

**ON THE ORDINARY
NOTION OF SUBSTANCE.
REPLY TO ABREU ZAVALETA¹**

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Abstract: My proposed mechanism of reference fixing for ordinary natural kind terms in the book *Roads to Reference* appeals to the ordinary notion of substance. In this note I reply to an objection by Martín Abreu Zavaleta that that notion is too vague to allow for a sufficiently constrained property to become the referent of a given ordinary substance term. I argue that the notion of substance is far less vague than Abreu Zavaleta claims.

Martín Abreu Zavaleta's (2020) comments all concern the ordinary notion of substance, which I suggest plays a key role in determining the referents of ordinary terms for

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substances. One basic proposal in *Roads to Reference* is that these referents are typically what I call “ordinary substances”, the idea being that, according to the ordinary notion of substance, the criterion for some thing being an example of a certain ordinary substance—water, for example—is the vague condition that it must be a thing sufficiently similar to the appropriate paradigms as regards the general compositional properties of the paradigms. According to this idea, whether something is an example of water is a vague question, though many things will be determinate examples of water and many other things will be determinate examples of non-water. Abreu Zavaleta is concerned that this vagueness turns out to be excessive, in such a way that ultimately the ordinary notion of substance doesn’t allow us to get referents (or reasonable referents) for ordinary substance terms: “as it stands, the ordinary notion of substance is too unregimented to determine a privileged criterion for when two items exemplify the same substance which is uniquely relevant to the determination of reference”, he says.

Abreu Zavaleta reaches this conclusion from an examination of the following quotation from *Roads to Reference*, where I state the criterion above: “in virtue of the ordinary notion of substance, the things exemplifying a substance will be the things which are not too different, in a suitably vague sense, from the paradigms as regards the necessary properties of the latter” (Gómez-Torrente (2019), 179); he calls this quotation “Gómez-Torrente’s thesis”. Abreu Zavaleta says that Gómez-Torrente’s thesis

can be precisified in many different ways, none of which is privileged over the rest merely by virtue of the content of the ordinary notion of substance. Since those different precisifications yield different criteria for

individuating substances, the ordinary notion of substance does not on its own determine a uniquely privileged such criterion.

His idea appears to be that different competent users of the ordinary notion of substance can understand “Gómez-Torrente’s thesis” in different precisified ways without doing injustice to that ordinary notion; however, he will note that some of these different ways sound absurd and do not yield appropriate referents for ordinary substance terms.

Abreu Zavaleta considers two dimensions along which he says Gómez-Torrente’s thesis can be precisified: one dimension corresponds to (1) “which of the paradigms’ properties one should take into account”, and another dimension corresponds to (2) “the sense in which two objects are similar enough with respect to a certain property”. Along the first dimension he considers three possible options:

(1a) X exemplifies the same substance as paradigm Y just in case X is similar enough to Y with respect to *every* necessary property of Y; (1b) X exemplifies the same substance as paradigm Y just in case X is similar enough to Y with respect to *some* necessary property of Y; (1c) X exemplifies the same substance as paradigm Y just in case X is similar enough to Y with respect to *certain specific* necessary properties of Y.

Along the second dimension he considers two possible options: “(2a) X is similar enough to Y with respect to Y’s property P just in case X has P; (2b) X is similar enough to Y with respect to Y’s property P just in case X has some

property similar enough to P”. He then observes that options (1a), (1b) and (2a) sound absurd (I will come back to why this is so in a moment), but since according to him all of them are allowed by the ordinary notion of substance, he concludes that the ordinary notion of substance does not appropriately constrain the possibilities relevant to the fixing of the referents of ordinary substance terms.

My view, quite to the contrary, is that the precise claims (1a), (1b) and (2a) are clearly not allowed by the ordinary notion of substance. I suppose this is to some extent clear from my discussion in the paragraphs surrounding “Gómez-Torrente’s thesis” in *Roads to Reference*. In fact, the context in which that quotation appears makes it plain that the necessary properties that are relevant at that point in the discussion are “some necessary properties at the appropriate level” (Gómez-Torrente (2019), 179)—a level in which the passage includes general compositional properties—thus making it reasonably clear that, in my view at least, only a thesis of the form (1c) is allowed by the ordinary notion of substance. Similarly, the whole discussion in the surrounding paragraphs can be seen as arguing precisely that thesis (2a) imposes a precision on the notion of substance that is lacking in the ordinary notion, which involves something closer to (2b). But, even regardless of whether this is already clear in *Roads to Reference*, one can just independently consider afresh the question whether the ordinary notion of substance is such that it allows the options that Abreu Zavaleta thinks it allows.

