Rigidity, General Terms, and Trivialization

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The simple proposal for a characterization of general term rigidity is in terms of sameness of designation in every possible world. Critics like Schwartz (2002) and Soames (2002) have argued that such a proposal would trivialize rigidity for general terms. Martí (2004) claims that the objection rests on the failure to distinguish what is expressed by a general term and the property designated. I argue here against such a response by showing that the trivialization problem reappears even if one pays attention to such a distinction.

I

Rigidity for singular terms consists in (roughly) sameness of designation across the different possible worlds. The *simple proposal* for a characterization of rigidity for general terms concerns also sameness of designation.

> A rigid general term designates the same universal, species, substance, kind, colour or property in every possible world. So, 'yellow' designates the same universal/colour and 'gold' designates the same universal/substance in every possible world. 'Mary's favourite colour' designates different universals/colours in different worlds, since Mary's taste might have been different. (Martí 2004, p. 136)

This view on rigidity for general terms was arguably suggested by Kripke (1980) himself, and in any case seems to be the one guiding rigidity talk in discussions in philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, or metaethics, to name some. According to critics like Schwartz (2002) and Soames (2002), however, the simple proposal suffers from what I have called *the trivialization problem*: *any* general term whatsoever would turn out to be trivially rigid, according to it.

In her (2004), Genoveva Martí claims:

> I think that there is no trivialization problem, and that the objection rests on the failure to distinguish what is expressed by a general term

and the property designated. (Martí 2004, p. 137)

Sympathetic as I am to the simple proposal, I do not think that the trivialization problem rests on such a failure. It does arise even if one were to pay attention to a distinction like this. To show this is the aim of this note.

II

According to the defender of the simple proposal, some general terms such as 'Mary's favourite colour' designate different colours in the different worlds, and are thereby flexible. Now consider the property of being Mary's-favourite-colour, stipulated to be that which is had by something (in a world at a time) if it is the colour Mary favours (in that world at that time). The general term in question applies to something according to the flexible account if and only if it applies to something *under the contrasting supposition that it designates rigidly the introduced property*. And this holds both with respect to the actual and to counterfactual situations. Take any simple predication, such as 'John's shirt is Mary's favourite colour.' The predication is true with respect to an arbitrary world w (according to the flexible hypothesis) iff the shirt has the property flexibly designated with respect to w (according to the flexible hypothesis) iff the shirt is the colour that Mary happens to favour in w iff the shirt has the property of being Mary's-favourite-colour in w iff the shirt has the property rigidly designated with respect to w (according to the contrasting rigid hypothesis) iff the predication is true with respect to world w (according to the contrasting rigid hypothesis). How could then be defended the flexibility claim?

This consideration is reproducible, of course, with respect to *any* candidate flexible general term whatsoever. The *trivialization problem* consists in the challenge to motivate the view that a general term designates *flexibly*, given the availability of an appropriate property (whose extension necessarily tracks the extension of the general term) to be rigidly designated.

Here is Soames's recent presentation of the worry:

> Nor it will do to say that a predicate is rigid iff there is a unique property which it stands for that determines its extension at each possible world. There is, it could be argued, such a property in the case of nat-

ural kind terms like *cow* and *animal*—namely, the property of being a cow and the property of being an animal. However, the same could be said for any predicate; for any predicate *F*, and any world *w*, the extension of *F* with respect to *w* is the set of things that have, in *w*, the property expressed by ⌜being an *F*⌝. But there is no point in defining a notion of rigidity for predicates according to which all predicates turn out, trivially, to be rigid. (Soames 2002, pp. 250–1)[1]

III

For the trivialization problem to arise, a very 'liberal' view about the entities general terms are said to designate is required. Otherwise there is no guarantee that properties of the required sort would be in general available. Following Lewis (1986), let me call *abundant* the properties that can be modelled by arbitrary functions from worlds to extensions, to be contrasted with the privileged *sparse* properties, however they are ultimately explicated. The *sparse solution* to the trivialization problem consists in rejecting the assumption that (possibly merely) abundant properties are the right sort of thing for general terms to designate.[2] This is *not* the defence of the simple proposal Martí favours.[3] Rather, she holds that the objection rests on the failure to distinguish what is expressed by a general term and the property designated.

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[1] See also Schwartz 2002, pp. 268–9. To the best of my knowledge, the problem was first considered in Salmon 1982 and Linsky 1984.

[2] Arguably Linsky favoured one such solution (see Linsky 1984, pp. 262, 268–9). Martí seems to follow Schwartz (2002, p. 268) in attributing such a defence to LaPorte: 'LaPorte (2000) assumes that on the approach that interprets rigidity as sameness of designation one needs to exclude "unusual" kinds, such as the kind or property of being my uncle's favourite drink on Super Bowl Sunday' (Martí 2004, p. 141). This seems to me to be a mistake: 'It seems evident that we do use some expressions to refer to kinds non-rigidly. … If there are unusual kinds, we might want to conclude that an expression like "the kind of bread this bag is fashioned to hold" or "the beverage my uncle requests at Super Bowl parties" has *more than one* use, but not that there is no non-rigid use of such an expression' (LaPorte 2000, p. 301).

