

FLEXIBLE PROPERTY DESIGNATORS

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The *simple proposal* about rigidity for predicates can be stated thus: a predicate is rigid if its canonical nominalization signifies the same property across the different possible worlds. I have tried elsewhere to defend such a proposal from the *trivialization problem*, according to which any predicate whatsoever would turn out to be rigid. Benjamin Schnieder (2005) aims first to rebut my argument that some canonical nominalizations can be flexible, then to provide five arguments to the effect that they are all rigid, and finally to propose a general explanation of why they are all rigid. I show first why my argument has not been rebutted, then why Schnieder's five arguments for their rigidity all fail, and finally why the alleged "explanation" cannot be such, as the facts alluded to are neutral with respect to the rigidity or flexibility of the nominalizations.

1. *Rigidity for predicates: the simple proposal*

A singular term is rigid if it signifies¹ the same object across the different worlds. What it is for a predicate to be rigid?

The *simple proposal* about rigidity for predicates is the following: a predicate is *rigid* iff it signifies the same property across the different possible worlds. This was arguably suggested by Kripke (1980) himself, and indeed seems to be tacitly assumed in discussions in philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, or metaethics. In order to allay the misgivings some people have about predicates signifying properties, the proposal can be restated via canonical nominalizations of predicates. If P is a predicate, its *canonical nominalization*, P -ing, is (roughly) the expression that results from P by replacing the first verb it contains by its gerund form. So 'being water', 'being the substance instances of which fall from the sky in rain and fill the lakes and rivers', 'running' and 'exercising the way José prefers' are the canonical nominalizations of the predicates 'is water', 'is the substance instances of which fall from the sky in rain and fill the lakes and

1. Following Gödel, I use 'signification' as a word for what in German is called 'Bedeutung'.

rivers,' 'runs' and 'exercises the way José prefers.' A predicate is rigid, the simple proposal has it, iff its canonical nominalization signifies the same property across the different possible worlds.

The simple proposal is in effect quite a natural one, as its critics also concede. However, it has been claimed to suffer from what I call *the trivialization problem*: any predicate whatsoever would turn out to be trivially rigid, according to the proposal. I have argued elsewhere² that the simple proposal *can* overcome the trivialization problem, by exploiting intuitions about the actual truth-values of identity statements involving nominalizations.

In a recent paper, 'Property Designators, Predicates, and Rigidity', Benjamin Schnieder (2005) aims first to rebut my argument that some canonical nominalizations can be flexible, then to provide five arguments to the effect that they are all rigid, and finally to propose a general explanation of why they are all rigid. In what follows I show first why my argument has not been rebutted (section 2), then why Schnieder's five arguments for their rigidity all fail (section 3), and finally why the alleged "explanation" cannot be such, as the facts alluded to are neutral with respect to the rigidity or flexibility of the nominalizations (section 4).

2. *The flexibility of some nominalizations defended*

According to the defender of the simple proposal, some (canonical) nominalizations can signify different properties in the different worlds. Plausibly, for instance, 'exercising the way José prefers' signifies running with respect to the actual world, but swimming with respect to an appropriate counterfactual world. But now consider the (abundant) property exercising-the-way-José-prefers, which is (stipulated to be) had by something in a world iff it is the way of exercising José prefers in that world. Notice that the assumption that 'exercising the way José prefers' rigidly signifies this property instead of flexibly signifying the different sports José prefers in the different worlds has the same consequences regarding both the actual and counterfactual truth-values of sentences like 'Pedro exercises the way José prefers'. Furthermore, one might suggest, if there is such a property as exercising-the-way-José-prefers, isn't it the obvious candidate for 'exercising the way José prefers' to (rigidly) signify? How could the simple proposal and the flexibility of 'exercising the way José prefers' then be defended?

