

Further Remarks on Property Designators and Rigidity

(Reply to López de Sa's Criticisms)

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Abstract: Are all canonical property designators (i.e. nominalizations of predicative phrases) rigid? Dan López de Sa recently criticized the arguments I gave for an affirmative answer to that question. The current article rebuts López de Sa's objections.

1. Introduction

Singular terms for properties can be derived from predicative phrases (i.e. general terms and/or predicates) by means of nominalization. Let me call such property designators *canonical* (they exhibit several forms, most notably '*F*-ness', 'being *F*', 'to be *F*', and 'the property of being *F*'). In a previous article I argued that all canonical property designators are *rigid* in Kripke's sense.¹ Dan López de Sa recently tried to show that my arguments do not achieve their goal.² But I am not convinced; López de Sa's criticisms can be rebutted.

For a start, let me briefly review what exactly is at issue between López de Sa and me. We agree that there are flexible property designators. Properties can be picked out by definite descriptions which describe them by some contingent features (thus, 'the most famous virtue of Socrates' flexibly designates wisdom). We disagree over the question whether all *canonical* property designators (which are nominalized expressions) are rigid. The crucial question is whether nominalization always rigidifies or not.

We again agree that many examples of canonical property designators are unquestionably rigid, for instance: 'wisdom', 'the property of being human', or 'being a cubic object'. Dissent sets in when more convoluted cases are considered. Thus,

CRT 'having the colour of ripe tomatoes'

may appear to be different, because the term may appear to denote a colour-property, *viz.* the property of being red. If, but only if, this assumption were correct, we should classify

¹ See Schnieder (2005).

² See López de Sa (2006).

the designator as non-rigid: ripe tomatoes could have been blue, and if **CRT** designates the property of being red when used to talk about the actual world, it should designate the property of being blue when used to describe a counterfactual situation in which tomatoes are blue. So, whether **CRT** is rigid or not hinges on the truth-value of

- (1) ‘having the colour of ripe tomatoes’ designates the property of being red.

If (1) is false, we lack any reason to deny that **CRT** is rigid; if (1) is true, however, we have all the reason in the world to regard **CRT** as non-rigid. (The example can be seen as representative for a number of other cases; ‘having the most common vice,’ or ‘having the shape of the sun’ may for analogous reasons appear to be flexible.)

Now, while López de Sa thinks that (1) is true and **CRT** is non-rigid, I hold the opposite: (1) is false and **CRT** is rigid. It does not designate a colour-property, but rather a *relational* property which is possessed (in any possible world) by exactly those entities that stand to ripe tomatoes in a certain relation, namely in that of sameness of colour (i.e. of the colour that ripe tomatoes have *in the respective possible world*).

2. Defence

In my original article I formulated six arguments for the thesis that **CRT** does not designate the property of being red (but designates, rigidly, a relational property). I commenced with three arguments which, as I frankly admitted, are certainly not decisive (hence, I am sympathetic with López de Sa’s comments on these arguments).³ So let me just focus on the three arguments that I regarded as conclusive then.

One of them was this: the truth of (1) is at odds with the truth of

- (2) Having the colour of ripe tomatoes is a property my T-shirt has; but it would not have had *this property*, if ripe tomatoes had been brown instead of red.

The phrase ‘this property’ takes up the reference of ‘having the colour of ripe tomatoes’. If the latter term denoted the property of being red, then ‘this property’ would denote it too; if we understood the terms this way, we should dismiss (3) as false, because it would then imply the following falsity:

- (2*) My T-shirt would not have had the property of being red, if ripe tomatoes had been brown instead of red.

³ Cp. Schnieder (2005: 232–33).

But – it seems to me – we accept (2) as true. That we do so is one of the *data* I relied upon. Take away my data and you take away my point: if someone has the intuition that (2) is false, then he need not be moved by my argument. I am not sure whether López de Sa has the intuition that (2) is false. He does not explicitly say so.⁴ But if he has it, I can not do anything about that; perhaps, intuitions can vary in this case.

