposal of this kind in a paper by Monte Cook

1999, Devitt and Sterelny suggest again the plausibility of such accounts.

2002 Scott Soames dismisses such accounts in *Beyond Rigidity* on the grounds that they are not able to explain the necessity of true theoretical identifications.

2002 Stephen Schwartz also dismisses such accounts on the basis of objections concerning, for the most part, problems of extensional adequacy.

2005 Michael Devitt, in "Rigid Application", accepts Soames' objection, but defends the account from Schwartz's objections.

2006 Mario Gomez-Torrente, in "Rigidity and Essentiality", defends the account from Soames' objections and general worries related to Schwartz's ones.

I will be mainly concerned with the defenses offered by Devitt and Gómez-Torrente (and will try to reject them).

What is the problem? Kripke defines a notion of rigidity for singular terms, and suggests that it applies also to natural kind terms, but it is not straightforward how to apply this notion to them.

Why? The original notion of rigidity is defined in terms of the notion of designation, and it is not clear how this notions should be applied to predicates.

Kripke on singular term designation: "Let's call something a *rigid designator* if in every possible world it designates the same object, a *nonrigid* or *accidental designator* if that is not the case (1980, p. 48)".

3 *prima facie* candidates:

C1. the relation between a general term and its extension.

C2. the relation between a general term and each of the members of its extension.

C3. the relation between a general term and the property it expresses.

C1 has been typically thought to be a non starter, C2 gives rise to the essentialist proposal, C3 to the referentialist proposal. (It would seem that C2 and C3 would be something like "counterparts under different counterpart relations", in a case of "fission", of the notion of designation as it applies to singular terms: C2 privileges the relation of a term with the object(s) it applies to, C3 the relation of a term with its semantic content)

Formulations of the essentialist proposal:

Devitt: "A general term '*F*' is a rigid applier iff it is such that if it applies to an object in any possible world, then it applies to that object in every possible world in which the object exists. Similarly for a mass term (2005, p. 146)".

Gómez-Torrente: "A predicate *P* is weakly essentialist iff for all worlds *w* and any object *o*, if *P* applies to *o* in *w*, then for all worlds *w'*, if *o* exists in *w'* then *P* applies to *o* in *w'* (2006, p. 235)".

I shall take the proposals to be equivalent, though the difference of formulating it for general terms or for predicates may have some bearing of the discussion of overgeneralization later.

Which should be the criteria for accepting any such proposal?

The following seems a reasonable set of requirements (Cp. Soames 2002):

R1. The proposal concerning the rigidity distinction should be relevant to characterize (or be illuminating as regards) the different semantic properties of the terms so distinguished.

R2. The proposal should be able to explain some formal contrasts between rigid and non rigid expressions, in particular, the necessity of true identifications between rigid terms.

R3. The proposal should make the class of rigid terms coincide (at least to a great extent) with the class of natural kind terms.

Devitt accepts the three of them, though in different degrees. R1 is for him the most important “task” for the notion of rigidity (he refers to it by saying that this notion should be used to refute description theories of the meaning of terms), R2 and R3 are less important, in the sense that not fulfilling them completely should not be a sufficient reason for rejecting the view (he accepts that R2 is not completely fulfilled because the necessitations of the identities cannot be explained in his account).

Gómez-Torrente seems also to accept the three of them, though he is silent on R1 and does not discuss it, giving foremost importance to R2.

In general, it seems that RR 1-3 stem from the most salient things Kripke says about these terms and should be kept if we are after Kripke’s notion; but R3 is perhaps less important if we are simply after a reasonable notion of rigidity, as R1 and R2 encapsulate most of the work these notions play in the theory (and only they have clear singular term counterparts).

In the rest of the talk I try to see how the proposal fares as regards these three requirements.

R3. Extensional adequacy.

There are two ways of being extensionally inadequate:

- a. Overgeneralization: in case the proposal makes rigid some terms other than natural kind ones.
- b. Undergeneralization: in case the proposal fails to make rigid all natural kind terms.

a. Overgeneralization.