This challenge is what constitutes *the trivialization problem*, as the worry would reappear with respect to any putative candidate of a flexible predicate whatsoever: how could its flexibility be defended given that an (abundant)

2. In (López de Sa, 2001, 2003). See also (LaPorte, 2000) and (Salmon, 2003, 2005) for congenial proposals.

property, tracking the actual and counterfactual extensions of the predicate, will always be available to be rigidly signified?³

The strategy I advocate for overcoming the trivialization problem exploits intuitions about the actual truth-values of identity statements involving nominalizations. To the extent to which one has intuitions that *some* such statements are (contingent but) true, one can provide the required reason for defending the flexibility of one of the nominalizations involved. For if both were rigid, the famous Kripkean argument would entail that the statements are necessary if true. Hence, even if the alternative candidate (abundant) property is always available, one can have reasons for holding that the nominalization does not (rigidly) signify it.

The following seem to me to be precisely cases at hand, intuitively (merely contingent) true identity statements:

Running is exercising the way José prefers.

Being water is being the substance instances of which fall from the sky in rain and fill the lakes and rivers.

Having the color Sònia likes best is being blue.

According to Schnieder, these are intuitively correct claims to make—and in effect *contingent* ones. What he challenges, however, is that they are *identity* statements. He offers some nice examples of statements of the same form that are naturally understood as conveying (in the appropriate contexts) relations

3. The trivialization problem was considered in (Salmon, 1982) and (Linsky, 1984). For recent influential versions of it, see (Schwartz, 2002, 268–9) and (Soames, 2002, 250–1). Talking about general terms—involved in (some of) the predicates—rather than predicates themselves, (Linsky, 2006) offers a Lewisian “double indexing” model for representing how some of them might be flexible. Each expression can be associated with a function that assigns to each possible world the property (or kind) the expression signifies with respect to that world—which in turn can be modelled as a function that assigns to each possible world the extension of the property with respect to that world. As I argue in (López de Sa, 2006), this by itself does not solve the corresponding trivialization problem. I don’t think Linsky would disagree, given that he alludes to the relevant considerations being forthcoming once the expressions are embedded in contexts involving modal or other intensional operators, (Linsky, 2006, 661). Although he does not elaborate on this, the thought might be similar to the one I mention in the text just below. In his reply to Linsky, Soames (2006) concedes that a distinction can be drawn between rigid and flexible general terms (such as ‘blue’), and derivatively between the predicates which involve them (such as ‘is blue’). The proposal is not as general as mine, given that not every predicate comes from a general term by attaching the copula (see ‘runs’). Besides, and as we are about to see, it is my view that essentially the same kind of consideration that can be used for distinguishing between rigid and flexible general terms is also available for the case of canonical nominalizations of predicates. My thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal for suggesting that I should comment here on Linsky’s and Soames’ recent papers.

between the properties signified other than identity, sometimes perhaps mere extension subsumption. One of them is the following:

And as to being loyal, what is that? It is being truthful! It is being faithful!
(Joseph Conrad, *The Arrow of Gold*).

I agree: some statements of the same form are indeed sometimes naturally understood as conveying (in the appropriate contexts) relations between the properties signified other than identity.⁴ But the defense I submitted, contrary to what he seems to hold, is *not* incompatible with acknowledging this. For it to work it suffices that statements of the form *do* sometimes convey identity, and that mine are cases thereof.⁵ More in particular, it suffices that my examples above can be understood such that one might have intuitions about their being contingently true *by contrast with*

Having a heart is having a liver;
Being in pain is having C-fibers firing;

which are, intuitively, false or necessary.

I am perfectly aware that my appeal to intuitions here can be contested. What it is important to appreciate is that the trivialization problem is overcome if one *could* have such intuitions, regardless whether we do in fact do—or, indeed, perhaps merely that it is not *trivially false* that we might do. For then one can motivate in terms of them the (possible) flexibility of a predicate, even in the presence of a property which tracks actual and counterfactual extensions of the predicate. If, contrary to what I think, all our candidate flexible predicates turn out to be rigid, then far from being a trivial consequence of the simple proposal, this would be a substantial result about the intuitions we do in fact have regarding the cases in question.⁶ And all this is, of course, compatible with the claim that by ‘is’ people sometimes convey relations other than identity.