According to option (1a), two things *a* and *b* are of the same substance in the ordinary sense when they share all their necessary properties. This implies that *a* and *b* are of the same substance only if $a=b$, for surely a necessary property of *a* (*b*) is being identical with *a* (*b*). As Abreu Zavaleta notes, this is absurd, and I concur. But he says

that the absurdity “stem[s] from substantive metaphysical arguments”, not from the ordinary notion of substance. I fail to see what “substantive metaphysical argument” is involved in simply noting that it is absurd to think that in order for two things to be of the same substance they have to be identical. I think that anyone competent with the ordinary notion can see the absurdity, for it’s clear that the ordinary notion is such that it allows that two different things exemplify the same substance—otherwise the ordinary notion would have no use for the typical speaker.

Similar comments can be made regarding thesis (1b). According to it, two things *a* and *b* are of the same substance in the ordinary sense when they share some of their necessary properties or other. This implies that two material objects *a* and *b* are of the same substance if they are spatially located when they exist, for surely a necessary property of *a* (*b*) is being spatially located when it exists. Abreu Zavaleta notes that this is absurd, and again I concur. But again he attributes the absurdity to “substantive metaphysical arguments”, not to a conflict with the ordinary notion of substance, and again I think that the absurdity will be plain to any ordinary user of the common notion of substance. It’s clear that the ordinary notion is such that it allows that two different material objects don’t exemplify the same substance—otherwise the ordinary notion would have no use at all.

According to option (2a), two things are of the same substance only if they share every general compositional property. This implies, for example, that two volumes of liquid will be volumes of water only if they share the same amount of bacteria per volume unit. Again this is absurd, and I am certain that any minimally competent user of the ordinary notions of substance and water will see that. Is it not evident, in fact, that an ordinary user who accepted either (1a) or (1b) or (2a) would be deemed an incompetent

user of the ordinary notion of substance (and not merely an incompetent metaphysician)?

One reason why (1a), (1b) and (2a) are absurd from the point of view of a competent user of the ordinary notion of substance is, in fact, that they sidestep aspects on which the ordinary notion adopts certain types of vagueness, introducing types of precision which are alien to the ordinary notion. As suggested in *Roads to Reference*, on the ordinary notion of substance two things *a* and *b* exemplify the same substance when they are both sufficiently (vaguely) similar to the appropriate paradigms as regards the general compositional properties of the paradigms. (1a) and (1b) prescind from the vagueness involved in locating the basis of similarity in a certain imprecise collection of necessary properties of the paradigms, and locate that basis either in the precise set of all necessary properties (of a particular paradigm) or in the set of unit sets consisting of one particular necessary property. (2a) prescinds from the vagueness involved in the very notion of similarity and identifies the suitable relation that must obtain between candidates and paradigms with the relation of exemplification of precisely the very same set of (compositional) properties.

I thus think that the ordinary notion of substance is rich enough to leave it settled that (1a), (1b) and (2a) are excluded by it. Abreu Zavaleta may have thought otherwise because of my insistence on the idea that the ordinary notion is vague (and on the implications this has for the vague nature of particular ordinary substances), which certainly implies that, in a sense, it “has” many precisifications. But the sense in which a vague notion “has” or “allows for” many precisifications has nothing to do with the alleged fact that a competent user of the notion is allowed to embrace one particular precisification in ordinary communicative contexts. Think of someone who

thought, in an ordinary context in which no special convention was in place, that a particular precisification of the notion of being thin is correct, say one which implied that one is thin just in case one has a waist of precisely 56.87 cm or less. If she made this thought clear to other speakers via her linguistic behavior, they would think she was not really a competent user of “thin”. (That would actually be a mild way of putting what they would think.) The fact that a vague concept like that of being thin “has” a number of precisifications does not mean that any of the precisifications it “has” is just a possible way of understanding the concept for ordinary purposes.²

The ordinary notion of substance is rich (or nonvague) enough to determine something like the criterion of *Roads to Reference* as the criterion for exemplification of a given substance. The criterion is even a bit less vague than what Abreu Zavaleta calls Exemplification (“the things exemplifying a certain substance are the things X such that, for every property P in a certain specific set of necessary properties of the substance’s paradigms, X has a property similar enough to P”), in that the relevant specific set is determinately limited to the general compositional properties, and the dimension of similarity must then obviously involve similarity in some aspects relating to general composition. And yet, the determined criterion is

² It may be worth noting that supervaluationism, the theory of vagueness that makes perhaps the most prominent use of precisifications, does not postulate that a precisification constitutes an allowed way of understanding a vague term for ordinary purposes. Instead, supervaluationists (such as Fine (1975)) merely use the concept of precisification and quantifications over precisifications in the definition of general semantic concepts such as those of satisfaction and truth for language fragments containing vague predicates.

itself vague, for example because it is vague what is a general compositional property, and because the notion of similarity as regards general composition is equally vague. This latter fact is what probably makes it indeterminate, for example, whether a volume composed just of orthowater, as opposed to “ $\frac{3}{4}$ orthowater, $\frac{1}{4}$ parawater”, is water. But this indeterminacy, as argued at length in *Roads to Reference*, is just what we find when we reflect on the ordinary notion of water, and so the fact that the proposal in the book captures the indeterminacy in question cannot constitute an objection to it.

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