"Philosophers care about the truth": Descriptive/normative generics

Olivier Lemeire

Abstract

Some generic generalizations have both a descriptive and a normative reading. The generic sentence "Philosophers care about the truth", for instance, can be read as describing what philosophers in fact care about, but can also be read as prescribing philosophers to care about the truth. On Leslie's account, this generic sentence has two readings due to the polysemy of the kind term "philosopher". In this paper, I first argue against this polysemy account of descriptive/normative generics. In response, a contextualist semantic theory for generic sentences is introduced. Based on this theory, I argue that descriptive/normative generics are contextually underspecified.

1. INTRODUCTION

Generic sentences, or *generics* for short, are generalizations that are formulated without the overt use of a quantifier. Typical examples of generics are sentences like the following:

(1) Tigers are striped.

(2) Ravens are black.[1]

On the most widely accepted analysis, generic generalizations like these contain an unpronounced sentential operator in their logical form, called *Gen* (Krifka et al., 1995). This variable-binding operator relates a restrictor – such as "Tiger(x)" – with a scope – such as "Striped(x)". The logical form of generics like (1) and (2), for example, is generally thought to be this:

(3) Gen x [Tiger(x)][Striped(x)]

(4) Gen x [Raven(x)][Black(x)]

---

[1] Since there appear to be subtle differences in meaning between generics with a bare plural noun phrase and those with an indefinite singular or definite singular noun phrase, I will only discuss the former in this paper (but see Greenberg (2002) and Krifka et al. (1995)).

Even after decades of research, there is little agreement in the literature concerning the type of generalization expressed by *Gen* (Krifka et al., 1995; Sterken, 2017). Generics appear to express broad kind-wide generalizations but can still be true in the face of exceptions. The existence of some stripeless tigers does not falsify (1), for instance, just as the existence of some albino ravens does not falsify (2).

Their tolerance for exceptions is not the only puzzling fact about generics, however. Also puzzling is the fact that some generic sentences only have a descriptive reading whereas other generic sentences also have a normative reading. Sentences such as (1) and (2), for instance, are interpreted as just *describing* what members of the kind are like. Other generics, however, can also be interpreted as *prescribing* what members of the kind ought to be like. Here are two examples that will be returned to throughout this paper:

    (5)   Philosophers care about the truth.

    (6)   Men are tough.

Both these generic sentences can be understood descriptively as well as normatively. Sentence (5) can be read as describing what philosophers in fact care about but can also be read as prescribing philosophers to care about the truth. The same holds for (6), which, according to its normative reading, says that all men ought to be tough.[2] In some conversational contexts, an utterance of one of these sentences will convey either a descriptive or a normative generalization. Yet without any further contextual clues, both readings are available. Generic sentences that standardly have both a descriptive and a normative reading are what I call *descriptive/normative generics*. The question to be answered in this paper is why both a descriptive and a normative reading is so readily available for these sentences.

More specifically, descriptive/normative generics raise the question why a normative reading is more readily available for these generics than for generics like (1) and (2). In a standard context, one would not understand (1) as saying that tigers *ought* to be striped in a prescriptive-normative sense. This sentence does not have a normative reading, except perhaps in a very specific conversational setting. Presumably, this is because biological kinds such as *ravens* and *tigers* are not typically conceived of as the kind of things to which prescriptive norms apply, unlike social kinds such as

---

[2] This generic will be mentioned often in this paper. Obviously, this should not be considered an endorsement of it. Other examples of objectionable descriptive/normative generics are "Women are submissive", "Boys don't cry", "Girls are caring", and "Black people don't snitch" (from the ABC sitcom *Black-Ish*).

philosophers and *men*. But how exactly does this difference in conceptualization lead to a difference in the readings that are available for generic sentences?

In this paper, I argue that descriptive/normative generics are contextually underspecified when uttered in a standard context. To do so, I introduce a contextualist semantic theory for generic sentences. According to this theory, generics express kindhood generalizations, where the content of "kindhood" is context-dependent. A generic of the form "*Ks* are *F*" roughly says that *F* (e.g., caring about the truth) is part of what makes *Ks* (e.g., philosophers) into a *kind*. The notion of *kindhood*, however, only makes sense relative to a contextually selected categorizing strategy. Some generic sentences – like (5) and (6) – can standardly be understood in two different ways because it is common ground that the categories involved – *philosophers* and *men* – can be considered kinds relative to two different categorizing strategies.

This contextualist theory is defended in response to Sarah-Jane Leslie's (2015) account of descriptive/normative generics, according to which they have two different readings due to the polysemy of the kind terms "philosopher" and "man". Leslie's polysemy account has already been influential in the literature (Del Pinal & Reuter, 2017; Reuter, 2019).[3] In the first part of the paper, I present Leslie's polysemy account and an objection against it. In the second part of this paper, I defend my alternative contextualist theory in response.