4. One might feel that Schnieder is nonetheless overstating his claim when he says that “the ‘is’ *usually* plays a different role [than conveying identity] in such statements. ... [Conveying identity] is just not the *common* function of the ‘is’ in similar statements” (Schnieder, 2005, 230–1, my emphasis), on the basis of this and a couple of other examples.

5. Notice that my defense is compatible with, but is not committed to, the view that the relevant statements are *ambiguous* between one and other kind of meaning. An alternative towards which I am more sympathetic would have it that the *literal* meaning is given by the strict identities, and that the rest of the relations are (sometimes) conveyed as a matter of *non-literal*, conversational or conventional implicature. I am indebted here to the comments by one referee for this journal.

6. In my view, the case can be made for the stronger, more ambitious conclusion that the

3. *The five arguments for global rigidity rebutted*

Take ‘having the color of ripe tomatoes’ as a paradigm for a flexible nominalization, if any is. According to the defender of the simple proposal, this can flexibly signify (in actuality) the property being red, instead of rigidly signifying the property having-the-color-of-ripe-tomatoes. In other words, it is true to say (in actuality) that having the color of ripe tomatoes is (identical to) being red. Schnieder offers five arguments against this claim. I reject them in turn.

Argument 1: [The Kripkean test case for rigidity requires that ‘Having the color of ripe tomatoes might not have been having the color of ripe tomatoes’ have a true reading—DLdS] What about the property of having the color of ripe tomatoes? Could it have failed to be the property of having the color of ripe tomatoes? *To me this question sounds odd; I cannot see what a positive answer should be meant to assert.* (Schnieder, 2005, 232, my emphasis)

Reply: The question is not odd (concerns of verbosity aside), and it is straightforward enough what a positive answer should be meant to assert: that having the color of ripe tomatoes might have been being blue instead. Or at least, this is what the contender will fairly claim, given that, as we have seen, it is precisely appealing to intuitions about the contingent truth of the identification that she motivates her view. Argument 1 is therefore obviously not an argument for the rigidity of nominalizations that is independent of the issues we have discussed in the preceding section.

Argument 2: *Having the color of ripe tomatoes is a relational property.* Whatever has this property has it in virtue of standing in a certain relation to ripe tomatoes. Being red, however, is not a relational property. Or even if it is, it is at least not a property which things have in virtue of standing in a certain relation *to ripe tomatoes*. So, by Leibniz’ Law, being red cannot be identical to the property of having the color of ripe tomatoes. (Schnieder, 2005, 232, my emphasis)

Reply: It is hardly contestable that by ‘in virtue of’ philosophers might mean to convey a number of different relations in different contexts: epistemic, causal, semantic, constitutive, among perhaps many others.

I guess there is a sense in which it is perfectly acceptable to say that whoever is the Pope is the Pope *in virtue of* holding a certain position, being the Head candidate examples are actually flexible. For this and further discussion, see (López de Sa, 2003).

of the Catholic Church. In that sense it is certainly also acceptable to say that whatever has the property of having the color of ripe tomatoes does so *in virtue of* standing in a certain relation to ripe tomatoes. But this being true in the relevant sense falls short of supporting the emphasized contention about relationality—in much the same way as the claim about the Pope does not require that a relation to the position be built into the nature of the person signified!

There might very well be stronger senses for the locution, so that the ‘in virtue of’ claim suffices for the property being relational. I take it that whatever has the property having-the-color-of-ripe-tomatoes does so *in virtue of* standing in a certain relation to ripe tomatoes, in this stronger sense. But merely asserting that the same holds for having the color of ripe tomatoes amounts to merely asserting that ‘having the color of ripe tomatoes’ signifies having-the-color-of-ripe-tomatoes. And this is precisely what was at stake.