If each of my other two arguments equally depended on a premise that I accept as intuitively correct while López de Sa does not, we should acknowledge our diverging intuitions and bury the hatchet. However, in criticising my other arguments, López de Sa did *not* just deny my starting points; rather, he *accepted* them but tried to show that they do not support my position. This is a more substantial disagreement, which I will now address.

a. Modal Properties of Properties

For my next argument, I changed the example: instead of **CRT**, I used the designator

VS being the virtue that Socrates was most famous for.

López de Sa apparently is somewhat uneasy with the new example; he writes:

It is not clear what one should say about the expressions ‘being (identical to) the virtue that Socrates was most famous for’ and ‘being (identical to) the Head of the Catholic Church.’ But suppose [...] that one holds they flexibly signify (respectively) the property of being wise and of being Ratzinger in actuality – as Schnieder seems to think [I] should do. (López de Sa 2006: 228)

This is, in fact, what I think. López de Sa only agrees under reserve. But why? He correctly points out that the ‘being’ in **VS** is not the nominalization of the copulative ‘is’, but rather of the ‘is’ of identity – yet I cannot see why this should make any difference. The copulative ‘is’ was not mentioned when López de Sa argued for the non-rigidity of **CRT**. Rather, he relied on the intuition that **CRT** designates the property of being red, and he took the intuition to be supported by the intuitive truth of

(3) Having the colour of ripe tomatoes is being red.⁵

⁴ What he *does* say (2005: 227) rather sounds as if he accused me of committing a *petitio*. But this criticism is ungrounded; I rely on (2) as an intuitive linguistic *datum* that may reveal facts about the semantics of **CRT**. If this were not legitimate, then López de Sa’s own argument (see below) for the non-rigidity of **CRT** would equally be a *petitio*. I take it both is not the case.

⁵ I agree that (3) is intuitively acceptable; but this only proves López de Sa’s point if (3) is to be taken as an identity statement. However, I produced a number of examples in my earlier article (2005: 230f.) to show that constructions of the form ‘to ϕ is to ψ ’ or ‘ ϕ -ing is ψ -ing’ are

However, it is equally intuitive to think that ‘being (identical to) the virtue that Socrates was most famous for’ designates the property of being (identical to) wisdom, and this intuition may seem to be supported by the intuitive truth of

- (4) Being the virtue that Socrates was most famous for is being wisdom.⁶

The copulative ‘being’ is not required to make a canonical property designator appear to be flexible. Rather, it is the presence of a *flexible definite description* as a *part* of a canonical property designator that accounts for the apparent flexibility: **CRT** contains the flexible ‘the colour of ripe tomatoes’ and **VS** contains the flexible ‘the virtue that Socrates was most famous for’. The flexibility of these expressions explains why we may think the whole terms flexibly denote the property of being red and the property of being (identical to) wisdom respectively. The main verb of the canonical property designator does not play any important role for these intuitions; apart from ‘being’, ‘having’, or ‘being (identical to)’, it may also be some other verb, like ‘seeing,’ ‘striving for,’ ‘lacking,’ etc. Thus, ‘seeing the colour of the sky’ may seem to denote the property of seeing the colour blue, ‘striving for the virtue that Socrates was most famous for’ may seem to denote the property of striving for wisdom, etc. I cannot see any reasons to follow the intuitions in one case but not in the other.

Now, López de Sa criticizes my argument independently of any misgivings about the example. Let me start with the argument: I take sentence

not normally used to make identity statements. Whoever believes that lying is sinning or that to be late is to be impolite is not committed to the absurd beliefs that sinning is lying or that to be impolite is to be late (which he would be committed to if the statements were statements of identity). In his article (at p. 223f.), López de Sa agrees with this observation but thinks that statements such as (3) *can* be read as identity statements and that the intuitions supporting (3) do support it *in that reading* – but he does not give any argument for this claim. Now here is an argument for the contrary position: *if* intuitions in favour of (3) would clearly support it in the identity reading, then we should have equally strong intuitions in favour of the following explicit identity statement:

- (3*) The property of having the colour of ripe tomatoes is no other property than the property of being red.

But while most people readily accept (3), they hesitate to accept (3*). Even López de Sa admits that he has no firm intuitions about (3*). But then he cannot use intuitions about (3) as a substitute for intuitions about (3*), and thus he loses the primary support for his view.