2. LESLIE'S POLYSEMY ACCOUNT

2.1 Descriptive/normative polysemy

The fact that some generic sentences have both a descriptive and a normative reading calls for an explanation. On Leslie's (2015) account, descriptive/normative generics can be understood in both a descriptive and a normative way because the kind terms in these sentences can themselves be understood in both a descriptive and a normative way. Leslie hypothesizes that social kind terms such as "philosopher" and "man" are polysemous. Polysemy occurs when a single word has multiple senses that are distinct yet related. A typical example of polysemy is the word "book" which has both a physical object sense (e.g., "this book is heavy") and an information sense (e.g., "this book is interesting").[4] On Leslie's view, the kind terms "philosopher" and "man" have both a descriptive sense and a normative sense, causing generic sentences such as (5) and (6) to have both a descriptive and a

---

[3] Since submitting this paper, another criticism of Leslie's view has been published that pursues a very different critique and a pragmatic alternative (Hesni, 2021). For another pragmatic approach to normative generics, also see Haslanger (2015).

[4] For this and more examples, see Löhr (2021). For an overview of current theoretical and experimental issues regarding polysemy, see Falkum & Vicente (2015).

normative reading. Generics like (1) and (2), on the other hand, can only be understood as expressing a descriptive generalization because the kind terms in these sentences are monosemous. This view can be presented as follows:

(7) Gen x [Tiger(x)][Striped(x)]

(8) Gen x [Raven(x)][Black(x)]

(9) a. Gen x [Philosopher$_1$(x)][Cares-about-the-truth(x)]

   b. Gen x [Philosopher$_2$(x)][Cares-about-the-truth(x)]

(10) a. Gen x [Man$_1$(x)][Tough(x)]

   b. Gen x [Man$_2$(x)][Tough(x)]

Leslie argues that the kind terms "philosopher" and "man" are polysemous due to fact that the concepts PHILOSOPHER and MAN have a dual character (Knobe et al., 2013; Reuter, 2019). Dual character concepts encode both a descriptive and a normative dimension, each of which is independently sufficient for categorization (Reuter, 2019). Leslie proposes that the concept PHILOSOPHER, for example, is a dual character concept because it encodes several properties that describe philosophers (e.g., reads philosophy books, teaches philosophy classes, etc.) and a broader social role that is characteristic of philosophers (e.g., asks fundamental questions about life and reality). Someone could be categorized as a philosopher, furthermore, because she instantiates many of the properties that describe a philosopher but alternatively, also because she performs the social role characteristic of a philosopher, irrespective of whether she instantiates any of the other properties. The descriptive content and the social role content of PHILOSOPHER are independently sufficient for someone to be categorized as a philosopher. The same holds for the concept MAN, which encodes both a set of descriptive properties and a characteristic social role.

The social roles encoded by the concepts PHILOSOPHER and MAN also have normative force. Leslie argues that there is a *prima facie* social obligation for individuals who satisfy the description of a kind to also carry out the social role characteristic of that kind. Hence these concepts really have both a descriptive and a *normative* character, encoding both a set of descriptive properties and a normatively laden social role that everyone who satisfies the description of the kind is obligated to perform.

As a result of this dual character conceptualization, Leslie argues, words like "philosopher" and "man" are polysemous; they have both a descriptive and a normative sense. The word "philosopher" can be used in two different ways; either to denote people who satisfy the description of a philosopher or to denote people who perform the social role of a philosopher. Similarly, the word "man" can denote people who satisfy the description of a man but can also denote people who perform the social role characteristic of men. For example, when someone says that "Hillary Clinton was the only man in the Obama administration", the word "man" in this sentence denotes specifically those people who

perform the social role characteristic of men. When someone is called a "*true* philosopher" or a "*real* man", the modifiers "true" and "real" select the normative social role sense of the kind term. But even without these modifiers, Leslie argues, "philosopher" and "man" can have a distinct and normatively laden social role sense.

This polysemy, Leslie further argues, is also responsible for the fact that both a descriptive and a normative reading are available for some generic sentences. Due to the polysemy of "philosopher", (5) can be interpreted as a generalization about people who satisfy the description of a philosopher but alternatively, also as a generalization about people who exemplify the social role of a philosopher. Similarly, (6) can be interpreted as being about people who satisfy the description of a man but also about people who exemplify the social role of a man. The two readings that are available for these sentences can therefore also be represented as follows:

(11) a. Gen x [satisfies-description-of-a-philosopher(x)][cares-about-the-truth(x)]

b. Gen x [exemplifies-normative-social-role-of-a-philosopher(x)][cares-about-the-truth(x)]

(12) a. Gen x [satisfies-description-of-a-man(x)][tough(x)]

b. Gen x [exemplifies-normative-social-role-of-a-man(x)][tough(x)]

Hence on Leslie's view, the fact that generics like (5) and (6) have both a descriptive and a normative reading is not really due to the semantics of *Gen* but due to the semantics of "philosopher" and "man". Because Leslie proposes that the polysemy of the kind terms is responsible for the two readings of these generics, I will not say more here about her otherwise very interesting views on the meaning of *Gen* (see Leslie, 2007, 2008).