Argument 3: Having the color of ripe tomatoes is a property possessed in virtue of standing in the relation of *sameness of color* to ripe tomatoes. Since ripe tomatoes are red, things stand in the said relation to ripe tomatoes in virtue of being red. So, it is correct to say that things have the property of having the color of ripe tomatoes in virtue of being red. However, things are not red in virtue of being red (‘in virtue of’ indicates some kind of explanatory relation and a thing’s being red is surely not self-explanatory). So again, there is something truly predicable of the one property while not so of the other: the things which have it, have it in virtue of being red. Leibniz’ Law yields the non-identity of the two properties. (Schnieder, 2005, 232–3, my emphasis)

Reply: Again, there is arguably a sense in which it is perfectly acceptable to say that someone is the Pope in virtue of being the Head of the Catholic Church, although it would be odd, and not very explanatory, to say that he is the Head of the Catholic Church in virtue of being the Head of the Catholic Church. In this sense, the things Schnieder says that I have highlighted are also clearly acceptable. But this sense better not suffice for non-identity, on pain of the Pope *not* being the Head of the Catholic Church, after all!

Argument 4: My shoes are brown and thus they lack the property of having the color of ripe tomatoes. But my shoes would have possessed *this property* (while my red shirt would not) if ripe tomatoes had been brown. Hence there is a property, *namely the property of having the color of ripe tomatoes*, which is possessed by my shirt, while under some counterfactual circumstances *it* would have been possessed by my shoes. ... There is such a property, we say, *and we refer to it with the term ‘having the color of ripe tomatoes’*. This property

cannot be the property of being red—for *that* property would not have been possessed by my shoes, if ripe tomatoes had been brown (tomatoes having a different color would not have affected the color of my shoes). (Schnieder, 2005, 233, my emphasis)

Reply: Schnieder's shoes lack both having-the-color-of-ripe-tomatoes and the property of being red, and hence lack the property of having the color of ripe tomatoes, whichever of the two is signified (in actuality) by the nominalization involved. The shoes would have possessed the property having the color of ripe tomatoes if they were brown, again whichever it is of being brown or having-the-color-of-ripe-tomatoes that the nominalization would signify (in the envisaged situation). Furthermore, there is certainly a property which is possessed by Schnieder's shirt, while in some counterfactual circumstances it would have been possessed by Schnieder's shoes, namely having-the-color-of-ripe-tomatoes, which is not any of the colors. So far so good. Now merely asserting that *this is* the one we refer to by the term 'having the color of ripe tomatoes' amounts to merely asserting that 'having the color of ripe tomatoes' signifies having-the-color-of-ripe-tomatoes. And again this is precisely what was at stake.

Argument 5: Whoever thinks in the above case that 'having the color of ripe tomatoes' non-rigidly designates the property of being red (since, after all, red is the color of ripe tomatoes) should for reasons of parity hold the parallel claim that 'to be the virtue that Socrates was most famous for' non-rigidly designates the property of being wisdom (since, after all, wisdom is the virtue Socrates was most famous for). But now we may notice that

(1) To be the virtue that Socrates was most famous for is only an accidental feature of wisdom.

After all, Socrates could have been most famous for his piety than his wisdom. But whoever thinks that 'to be the virtue that Socrates was most famous for' denotes the property of being wisdom cannot account for the truth of (1). Being wisdom, evidently, is an *essential*, not an accidental, property of wisdom. So the two property designators differ in reference. (Schnieder, 2005, 233, numbering altered)

Reply: The expression 'is wise' is a predicate, whose canonical nominalization is 'being wise', which arguably (rigidly) signifies the property being wise, i.e. wisdom. By contrast, 'has the virtue Socrates was most famous for' flexibly signifies the different virtues, being wise, being pious etc. Socrates might be most famous for—or so the defender of the simple proposal would probably hold.