Two main kinds of examples:

A: ‘is self-identical’, ‘is identical with Plato’, ‘is different from Hitler’, ‘is either coloured or transparent’ (discussed by Gómez-Torrente).

B: ‘television set’ and ‘table’, that is, terms for sortal concepts or properties that are usually believed to be essential to the objects they are true of (discussed by Devitt).

A. Gómez-Torrente accepts that the predicates he discusses are indeed essentialist and do not stand for natural kinds, but he dismisses the accusation of overgeneralization as irrelevant.

Argument: a similar situation takes place in the case of singular terms, where there are more rigid terms (rigid definite descriptions) than paradigmatic rigid terms (i.e., names).

Reply: that is right, and can be in general accepted, but it should be pointed out that there are strong disanalogies between both cases: Kripke has an explanation, both of why it is that names are the paradigmatic rigid terms, and of why it is that there are other rigid singular terms, namely, that the former are rigid *de jure*, and the latter are so *de facto*. On the contrary, there seems to be no way of explaining, in essentialist terms, why natural kind terms are to be paradigms of rigidity, nor is there any *formal* difference between them and other essentialist terms.

B. Devitt tries to defend the thesis that terms such as those he discusses, sortal terms for artifacts, do not stand for properties that are essential for their instances, and are therefore not of the right kind to show the proposal to overgeneralize

(Previous worry: shouldn’t he be concerned about Gómez-Torrente’s examples? No, as long as his project concerns mainly (semantically simple) general terms).

Argument: terms like ‘table’ and ‘television set’ are indeed terms for implements which, unlike natural kind terms, express properties, such as *being a paperweight*, that are not essential to the particular objects that exemplify them. He grounds this conclusion in the intuitions we allegedly have as regards how to describe certain situations, for instance:

(i) A stone that is taken from the beach and used as a paperweight.

(ii) An object indiscernible from a table (“Kripke’s table”) that is then used as a lightshade.

Devitt on (i): “But it is odd indeed to suppose that two indistinguishable stones differ in their essential natures simply because one was left on the beach whilst the other was picked up and regularly used as a paperweight (2005, p. 156)”.

He then concludes that objects are not essentially the kind of implement they are, and that therefore terms for them (such as ‘table’ or ‘television set’) are not essentialist.

Reply: 1. He reaches conclusions regarding the whole class of artifacts from the consideration of some very simple cases; but typically artifacts are more complex and in those cases his contentions much less intuitive (we wouldn’t like to say that a car is actually a certain aggregate put accidentally to some use).

2. He cannot explain the difference between saying what something is used for, and what something is. Example: I inherit a cup from my aunt but I never drink tea nor coffee, so I regularly use the cup as a paperweight. Devitt’s theory predicts that I have a similar right to call it one thing or another, but it is clear that there is an asymmetry between both cases (it is not both things *in the same sense*: we clearly seem to suppose that it *is* a cup *used as* a paperweight).

3. This idea of using an artifact term to say what something is related to the idea that our use of those terms is connected to what we consider to be the persistence conditions of the objects so called. And it should be pointed out that in the cases in which his arguments seem to work, they exploit rather certain phenomena of vagueness concerning the coming into being of artifacts. But similar phenomena take place (a) as regards natural kinds; and (b) as regards the use of names (it would be indeterminate whether a names applies to something as long as it is indeterminate whether or not it is a particular individual); and Devitt does not conclude for them that they are not essentialist.

b. Undergeneralization.

Two different kinds of examples:

A: some adjectives such as ‘red’, ‘hot’, ‘loud’, adjectival comparative phrases such as ‘... is hotter than ...’ (discussed by Gómez-Torrente)

B: some common nouns that describe stages in the development of individuals of some species, such as ‘frog’ or ‘butterfly’ (originally presented by Schwartz and discussed by Devitt).

A. Gómez-Torrente accepts that terms like ‘red’ or ‘hot’ are natural kind terms, and he also accepts that they are not essentialist. But he reinterprets Kripke’s text to the effect that he would accept that terms like ‘red’ are not strictly rigid.

