Could Hesperus Have Failed to be Phosphorus?

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Or: How Yablo Awoke Me from my Dogmatic Slumbers and Inadvertently Convinced Me that Names are not Rigid Designators
Conceivability and Possibility

- Yablo 1993: Conceivability is a defeasible guide to possibility.
- ...
- Yablo 2006: When intuitions of possibility are defeated, the defeat should (ideally?) take a certain form.
Yablo’s Psychoanalytic Standard

• “Unless the conceiver is confused or resistant, ◊F explains E's seeming possibility only if he/she does or would accept it as an explanation, and accept that his/her intuition testifies at best to F's possibility, not E’s.”
Kripke on Hesperus and Phosphorus

• Kripke (N&N, lecture 3): It seems possible that Hesperus is not Phosphorus (H≠P). However, this is not possible.

• When we say it seems possible to us that H≠P, it really seems possible that the morning star isn’t the evening star, or that a sentence analogous to ‘H≠P’ is true in a qualitatively identical evidential scenario.
Simple 2D Explanation

• It’s *epistemically* possible (not ruled out apriori, conceivable as actual) that $H \neq P$.

• It’s not metaphysically possible (it couldn’t have been the case) that $H \neq P$.

• When we say it seems possible that $H \neq P$, this is explained by the epistemic possibility intuition (which we may confuse with a metaphysical possibility intuition).
Psychoanalytic Standard

• Yablo: This doesn’t meet the psychoanalytic standard.

• I can distinguish epistemic from metaphysical possibility, and even so it seems metaphysically possible that $H \neq P$.

• I.e. intuitively, it seems to me that (even though $H = P$), it could have been that $H \neq P$. 
Counterfactual Intuitions

• I think Yablo is right: we have the counterfactual intuition that it could have been that $H \neq P$.

• Call this an anti-rigidity intuition.

• Some even stronger anti-rigidity intuitions…
Turning Out

• Intuition: It could have turned out that $H \neq P$.

• Given that “turns out that” is factive, this entails that it could have been that $H \neq P$. 
Discovering That

• Another intuition: We could have discovered that $H \neq P$.

• Given that “discovered that” is factive, this entails that it could have been that $H \neq P$. 
Epistemic or Counterfactual

• One might suggest that these are just epistemic intuitions, reflecting an epistemic (past-tense indicative) use of “could have been”.

• But they seem to support paradigm counterfactuals: e.g. if the morning star and evening star had been distinct, we would have discovered that $H \neq P$. 
Explaining Away

• Kripke recognizes these counterfactual intuitions and tries to explain them away in terms of the intuition that

• (1) it might have been that the morning star isn’t the evening star (MS≠ES)

• (2) it might have been that a sentence of the form ‘H=P’ was true.
Psychoanalytic Standard

- Prima facie, just as the 2D explanation doesn’t meet the psychoanalytic standard, these explanations don’t either.

- Even after recognizing the difference between \('H≠P', 'MS≠ES', and ‘a sentence of the form ‘H≠P’ is true’, I still have the intuition that it could have been that \(H≠P\).
Defeating Intuitions

- Kripkean (Yablovian?) line: these anti-rigidity intuitions are defeated by arguments that names are rigid designators, so ‘H=P’ is necessary.

- Perhaps this defeat plus the explaining-away of intuitions meets the psychoanalytic standard: after seeing the pro-rigidity arguments, one recognizes that the anti-rigidity intuitions only support (1) and (2).
Naming and Necessity, Lecture 1

• 1. Arguments about de re modality.
• 2. Modal argument that names aren’t equivalent to descriptions.
• 3. Argument that names are rigid designators.
1. De Re Modality

• De re modal intuitions: e.g. Hesperus (that thing) might have failed to be the evening star.

• Objects have modal properties independently of how they’re picked out.

• I won’t dispute any of this.
2. Modal Argument against Descriptivism

• Intuition: It might have been that Hesperus wasn’t the evening star. [e.g. if it had been knocked off course by a comet]

• So ‘Hesperus’ is not modally equivalent to ‘the evening star’ (and so on).
Observations

• 1. This argument doesn’t yet establish that names are rigid.

• 2. The anti-descriptive intuition here doesn’t contradict the anti-rigidity intuition.

• 3. Even if it did: why does the former defeat the latter and not vice versa?
Naming and Contingency

• A backward version of N&N that starts with the anti-rigidity intuition.

• Lecture 1: it’s contingent that H=P, names are nonrigid.

• Lecture 3: the intuition that it could have been that H≠ES is defeated by the argument for nonrigidity and explained away by the de re intuition that H could have failed to be ES.
3. Arguments for Rigidity

- Kripke’s official argument for rigidity goes via an intuitive test

- No one other than Nixon might have been Nixon.

- If so, Nixon (the actual referent) is the referent of ‘Nixon’ in every world where there is one: i.e. ‘Nixon’ is (weakly, modally) rigid.

- Call this the pro-rigidity intuition.
Evaluating the Intuition

• This pro-rigidity intuition isn’t all that strong.

• Nothing other than Hesperus might have been Hesperus?

• Intuitively: Mars might have turned out to be Hesperus. (We could have discovered that it was Hesperus).