Schnieder's cases in Argument 5 are different. The 'is' in 'is the virtue Socrates

was most famous for' or 'is wisdom' is that of identity, not of predication, and hence similar to 'is (identical to) Ratzinger' or 'is (identical to) the Head of the Catholic Church'. It is not clear what one should say about the expressions 'being (identical to) the virtue Socrates was most famous for' and 'being (identical to) the Head of the Catholic Church'. But suppose, for the sake of the argument, that one holds that they flexibly signify (respectively) the property of being wise and of being Ratzinger in actuality—as Schnieder seems to think the defender of the simple proposal should do. Consider the following line of thought:

- (2) Being the Head of the Catholic Church is only an accidental feature of Ratzinger.

After all, he could have been a Buddhist all his life. But again, intuitions concerning (2) better be compatible with Ratzinger *being* (identical to) the Head of the Catholic Church! *Mutatis mutandis* for the virtuous case.

All in all, none of the five arguments is compelling.

4. *The general "explanation" rejected*

Schnieder devotes his final section to providing a general explanation of why all nominalizations are rigid. This involves the following principle, "which reveals both the reference conditions for canonical property terms and the nature of the properties denoted" (Schnieder, 2005, 236):

- (P) Being *F* (to be *F*, *F*-ness) is the property which is essentially such that it is possessed by all and only *F*s.

Suppose this is right. According to Schnieder,

if principle (P) is correct, it straightforwardly explains why canonical property designators are all rigid. (Schnieder, 2005, 237)

This is not so. To show this, I assume that a nominalization is flexible, and we see that the corresponding instance of (P) is nonetheless true. Suppose then that 'having the color of ripe tomatoes' flexibly signifies being red in actuality. Hence having the color of ripe tomatoes is being red. Now being red is the property which is essentially such that it is possessed by all and only red things, and red things are all and only the things that have the color of ripe tomatoes. Hence having the color of ripe tomatoes is the property which is essentially such that

it is possessed by all and only the things that have the color of ripe tomatoes. Hence the instance of (P) is true.

(Furthermore, this line of argument is reproducible with respect to any counterfactual situation. Suppose we consider a world w in which ripe tomatoes are blue. 'Having the color of ripe tomatoes' flexibly signifies being blue wrt w . Hence 'having the color of ripe tomatoes is being blue' is true wrt w . Now 'being blue is the property which is essentially such that it is possessed by all and only blue things' is true wrt w , and 'blue things are all and only the things that have the color of ripe tomatoes' is true wrt w . Hence 'having the color of ripe tomatoes is the property which is essentially such that it is possessed by all and only the things that have the color of ripe tomatoes' is true wrt w . Hence the instance of (P) is true wrt w . Hence the instance of (P) is indeed *necessarily* true.)

Therefore, there can be no argument in terms of (P) for the rigidity of all canonical nominalizations.⁷

Conclusion

I conclude that, contrary to Schnieder's contention, the simple proposal can indeed overcome the trivialization problem.⁸

7. Schnieder (2005, 237) says that (P) can also be put more formally as follows:

(P*) Being F = the property x such that $\Box \forall y (y \text{ has } x \leftrightarrow y \text{ is } F)$.

If 'x' here could be understood flexibly, then (P*) would seem an appropriate regimentation of (P), and the remarks in the text would apply. Otherwise (P*) does settle the issue, but by fiat. If 'x' is required to be rigid, (P*) amounts to the claim that any canonical nominalization does signify the property whose extension is the extension of the predicate in each possible world. That is to say, it asserts that in particular 'having the color of ripe tomatoes' does signify having-the-color-of-ripe-tomatoes. But it merely *asserts* it, it does not explain it or provide grounds for it. Something along the lines of (P) might be supported by Schnieder's contention about understanding of the nominalization depending on understanding on the embedded general term (2005, 236)—or so, at least, one can take for granted for the sake of the argument. But obviously this does not suffice for vindicating the considered reading of (P*).

8. Thanks are due to Benjamin Schnieder for very stimulating discussion, and anonymous referees for useful suggestions. Research funded by projects HUM2004-05609-C02-01 (MEC) and BFF2002-10164 (ESF), and grant EX2004-1159 (MEC). Thanks to these institutions and to Mike Maudsley for his linguistic revision.

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