⁶ Moreover, notice that our original case of **CRT** does *not* contain the copulative ‘is’ or ‘being’ either (it does not contain any ‘is’ or ‘being’); its main verb is ‘have’. And notice finally that I can simply give López de Sa the copulative ‘being’. Just replace the ‘being’ in **VS** with ‘being identical to’; you get: ‘being identical to the virtue that Socrates was most famous for.’ *Here*, the ‘being’ is *not* that of identity but rather has its copulative use.

- (6) Being the virtue that Socrates was most famous for is only a contingent feature of wisdom.⁷

to be (rather obviously) true. (6) can be spelled out as follows:

- (6*) Being the virtue that Socrates was most famous for *is* a feature of wisdom, but it is not *necessary* that wisdom possesses *this feature*.

This statement is backed by more specific counterfactual statements, such as:

- (6**) Being the virtue that Socrates was most famous for is a feature of wisdom. But wisdom would not have had this feature, if Socrates had been best known for his patience.

That (6) is true is a *datum* I work with. Without it, I have no argument. Fortunately though, López de Sa agrees with me on the truth of (6).

Now if (6) is correct, we can prove that ‘being the virtue that Socrates was most famous for’ does not designate the property of being wisdom. For if it did, we would have:

- (7) Being wisdom is only a contingent feature of wisdom.

(7) can be spelled out as:

- (7*) Being wisdom is a feature of wisdom, but it is not necessary that wisdom possesses *this feature*.

And this is obviously false.

López de Sa thinks that I am not allowed to reason like this, because there is an allegedly parallel case in which the same reasoning would lead to an absurd conclusion. He uses the following example to show that something is at odds with my reasoning:

- (8) Being the head of the Catholic Church is only an accidental feature of Ratzinger.

López de Sa points out, correctly, that (8) is true and that this does *not* show that

- (9) Ratzinger is not the head of the Catholic Church.

So far so good, but what follows? Why should I be committed to this non-identity?

⁷ I use ‘contingent’ instead of my original ‘accidental’ in order to avoid debates about the proper understanding of ‘essential’ / ‘accidental’ here. The current argument needs only the modal notion of contingency.

Sentences (6) and (8) are structurally analogous. In both sentences, we have a complex property designator:

VS ‘being the virtue Socrates was most famous for,’ and
HCC ‘being the head of the Catholic Church’.

Both these designators *contain* as a part a flexible designator: **VS** contains ‘the virtue Socrates was most famous for’ and **HCC** contains ‘the head of the Catholic Church’. The latter expression designates Ratzinger, and the parallel assertion for (3) is: ‘the virtue Socrates was most famous for’ designates wisdom. And this is something I do *not* deny; instead, I presupposed this (so, I presupposed: wisdom = the virtue that Socrates was most famous for).

I concluded from (6) that the property of being wisdom is not identical to the property of being Socrates’s most famous virtue. So, I *am* obliged to draw the *parallel* conclusion from (8) – which is:

(10) The property of being the head of the Catholic Church is not identical to the property of being Ratzinger.

That I can perfectly live with *this* result should be no surprise. Moreover, this entailment is perfectly compatible with the truth of

(11) Ratzinger is the head of the Catholic Church,

just as the first entailment is compatible with the truth of

(12) Wisdom is the virtue that Socrates was most famous for.

Pace López de Sa, I am *not* in any way obliged to infer (9) from (8), just as I am not obliged to infer from (6) that wisdom is not the virtue Socrates was most famous for.

Now López de Sa did not point out any specific *failure* in my reasoning, but merely raised the objection that if I were entitled to conclude as I do, then we would also be entitled to conclude (9) from (8), which cannot be the case. But we saw that he confuses two related statements of identity; what parallels the conclusion I drew from (6) is (10), not (9). But while (9) is obviously wrong, (10) is just what I hold. López de Sa’s objection therefore is a non-starter and my argument still stands.

b. The Meaning of Canonical Property Designators

My final argument has a virtue that the others lacked: while they only give a reason to think *that* **CRT** is rigid, the last argument shows the reason *why* it is rigid. The argument

is based on more general reflections about the semantics of canonical property designators. I proposed an analysis of such terms according to which the following schema is valid:⁸

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

This, I thought, straightforwardly explains why these designators are rigid. López de Sa does not dispute the correctness of the schema; but he denies that (Prop) conflicts with the alleged flexibility of CRT:⁹

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 [(Prop)] is true. (2006: 228f.)

