

Comments on *The Bounds of Possibility*

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A Schema For Tolerance Arguments (p57)

Tolerance. a is tolerant.

Non-Contingency. If a is tolerant, then it is necessary that a is tolerant.

Iteration. Whatever is possibly possible is possible.

Persistent Closeness. When properties are close, they are necessarily close.

Hypertolerance. a is hypertolerant.

Something is *tolerant* if it could have had any property close to a property it has, and *hypertolerant* if it could have had any property ancestrally close to a property it has.¹

1 Plasticity & Plenitude

BoP offers a two-part package to resolve the puzzles and to stabilize denials of Non-Contingency:

- Terms like ‘this’, ‘Woody’, and ‘table’ are all **semantically plastic**: there is fine-grained variation across nearby worlds with respect to which objects and properties they pick out.
- Some suitably rich version of **plenitude** is true, so that “whenever you sit down in front of one table-shaped object, you sit down in front of many table-shaped objects.” (265) These coincident things vary modally in fine-grained ways: in a slogan, “there’s something for every consistent modal profile.”

Together, plenitude & plasticity help combat the **Security Argument** for Non-Contingency, but also reflect a pair of commitments on display throughout *BoP*: a commitment to systematic metaphysics and a commitment to charity (“to things taken for granted in ordinary life” (282)).

I’m on board, but want to look more closely at *Quantified Tolerance*.

2 Quantified Tolerance

Generalized: A Schema For Quantified Tolerance Arguments (p63)

Tolerance. Every K object is tolerantly K .

Non-Contingency. If every K object is tolerantly K , then necessarily every K object is tolerantly K .

Iteration. Whatever is possibly possible is possible.

Persistent Closeness. When properties are close, they are necessarily close.

Hypertolerance. Every K object is hypertolerantly K .

Where something is *tolerantly K* if it could have had any close property while still being K , and *hypertolerantly K* if it could have had any ancestrally close property while still being K .²

A paradigmatic instance:

Table Tolerance. Every table is tolerantly a table.

¹Instances of the schema require filling out the placeholder “close” with some relation on properties.

² K is any predicate: ‘table’, ‘table made in Cherry Grove in May 2020’, ‘table in this room’, or even ‘identical to Woody’.

According to *BoP*, the intuitive force of individual Tolerance judgments extends to quantified Tolerance judgments, at least far enough that it would be “quite shocking” if we had to deny them.

“There is something preposterous about the suggestion that while most IKEA Melltorp tables are such that they could still have been tables while having any one of their legs replaced by any other matching leg, a few of those tables are not like that. (...) it is hard to take seriously the thought that Melltorp tables vary in this modal respect despite their uniformity in design.”(64)

But I suspect we *do* often talk as though particular tables are more intolerant than categorically similar ones, and that these judgments are about as deeply entrenched in our ordinary practices as judgments that particular objects are tolerant. Perhaps...

A raw-edged table made from a distinctively knotty piece of cherry wood; “That table could have been made shorter, but only if you’d still have kept that lovely pin knot on the edge.”

You grandfather’s first inexpertly cut dining table; couldn’t have been made with different tools or with cleaner joints.

The Melltorp “Frankentable” you assembled from a hodgepodge of screws, during an argument with your ex.

If there’s not much modal uniformity among tables, it undermines instances of even simpler tolerance generalizations:

every table is tolerant

But I think these cases are super hard to evaluate.

3 Ordinary Practices? Possible Lessons

- Work in psychology on *artifact categorization* aims to accommodate (among other things) our easy recognition of highly atypical instances of familiar artifact kinds, and the surprising flexibility of our judgments about feature centrality for those kinds. Fully general theories are quite controversial in part because our categorization judgments are so messy.³

One potential lesson: judgments generalizing on artifact kinds aren’t ones we’re all *that* committed to, and aren’t all that firmly embedded in our ordinary practices.

- Gelman (2013) argues that although we don’t typically essentialize artifact categories, our judgments about individual artifacts pattern with *psychological essentialism*. In particular, she suggests that judgments about individual artifacts often sensitive to highly specific and non-obvious facts about the history of the object. (Eg. who it belonged to, whether it has sentimental value to us, whether it was worn by someone we respect or dislike.)⁴

And so perhaps: we’re committed to intolerance judgments that aren’t uniform within familiar (artifact) kinds, especially when it comes to idiosyncratic features that are particularly meaningful or significant to us.

But! I think that plenitude & plasticity are *exactly* what we’d need to make sense of this; the package is *already* equipped to accommodate our weirdest and most unsystematically sentimental beliefs about ordinary objects.

³For example, see Malt and Sloman (2007), and related overviews in Keil et al. (2007) and Carrara and Mingardo (2013). For more optimism, see Bloom (1998) and Bloom (2007).

⁴See also De Freitas et al (2014). For a recent overview of psychological essentialism and connections to philosophical work, see Neufeld (2022).

References

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