• It might have been (turned out) that Jimmy Hoffa was Nixon?
Competing Intuitions

- Even if there’s a strongish pro-rigidity intuition here, there’s also a strongish anti-rigidity intuition.
- Why does the former get to trump the latter?
- Pretheoretically stronger? (Hmm…)
- Posttheoretically stronger?
Abductive Argument

• There’s also a potential abductive argument for rigidity.
  • The anti-descriptive intuition is best explained by the hypothesis that names are rigid.
  • That hypothesis is simple and powerful.
  • So names are rigid.
Abductive Trumping

- On this view, the anti-descriptive intuition plus abduction trump the pro-rigidity intuition.

- Two worries: (1) is the anti-descriptive intuition really pretheoretically stronger than the pro-rigidity intuition? (2) maybe there are better explanations of both intuitions.
Extreme Alternatives

1. Keep anti-descriptive and pro-rigidity intuitions, junk all anti-rigidity intuitions (explain away via Kripkean strategy): names are always rigid.

2. Keep all anti-rigidity intuitions, junk anti-descriptive and pro-rigidity intuitions (explain away via scope): names are always descriptive.

Question for both: what breaks symmetry?
Moderate Alternatives

3. Keep anti-descriptive and pro-rigidity intuitions, keep some anti-rigidity intuitions and junk others (non-factivity).

4. Keep all anti-rigidity intuitions, keep pro-descriptive intuition and junk pro-rigidity intuition (semi-rigidity).

5. Keep all the intuitions (context dependence, ambiguous operator).
3. Non-Factivity

• Yablo’s line: accept that it could have turned out that $H \neq P$, but deny that it could have been that $H \neq P$: “turns out that” isn’t factive.

• Awkward: “If it turned out that $p$, then $p$” seems trivially correct.

• And what about: we could have discovered that $H \neq P$? [Gluer/Pagin: this isn’t factive! Yablo: explain this away?]
4. Semi-Rigidity

- One can reconcile the anti-descriptive and anti-rigidity intuitions (but not the pro-rigidity intuition) via the thesis that names are semi-rigid designators: picking out actual referent in some world, description-satisfier in others.

- In some worlds ‘Hesperus’ picks out Venus (so it’s possible that $H \neq ES$)

- In other worlds ‘Hesperus’ picks out the evening star (so it’s possible that $H \neq P$).
Worry

• Worry: take a world where Venus spirals out of the solar system, and Jupiter and Mars are visible in morning and evening,

• Regarding this very world, the anti-descriptive intuition says ‘Hesperus is Mars (not Venus)’ and the pro-rigidity intuition says ‘Hesperus is Venus (not Mars)."
Two Different Worlds?

- Semi-rigidity view might say there are two different qualitatively identical worlds here: one in which Hesperus is Venus (and spirals out of control), one in which Hesperus is Mars (and is visible in the evening).

- But intuitively: this is a linguistic difference, two ways of describing the same world; not two ways the world could have been.
5. Contextualism

- Accommodate all the intuitions by saying that some uses of ‘Hesperus’ are rigid and some uses are nonrigid (depending on context).

- Anti-descriptive and pro-rigidity intuitions work by triggering rigid use.

- Anti-rigidity intuitions work by triggering nonrigid use.
Pushing Around

- E.g. ‘It might have been that $H \neq ES$’ (with a little bit of charity) tends to push us to rigid use.

- ‘It might have been that $H \neq P$’ (especially cued by “turns out”) tends to push us to nonrigid use.
Order Effects

• After ‘It might have been that H≠ES’ (and ‘It might have been that P≠MS’, ‘It might have been that H≠P’ typically seems (and is) false.

• After ‘It might have turned out that H≠P’ and ‘It might have been that H≠P’, ‘It might have been that H≠ES’ typically seems (and is) false. [Not sure!]
6. Ambiguous Operator

- Alternative reconciliation: 'It might have been that' is ambiguous between two readings.
- One generates pro-rigidity intuitions.
- One generates anti-rigidity intuitions (cf. 'It might have turned out that')
- Names are rigid with respect to the first reading but not the second reading.
Three Operators

• This last view recognizes at least three modal operators: one purely counterfactual (“It might have been that”), one purely epistemic (“It might be that”), and one combined counterfactual/epistemic (“It might have turned out that”).

• The view might treat these as fundamentally distinct (Yablo’s view, three-dimensionalism) or it might collapse the last two (e.g. both work off primary intensions).
Open Questions I

• I’m somewhat agnostic between a number of these options.

• I like the contextualist view, but don’t know if it can be made rigorous. Likewise the ambiguity and semi-rigidity view.

• I don’t currently see a compelling case for either extreme view.
Open Questions II

• Does all this generalize to other putative rigid expressions (demonstratives, natural kind terms): I’m inclined to think so.

• Are pure rigid designators even possible? (Maybe e.g. “that very object: …”?)
Open Questions III

• How does this relate to other cases for nonrigidity/descriptiveness of names: e.g. Cumming, Geurts, Roberts, Rothschild, …
Concluding Challenge

- For those who favor the traditional Kripkean view on which names are always rigid: what breaks the symmetry between the pro-rigidity and anti-rigidity intuitions, so that the former trump the latter?