

Notes on Rigidity, Abstract Reference & Predication

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Some Terminology: A claim is said to be a **necessary** truth if (roughly) it is true in *all possible worlds* or situations (including the *actual* world). If a claim is only true in *some* possible worlds (but false in others), then it is said to be **contingent**. A singular term (or definite description) is said to be **rigid** if it denotes the same thing in all possible worlds or situations.

It is a desirable feature of theories of abstract reference and predication that they have the following consequence:

- (1) “Courage is a virtue” is a necessary truth.

The realist theory of abstract reference does have this consequence, which can be established by the following argument.

“Courage” is rigid (it denotes the same property in all possible worlds).

“Virtue” is rigid (it denotes the same kind in all possible worlds).

The property Courage belongs to the kind Virtue (in the actual world).

∴ Courage belongs to Virtue in all possible worlds.¹

Therefore, (1) “Courage is a virtue” is a necessary truth.

Now, how does the trope theorist manage to undergird (1)? According to the trope theorist, “Courage” denotes whatever the definite description “the set of Courage tropes” denotes. It seems clear to me that we should *not* think of “the set of Courage tropes” as *rigid*, since (as Loux argues) that would make it impossible for there to have been more of fewer courageous people than there in fact are. But, if “the set of Courage tropes” is not rigid, then we *cannot* use an argument like the realist argument above to establish (1). In this sense, Loux is trying to be charitable to the trope theorist when he assumes that “the set of Courage tropes” *is* rigid. On *that* reading, at least (1) comes out true. The problem is that this assumption also leads to the absurd result about courageous people. It seems to me that we can have *both* the truth of (1), *and* the *non-rigidity* of “the set of Courage tropes”. In what follows, I will explain how such a version of trope theory does not seem to be ruled-out by what Loux says.

At this point, we need to backtrack and think about how the trope theorist handles simple, *concrete* predications, *e.g.*, the following:

- (2) “Socrates is courageous” is a contingent truth.

How does the trope theorist even give an account of *this*? They say that (2) is true because Socrates (*contingently*) *has a courage trope*. One may find this account unsatisfying. As Loux explains, the worry is that the trope theorist’s account of ordinary predication

¹I am assuming that “belongs to” is also rigid. But, this is what the realist assumes.

... explains one case of subject-predicate truth only by invoking another. Thus, we explain the truth of ‘Socrates is wise’ by appealing to a trope that Socrates has; but clearly the trope can do its explanatory job only if it is the right kind of trope. It cannot, for example, be a color trope or a shape trope. It must be a wisdom. But, then, how do trope theorists explain the fact that the relevant trope is a wisdom? They invoke a strategy we have met repeatedly in our discussion of the different forms of nominalism: they insist that a trope’s being what it is, being the sort of thing it is, represents a basic, unanalyzable, primitive fact. Tropes just are what they are - wisdoms, rednesses, and circularities; their being such things is not susceptible of any analysis, explanation, or reduction; but because they are what they are, the concrete objects that have them are how they are, are what they are, and are related to each other in all the ways they are.

It seems to me that anyone who rejects the trope theorist’s account of predication (either abstract *or* concrete) should reject it *at this stage*. Once we *grant* the trope theorist the ability to undergird the truth of (2) – *via* an explanatory *primitive* – there seems to be nothing stopping them from having (1) as well. After all, while *Socrates* has *his* courage trope *contingently*, there is no reason to suppose that the courage trope in question *is* a *courage* trope (rather than, say, a *color* trope) in a *contingent* manner. If tropes “just are what they are,” then why should we suppose that there is any *contingency* in the fact that Socrates’ courage trope is a *courage* trope? In other words, the very fact that this is a primitive, theoretical fact about courage tropes seems to suggest that:

(3) Courage tropes *are courage* tropes *necessarily*.

Once we come this far, we’re just a small step away from having our cake and eating it too. At this point, we need the following additional assumption.

(4) In the actual world, courage tropes are virtue tropes.

I can see no reason for us to reject (4). After all, it does seem (on reflection) that if there are such things as courage tropes and virtue tropes, then courage tropes are virtue tropes (at least, in the actual world). After all, we share with the realist the intuition that courage is a virtue. And, for the trope theorist, this just means that courage tropes are virtue tropes (*i.e.*, that the set of courage tropes is a subset of the set of virtue tropes). So, we *at least* have to grant the trope theorist (4). The key question is whether the trope theorist can motivate the following, stronger *modal* claim about courage tropes and virtue tropes:

(5) In all possible worlds, courage tropes are virtue tropes.

But, assuming (3), the step from (4) to (5) is no problem. If courage tropes are the kind of tropes they are *necessarily* (*i.e.*, as a matter of primitive, *theoretical* fact), then it seems to follow straightaway that if they are actually virtue tropes, then they are necessarily virtue tropes as well. Now, we’re done. The following argument seems to get the trope theorist “the best of both worlds”:

In the actual world, all courage tropes are virtue tropes.

Tropes are “the kinds of tropes they are” *necessarily* (*viz.*, *primitively*).

∴ In all possible worlds, all courage tropes are virtue tropes.

Therefore, (1) “Courage is a virtue” is a necessary truth.

This seems like a nice way for the trope theorist to avoid the problems associated with taking “the set of courage tropes” to be rigid, while, at the same time, being able to undergird the truth of (1).

Epilogue #1 on Austere Nominalism. The Austere nominalist has a similar approach, I think, to accounting for the truth of (1). For the Austere Nominalist, “Courage is a virtue” gets unpacked (roughly) as “All courageous persons are virtuous.” But, even if we *grant* that all courageous persons *happen to be* virtuous (which seems false *already!*), it is unclear how the Austere Nominalist is going to get the stronger, modal claim (1). The obvious thing to try here is something like the following:

(6) Courageous persons are virtuous, *insofar as they are courageous*.

But, what does “insofar as they are courageous” *mean*? Presumably, it means something like “holding fixed all the other virtues they might have or lack”. Surely, people can be courageous, but (at the same time) lack just about every other virtue, and so *not* be virtuous (everyone has *some* redeeming qualities, but that doesn’t make *everyone* virtuous!). The problem here is that there seems to be no way for the nominalist to give an account of “insofar as”. If there are (intuitively) lots and lots of virtues, then there will not be enough virtue *predicates* in our language to explicitly express the “insofar as” (or *ceteris paribus*) clause. Loux concludes that such constructions must be taken as primitive by the nominalist, in order for them to be able to ground the truth of (1). I am inclined to agree. This puts the Austere Nominalist in a position somewhat similar to the trope theorist. In order to get (1), they need to posit some theoretical primitive. In both cases, the theoretical primitive plays a similar role – it (very roughly) ensures that we can “isolate” the aspect of courageousness that is (intuitively) “a part of” virtuousness. And, intuitively, this relation between courage and virtue is not a contingent one.

Epilogue #2 on Trope/Bundle Theory & A Study Question. I suggested above that Socrates has some of his attributes *contingently*. On Loux’s reconstruction of the bundle theory, however, all attributes of particulars come out *necessary* (and for the same reason – Loux assumes that “the set of ___ tropes” is always *rigid*). Can a trick like the one I applied above to the trope theory of universals be applied to the trope/bundle theory of *particulars*? If so, what are the consequences of such a move? In particular, is it possible for Socrates to be *contingently* courageous on such a view? And, if so, *how* (that is, *why* is his courage *contingent* on such an account)? This is a study question.