[3] I am not completely clear, however, about her particular reason against it. She says: 'If the problem of trivialization were a problem, metaphysical commitment to genuine kinds would not be a solution. If "Mary's favourite colour" designates [a merely abundant property], denying that this property exists is tantamount to asserting that "Mary's favourite colour" does not denote' (Martí 2004, p. 142). But the defender of the sparse solution does not—or need not, anyway—reject that there *are* abundant properties. She just rejects the assumption that they are the right sort of things for the relevant expressions to designate.

For what it is worth, my own view is that the main limitation of the sparse solution is one

IV

Here is how she introduces the distinction:

> In possible worlds semantics-speak, universals are represented by in-
> tensions, functions from indices to sets. If we account for the rigidity
> of general terms on the basis of their designating or not designating
> the same universal with respect to each index, then 'yellow' designates
> the same function in every possible world, but 'Mary's favourite col-
> our' does not. These expressions in turn have or *express* intensions,
> which should be represented by higher level functions from indices of
> evaluation to customary intensions. The latter, of course, would all be
> constant since the intension expressed by a term does not vary from
> world to world. (Martí 2004, pp. 137–8)

So let YELLOW be the intension assigning to each world, the set of
yellow things in that world, and let RED, BLUE, etc. be characterized
similarly: YELLOW, RED, BLUE, etc. are the (arguably not merely)
abundant properties that are the colours.

The intension *expressed* by a general term assigns to each world,
the property *designated* by the general term with respect to that
world. According to the defender of the simple proposal, the flexi-
bility of 'Mary's favourite colour' is constituted by it designating
different colours in the different worlds. Following Martí, let Pat be
the intension that represents this, by assigning YELLOW to the actual
world, and RED, BLUE, etc. to the other relevant ones. The flexibility
of 'Mary's favourite colour' can therefore be stated by claiming that
it expresses Pat, and so does it (Martí 2004, p. 138).

As we saw, Martí thinks that there is no trivialization problem
and that the objection rests on the failure to distinguish what is ex-
pressed by a general term and the property designated.

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of generality. Suppose that one holds that in effect 'Mary's favourite colour' does not rigid-
ly designate the merely abundant property of being Mary's-favourite-colour, but rather
flexibly designates the different (sparse properties, we may suppose, that are the) colours.
One could still have good reasons for holding that some *other* expressions *do* signify the
merely abundant property, and do so *rigidly*: 'Mary's-favourite-colour', to name one. And
it will not do to stipulate that, unlike sparse properties, merely abundant properties can
only be designated rigidly: 'Mary's favourite merely abundant property' seems intuitively
as flexible as 'Mary's favourite colour'.

V

Unfortunately, this is not so. Let MARY'S-FAVOURITE-COLOUR be the intension assigning to each world the set of things that are the colour Mary favours in that world. So MARY'S-FAVOURITE-COLOUR is an (arguably merely) abundant property, coextensive, in each different world, with a certain different colour, depending on Mary's chromatic tastes. Now consider Chris, the intension that assigns MARY'S-FAVOURITE-COLOUR uniformly to every world. If a general term were to express Chris, it would be, according to the simple proposal, *rigid*.

Pat is *not* Chris, of course. To begin with, if @ is the actual world,

$$\text{Pat}(@) = \text{YELLOW} \neq \text{MARY'S-FAVOURITE-COLOUR} = \text{Chris}(@).$$

This notwithstanding, as Martí herself observes, for every world w and everything x,

$$\text{Pat}(w)(x) = \text{Chris}(w)(x).$$

Consider now the hypothesis that, contrary to what we have assumed so far, the intension 'Mary's favourite colour' expresses was *Chris* rather than Pat. As a result of the remark, the general term in question applies to something if and only if it applies to that thing *under the contrasting supposition that it expresses Chris*. And this holds both with respect to the actual and to counterfactual situations. Take again 'John's shirt is Mary's favourite colour'. The predication is true with respect to an arbitrary world w (if Pat is the one expressed) iff the shirt is the colour that Mary happens to favour in w iff the shirt has the property of being Mary's-favourite-colour in w iff the predication is true with respect to world w (if Chris is, by contrast, the one expressed). How could then be defended the claim that the term *does* express Pat, and is thereby flexible? What could be provided against the suggestion that it expresses Chris instead, and is thereby rigid?

But this, I daresay, *is* the trivialization problem in its splendour.

VI

Martí says she believes that linguistic data suggest 'Mary's favourite colour' is naturally used flexibly, after all (2004, p. 138). Unfortunately, she does not mention which data she has in mind. I do think that the claim *is* indeed correct, and I have tried myself to provide such linguistic evidence elsewhere.[4] My point here is that doing *that* is precisely what would be required in order to defend the simple proposal from the trivialization problem.

I conclude that, contrary to Martí's contention, the simple proposal does face the trivialization problem, which is not addressed merely by attending to her distinction.[5]

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[4] In López de Sa 2001 and 2003; see also LaPorte 2000 and Salmon 2005. In my view, such evidence is partly constituted by intuitions about the actual truth-values of identity statements involving nominalizations of predicates. Telling a long story short: 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 claim, even in the presence of the alternative candidate (abundant) property. For if both were rigid, the famous Kripkean argument would entail that the statements are necessary if true. 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 colour Sònia likes best is being blue.

in contrast with

Having a heart is having a liver.

which is, intuitively, false (and necessary). For elaboration and further discussion, see the papers mentioned above.

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