Argument (in two steps): 1. Kripke had no clear idea as to whether terms like ‘red’ should be classified as rigid or not. This would follow from the following two passages, where he seems to affirm and deny that colour terms are rigid:

T1 My own view (...) regards Mill as more-or-less right about ‘singular’ names, but wrong about ‘general’ names. *Perhaps* some ‘general’ names (‘foolish’, ‘fat’, ‘yellow’) express properties [here comes the note 66 to which we will later refer]. In a significant sense, such general names as ‘cow’ and ‘tiger’ do not, unless *being a cow* counts trivially as a property (pp. 127-8).

T2 ... my argument implicitly concludes that certain general terms, those for natural kinds, have a greater kinship with proper names than is generally realized. This conclusion (...) also applies to certain terms for natural phenomena, such as ‘heat’, ‘light’, ‘sound’, ‘lightning’, and, presumably, suitably elaborated, to corresponding adjectives – ‘hot’, ‘loud’, ‘red’ (p. 134).

2. This interpretation allows him to explain the “suitable elaboration” needed as follows: terms like ‘red’ are not themselves rigid/essentialist, but could nevertheless be used to explain why the derivations of the necessitations of true “identification sentences” are still valid. This would be so because the relevant class of terms are related in a modal way to genuinely essentialist ones, the true identifications among which are necessary.

That is, the necessity of

(a) **For all  $x$  and  $y$ ,  $x$  is hotter than  $y$  iff  $x$  has a greater instance of molecular energy (or higher molecular energy) than  $y$**  (the “identification” between ‘... is hotter than ...’ and ‘... has higher molecular energy than ...’)

would derive from the necessary truth of

(b) **For all  $x$  and  $y$ ,  $x$  is hotter than  $y$  iff  $x$  has a greater instance of heat (*sic*) than  $y$**  (the “modal connection” between ‘heat’ and ‘... is hotter than ...’)

and the necessary truth of

(c) **All and only instances of heat are instances of molecular energy** (because of the assumed rigid character of ‘heat’ and of ‘molecular energy’).

Reply: Re1: Gómez-Torrente does not provide an adequate reading of the passages. A clue to a more satisfactory interpretation can be obtained by looking at the note 66:

T3 I am not going to give any criterion for what I mean by a ‘pure property’, or Fregean intension. (...) Yellowness certainly expresses a manifest physical property of an object and, relative to the discussion of gold above, can be regarded as a property in the required sense. Actually, however, it is not without a certain referential element of its own, for on the present view yellowness is picked out and rigidly designated as that external physical property of the object which we sense by means of the *visual impression of yellowness*. It does in this respect resemble the natural kind terms. The phenomenological quality of the sensation itself, on the other hand, can be regarded as a *quale* in some pure sense (p. 128).

In the first place, Kripke restricts the validity of his supposition in T1 that ‘yellow’ would belong to the class of descriptive terms to a particular context, by saying that ‘yellow’ could (only) be taken as descriptive ‘*relative to the discussion of gold above*’ (and he goes on to say that in fact, ‘*actually*’, it is more like a natural kind term). Finally, the last remark in T3 might be taken as suggesting that ‘yellow’ is ambiguous between this sense and a “descriptive” sense, which he probably had in mind in the first passage quoted.

Re2: his understanding of the “suitable elaboration” seems wrong for various reasons:

1. It seems clear from the context that Kripke is asking for an elaboration as a result of which the notion of rigidity itself should be applicable to the relevant terms, something that is not the case according to the proposal.
2. A similar phenomenon arises with singular terms: ‘The birthplace of Cicero = The birthplace of Tully’ is necessarily true, as a consequence of the necessity of ‘Cicero = Tully’. But nobody would say that those descriptions are rigid in any sense, as one would expect if the proposal were right.
- (3. Besides, the proposal cannot accommodate the fact that Kripke refers to what makes terms like ‘yellow’ akin to natural kind terms as their having “a certain referential element of [their] own”.)

B. Devitt accepts that examples such as ‘frog’ or ‘butterfly’ are not essentialist, but construes them as not being “pure” natural kind terms (they include for him a descriptive element), so that they would be outside the scope of R3.