López de Sa apparently succumbs to a notorious modal fallacy here. From claims of the following forms,

P1 a is essentially such that all (and only) F s are R -related to it, and
P2 All and only F s are G s,

we are not entitled to conclude that

C a is essentially such that all (and only) G s are R -related to it.

Take the following example:

P1 Having kidneys is essentially such that all and only kidney-owners have it.
P2 All and only kidney-owners are heart-owners.
C Therefore: Having kidneys is essentially such that all and only heart-owners have it.

The conclusion is a *non sequitur*, and so is the conclusion in López de Sa’s case. In fact, it is provably false; notice first that

(13) Redness (the property of being red) is *not* essentially such that all things that have the colour of ripe tomatoes have it.

⁸ For a detailed defence of this analysis see Schnieder (2006).

⁹ López de Sa uses ‘signify’ where I use ‘designate’; this is but a difference in terminology.

For, had ripe tomatoes been brown and had there furthermore been some brown things, then some things with the colour of ripe tomatoes had not possessed redness.

So, on López de Sa's assumption that

(1*) Redness = the property of having the colour of ripe tomatoes,

it follows that:¹⁰

(14) Having the colour of ripe tomatoes is *not* essentially such that all things that have the colour of ripe tomatoes have it.

There is no way of reconciling the alleged flexibility of **CRT** with the validity of (Prop): Since the latter is an outflow of a general analysis of the semantics of canonical property designators, we know that **CRT** is rigid.

My fifth and sixth argument therefore withstand López de Sa's criticisms. He accepts the data the arguments work with and he fails to show that any fallacies are involved in my reasoning. Hence, I can still conclude that all canonical property designators are rigid.

3. Concession

Let me finally come to an aspect of my earlier work that is in need of an amendment; it may come as a little surprise: I am now willing to admit that **CRT** ('having the colour of ripe tomatoes') denotes the property of being red. Or at least that it may be used to denote the property of being red. But I reckon that in so far as it may be so used, this does not speak against its rigidity.

Take a further look at **CRT**: as remarked before, it contains a definite description, 'the color of ripe tomatoes'. Now Keith Donnellan famously argued that definite descriptions have what he called a *referential use*, in which they do not only denote something, but in which they are used to *refer* (in an ambitious sense of 'refer') to something (which may or may not be the entity denoted by the term).¹¹ If his idea is correct, then we should be able to use the description 'the colour of ripe tomatoes' in order to *refer* to the colour red. If the description is thus used while it occurs as a part of **CRT**, then the whole designator seems to denote the property of having the color red (or, equivalently, the property of being red).

¹⁰ The inference is an uncontroversial application of *Leibniz's Law*; the relevant singular terms do *not* occur inside the scope of any non-extensional operator.

¹¹ Cp. Donnellan (1966).

Does this concession force me to give up my earlier position? No. The reason is that in the described use, **CRT** would *not* be a flexible designator. It would still be rigid, but it would rigidly designate the property of having the color red. For assume we use **CRT** as described, i.e. as meaning something like: having *this* colour (where ‘this’ refers to the colour red). If we then evaluate **CRT** – thus used – with respect to some possible world, we must hold fixed the referent of the referentially used description; thus the expression will rigidly designate the property of being red (of having *this* colour). This is why I can admit that **CRT** may allow for a use in which it after all denotes the property of being red without retreating from the position I defended before.¹² Acknowledging this possible use of **CRT** may, however, account for some of the intuitions that make López de Sa regard **CRT** as flexible.*

References

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¹² Anyway, this case only works under some controversial assumptions. It only constitutes a *semantic* phenomenon if the referential use of definite descriptions is a semantic phenomenon itself – which I would doubt it is, following Kripke (1977).

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