Rigidity, General Terms, and Recognitional Capacities

I

It is often claimed that Kripke (1980) and Putnam (1975) established that many general terms, most importantly *natural kind* terms, are like proper names in being *rigid designators*. However, this extension of the notion of rigid designation to cover general terms has proved difficult in practice.

In the case of proper names, rigid designation can be characterised as *sameness of reference* or *sameness of extension* across possible worlds: a (rigidly used) proper name designates the same individual in all possible worlds (in which the individual exists). Sameness of extension clearly cannot be the proper characterisation of rigidity for general terms: the extension of a rigid general term can vary from world to world. The intuitive and natural move is to say that a rigid general term designates the same *kind* or *property* in all possible worlds.[1] I will call this the *kind-rigidity* view below.

The kind-rigidity view has severe problems. Most importantly, it threatens to make *any* predicate rigid. For example, just as we say that 'tiger' designates the tiger kind in any possible world, can we not say that 'bachelor' designates the bachelor kind in any world, making 'bachelor' a rigid designator? This objection is enough to make the kind-rigidity view unacceptable to many philosophers (Soames 2002; Schwartz 2002). But some philosophers would embrace this result, claiming rigidity to be a common feature of general terms and not restricted to natural kind terms (LaPorte 2000).

Whatever one's opinion is on this question, one should note that the kind-rigidity view suffers from more severe problems as well. Not only does it threaten to make nominal kind

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[1] Another natural, if less common, move is to equate rigid predicates with *essentialist* predicates. This, however fails to deliver the necessity of theoretical identifications, which rigidity was clearly supposed to deliver according to Kripke and Putnam (see Soames 2002, 251-259). Another problem with the view is that disjunctions of rigid predicates would also count as rigid, which seems unacceptable.

terms such as "bachelor" rigid, the worry is that even "abstruse kind" terms such as "being the first colour named by George W. Bush on the first of January, 2003" will come out rigid as well. Of course the "kind" named by this expression is a strange one, but the kind-rigidity view has no way of excluding it, at least not without substantial additions to the theory.

One might respond that, in this respect, the kind-rigidity view is in no worse shape than the standard view about the rigidity of proper names – a parallel problem can be raised concerning proper names, using so-called "office persons" as the objects rigidly designated by descriptions such as "the president of the United States" (Sidelle 1992). A natural rejoinder is to rely on *naturalness*: a singular term is rigid iff it designates the same *natural object* in all worlds (where the object exists); a general term is rigid iff it designates the same *natural property* in all worlds.

This strategy does not, I think, succeed in saving the kind-rigidity view. It is far more plausible to exclude "office persons" as eligible for rigid designation, on grounds of non-naturalness, than it would be to exclude unusual kinds. Rigid designation is supposed to be a categorical feature, not admitting degrees: either a term is rigid or it is non-rigid. Naturalness, particularly of properties, is typically considered to be a matter of degree *(e.g.* Lewis 1986, 60-61). Nevertheless, in the case of proper names and other singular terms the strategy looks plausible: individual objects and persons seem to be paradigm cases of perfectly natural individuals, and this sets them apart from "office persons" and similar unusual objects. But our typical examples of rigid natural kind terms do *not* designate perfectly natural properties (whatever they turn out to be). I do not think we have principled grounds to draw the line between those properties which are "natural enough" for rigidity and those which are not.

II

I believe we can do better than the kind-rigidity view. Using Jessica Brown's recent (1998) theory of how natural kind terms get their reference, I will show how we can give a proper account of what it is for a general term to be rigid.

Brown's theory is quite explicitly based on a parallel between proper names and natural kind terms. Both, she claims, get their reference by being associated with a *recognitional capacity* for a person or a kind. Very roughly, one can refer to a person or a natural kind only if one can, or one defers to subjects who can, recognise the person or kind in question.[2] One must note that having a recognitional capacity for a kind or a person does *not* entail an ability to distinguish the person or kind in question from every other actual or possible kind. Of course, in 1750 humans could *not* distinguish water from twater. What made their term 'water' refer to water, and not twater, was that they (1) had the ability to distinguish between water and other kinds which *in fact* existed in their surroundings, and (2) appreciated that whether a sample of a substance is water is determined by the fundamental properties of that sample (cf. Brown 1998, 285-287). These requirements have parallels for the reference of proper names and other particular items.

It is the second requirement, I think, which contains the ingredients for a proper understanding of rigidity, of general terms as well as of proper names. If Brown is right, it is part of being competent in the use of a natural kind term that one appreciates the "metaphysical nature" of kinds and persons. The mere ability to distinguish between, say, water and other kinds in one's environment, or one's neighbour and other people, on the basis of their appearances, is not enough. One's actual and counterfactual usage of the expression in question must also show an awareness (not necessarily fully conceptualised) of the fact that

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[2] Brown formulates her view so as to explain how a scientifically ignorant community can have a term for a natural kind, but clearly the view is intended to be generalisable to scientifically advanced communities, in which case the recognition of natural kinds may rely on technological devices (Brown 1998, 284).

there is more to being, say, water, than merely displaying the appropriate superficial properties – there is something "underneath" the superficial properties of both persons and natural kinds which determines whether the expression correctly applies to a given entity, and which is contingently connected with the superficial properties on the basis of which we recognise persons or instances of natural kinds.

To summarise, both proper names and natural kind terms (1) get their reference through being associated with recognitional capacities, yet (2) superficial properties are not sufficient for determining their correct application in the actual world; and (3) their correct application in counterfactual circumstances is determined by whether or not the relevant entities possess, in the relevant possible world, the same fundamental, non-manifest properties which are contingently connected with the appropriate recognitional capacities in the actual world.

The proper understanding of rigidity is, I think, to be found in (3). Rather than having the same *designation* across possible worlds, rigid expressions have a stable *non-manifest criterion of correct application* across possible worlds. With rigid expressions, the non-manifest properties which *in fact happen* to be involved in triggering our recognitional capacities are taken to determine their correct application, not just in the actual world, but also in other possible worlds.[3]

This view captures, I think, the intuitive notion of rigidity, shared by proper names and natural kind terms. It can also explain the rigidity of some relational expressions such as "hotter than", also used as an example by Kripke. Furthermore, general terms which are not natural kind terms can also turn out rigid on this view. For example, many theorists subscribe to theories of colour which treat them colour predicates as rigid. The account of rigidity put forward in this paper can accommodate such views quite easily.

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[3] This treatment of rigidity does not cover the alleged rigidity of terms denoting abstract objects (*i.e.* terms such as "three" or "the sum of two and five"). The rigidity of such terms would require a separate explanation, but I will not attempt to give one here.

References

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