Argument: a similar situation takes place in the case of singular terms. ‘That murderer’ includes a paradigmatic rigid term (the demonstrative), but the fact that it has also a descriptive element prevents the whole phrase from being rigid. Something similar happens with ‘frog’, if we suppose that it has a descriptive aspect besides its natural kind one (it would be analogous to ‘white horse’), so that one should not expect it to be essentialist.

Reply: 1. The idea that terms like ‘frog’ are partly descriptive seems simply false: we could always imagine a frog not exemplifying a pure property and going on being a frog, just as we can do so as regards tigers.

2. If ‘frog’ is partly descriptive, ‘tadpole’ should also be so, and therefore not rigid. But, at least according to a reading of the essentiality thesis in which it does not imply temporal constancy in a world this would not be so: if ‘tadpole’ describes a tadpole/frog in the first stage of its existence, it will be essentialist in this sense.

3. Finally, it seems reasonable to suppose that ‘frog’ share all relevant semantic properties with ‘tiger’: that it acquired its content in a reference-fixing way and that its range of application depends on an underlying nature. It should be pointed out that there being an essential underlying nature determining the extension of a natural kind term is completely independent from it being *de re* necessary for anything that has it.

R2. Necessitations of identification sentences.

Soames and Devitt both agree that the essentialist proposal cannot explain the necessitations of true theoretical identifications, but Gómez-Torrente thinks that that acceptance depends on their not distinguishing the different notions of rigidity/essentiality that Kripke had in mind, and the different degrees to which he was committed to them.

Gómez-Torrente’s argument: the failure Soames finds, which consists in the fact that argument (1) is invalid, concerns only the weak variant of the notion of essentiality (as follows from the assumptions he makes); but that is no ground for rejecting the proposal, as something similar happens in the parallel case with singular terms if our notion is that of weak rigidity, as is clear from the fact that (2), so understood, is also invalid.

- (1) ***For all x, x is A iff x is B*** is true.  
The predicates/general terms ‘A’ and ‘B’ are essentialist.  
***Necessarily, for all x, x is A iff x is B*** is true.

- (2)  $a = b$  is true.  
The singular terms 'a' and 'b' are rigid.  
*Necessarily,  $a = b$  is true.*

Gómez-Torrente thinks that there are two ways of reacting to this situation.

(i) Preserve the weak notion of rigidity/essentiality, and accept a weakened conclusion, or

(ii) Preserve the conclusion and accept a stronger notion of rigidity/essentiality (the obstinate variant).

He will try to argue in favour of (ii), but he also thinks that, if this were not ultimately successful, (i) would be a good enough situation. So we have:

(i) The minimal position: just as we have (3) corresponding to (2), we could have (4) corresponding to (1)

- (3)  $a = b$  is true.  
The singular terms 'a' and 'b' are (weakly) rigid.  
*Necessarily, (if a exists,  $a = b$ ) is true.*

- (4) *For all x, x is A iff x is B* is true.  
The predicates/general terms 'A' and 'B' are (weakly) essentialist.  
*Necessarily, (if everything that is actually an A or B exists, and everything that is an A or B actually exists, for all x, x is A iff x is B) is true.*

(ii) The ambitious position: if we could establish that names and the relevant predicates are obstinately essentialist, we could have the unrestricted conclusions of (5) and (6):

- (5)  $a = b$  is true.  
The singular terms 'a' and 'b' are (obstinately) rigid.  
*Necessarily,  $a = b$  is true.*
- (6) *For all x, x is A iff x is B* is true.  
The predicates/general terms 'A' and 'B' are (obstinately) essentialist.  
*Necessarily, for all x, x is A iff x is B is true.*

And, he thinks, there are good arguments to think that such predicates are obstinately essentialist (or at least there are as good arguments to think so as there are to think that names are obstinately rigid).

He makes his case on the basis of examples such as (7) and (8) (after some failed attempts):

(7) It might have been the case that Plato had been prevented from developing (if some specified spermatozoid and egg had never united).

(8) It might have been the case that there had been men who had been prevented from developing (if certain specific spermatozoids and eggs had not united).

Assuming that (7) is intuitively true, this implies that 'Plato has been prevented from developing' is true at some possible world, which again seems to require that 'Plato' refers to Plato in a world in which he does not exist. This would imply, then, the truth of the obstinacy thesis for names. He supposes then that something similar happens in the corresponding case with predicates for natural kinds, such as 'is a man' in (8), which is also intuitively true. In this case, the truth of (8) would require that 'Some men are prevented from developing' be true at some possible world and this, again, would require that there should be some individuals in that world of which it would be true, both that they are men there, and that they do not exist in that world. These considerations would then establish the truth of the obstinacy thesis for terms for natural kinds.

Reply: 1. Concerning (i), it doesn't seem true that, just as (3) was almost as satisfactory to (2), the same happens with (4) as regards (1). (4) implies that the identification is only valid in worlds in which all the relevant individuals are the same, but that seems too narrow a scope for its validity. Besides, supposing so would be at odds with Gómez-Torrente's own contention that Kripke conceived his necessitations to be at least as strong as to support counterfactuals.

2. I think that Gómez-Torrente's case for obstinate essentialism is not good, and that many of the theses he thinks that follow from the truth of (7) and (8) are wrong. In particular, I think that there are good arguments for the obstinate rigidity of names, but not for the obstinate essentiality of natural kind terms. This difference in our evaluation of these cases seems to derive from a different understanding of crucial phrases like 'being true in a world' and 'referring to something in a world'. The requirement he later makes, that we understand the contrasting sentence

(9) 'It might have been the case that the student of Socrates had been prevented from developing'

in its *de dicto* reading suggests that he is thinking that the denotation of the singular terms involved should be something *inside* that world, which seems to me to be an odd requirement. I suggest to take (7), instead, as parallel to the *de re* reading of (9), a reading that I think should not be taken as objectionable (cf. the true reading of the test sentence 'The president of the U.S. in 1970 might not have been the president of the U.S. in 1970'). 'Plato' in (9) should then be taken as referring to Plato, the one that once existed in our world (and, of course, in many other worlds), which then is to be seen as the semantic value contributed by the name to that sentence (assuming direct reference), whose truth value, nonetheless, is to be evaluated with respect to what is the case in possible worlds in which Plato does not exist. (cf. Branquinho's use in a similar context of Kaplan's distinction between reference *with respect to* a world and reference *in* a world).

But this result cannot be extended to general terms. The reason is that while one can identify an object in a certain world to say what happens with it in a world in which it does not exist, and so the semantic value obtained for a singular term in some world where it exists can be transferred, so to speak, to those other worlds, the semantic value of predications (their truth value) seems to be worldbound (while a singular term was rigid depending on what its reference was in different possible worlds, a predicate was essentialist, not depending on what its semantic value was in those worlds, but depending on what objects it was *true* of there). From the fact that I may refer to some men with respect to a certain world *w* it does *not* follow that they are men in *w*. The only thing that follows is that the individuals denoted by that use of 'some men' are men in the worlds from which they are picked up. This position has also the advantage of avoiding the troublesome contention that some objects may instantiate properties like *being a man* in worlds in which they do not exist.

#### R1. Rigidity and the semantic properties of terms.

The proposal seems unable to account for the relations that there seem to be between the rigidity of a term and its general semantic features. In particular, it seems to overlook the explanatory connection that Kripke seems to presuppose between the nondescriptionality (or reference-fixing character) of a term and its rigidity (as suggested both in the case of singular terms, and in the initial characterization of natural kind terms as the only ones of which should be expected to be rigid).

Not only does the proposal overlook that specific form of connection, but it seems to be structurally unable to explain any connection between the rigidity of a term and the way it gets its semantic content. This is because, while a singular term applies to an entity of a same kind as the one involved in the fixation of reference (and, indeed, the same entity is involved in both cases), a general term gets its content from a different kind of entity than those to which it applies.

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