To summarize, Leslie defends three claims: (a) concepts such as PHILOSOPHER and MAN are dual character concepts, encoding both a set of descriptive properties and a normatively laden social role, (b) kind terms such as "philosopher" and "man" are consequently polysemous, with a descriptive sense and a distinct normative social role sense, and (c) this polysemy causes generic sentences about philosophers and men to have both a descriptive and a normative reading. In the next section, I object to this third claim; descriptive/normative generics do *not* have two readings due to the polysemy of the kind terms involved.

2.2 Forcing Contexts

In this section, I argue against Leslie's polysemy account of descriptive/normative generics. I will not dispute Leslie's claim that PHILOSOPHER and MAN are dual character concepts that also encode a social role. In fact, I take this to be an important insight that I will rely on myself when explaining the meaning of descriptive/normative generics. Furthermore, I will also not dispute Leslie's claim that terms like "philosopher" and "man" are polysemous. It does appear that in *some* contexts, these terms

5

denote specifically those people who perform the social roles attributed to the kind, which may well be a case of polysemy (Laskowski, 2020).[5] What I will argue in this section, however, is that this alternative social role sense of the kind terms is not conventionalized enough for it to explain why generics about philosophers and men have two different readings.

Recall that for descriptive/normative generics such as (5) and (6), both a descriptive and a normative reading is standardly available. Of course, in some conversational contexts, an utterance of one of these sentences will convey either a descriptive generalization or a normative generalization. Yet without any further contextual clues (e.g., when mentioned in this paper), both readings are available. If the hypothesized polysemy of the kind terms is to explain this, the two different senses of these terms would have to be strongly conventionalized. It would have to be the case that both the descriptive sense and the social role sense of these terms are stored in our lexicon so that whenever these terms are used, both senses can be selected. Yet that is not the case. Instead, "philosopher" and "man" have one ordinary sense (which need not be *either* a set of descriptive properties *or* a social role but may well be some combination of both dimensions) and only have a distinct social role sense when the context forces this alternative understanding. When used in a standard context, however, only the ordinary sense of these kind terms is available.

To see this, consider the (non-generic) examples that Leslie provides in support of her view that kind terms like "philosopher" and "man" are polysemous. Crucially, these are all examples in which contextual factors force a non-ordinary understanding of these kind terms. Once we remove these contextual factors from the examples, however, the kind terms only have their ordinary sense.

A first type of examples are what Leslie calls *normatively shifted predications*, one example of which we have already mentioned above. These are sentences in which a social kind term is used to predicate that an individual performs the social role characteristic of the kind. Here are two examples:

(13) Hillary Clinton was the only man in the Obama administration.
(14) My sister is always looking for answers to deep questions. Even though she is not a philosopher, if you think about what it really means to be a philosopher, she is a philosopher.

In these examples, the kind terms do appear to denote specifically those people who exemplify the social roles attributed to the kinds. Sentence (13) says that Hillary Clinton was the only one in the Obama administration who performed the social role of a man. Sentence (14) says that the speaker's

---

[5] Alternatively, it could also be the case that kind terms such as "man" and "woman" have contextualist semantics themselves. For this view, see Saul (2012) and Diaz-Leon (2016). For discussion of this contextualist view, see Chen (2021).

sister performs the social role of a philosopher, even if she is not a philosopher in the descriptive sense. However, these examples do *not* show that a distinct social role sense of "philosopher" and "man" is conventionalized in such a way that it could explain the two readings that are standardly available for descriptive/normative generics. In both (13) and (14), the context forces the reader to look for the non-ordinary way in which the speaker is using the kind terms. In (13), the speaker flouts the maxim of quality by stating something that is obviously false when the kind term is interpreted in an ordinary manner. In (14), the speaker instructs the reader to look for "the real meaning" of the kind term and to thereby avoid a contradiction.

Without these forcing contextual factors, however, there is no distinct social role sense available for the kind terms. This is shown by the following two examples:

(15) Hillary Clinton was the only woman in the Obama administration.

(16) Nietzsche is a philosopher.

Sentences (15) and (16) have only a single reading, based on the ordinary senses of "woman" and "philosopher". Examples such as these provide evidence against Leslie's claim that kind terms such as "woman", "man", and "philosopher" are polysemous in a way that could explain the two readings that are standardly available for descriptive/normative generics. If the (predicative) use of these kind terms does not cause sentences such as (15) and (16) to have two different readings, why would it cause generics like (5) and (6) to have two different readings? There must be something about the generic formulation itself that is responsible for the two readings of descriptive/normative generics.

For a second type of examples, consider sentences in which "philosophers" and "men" are used to restrict the scope of a quantifier. Leslie mentions several explicitly quantified generalizations about social kinds that express a normatively laden generalization. Although the following sentences are different from the ones she discusses, they work equally well:

(17) Most [philosophers]$_F$ care about the truth.

(18) All [men]$_F$ are tough.

When special focus is placed on the kind terms, quantified generalizations such as (17) and (18) do appear to express a generalization about the people who exemplify the social role associated with the kind, and hence have normative force. Again, however, this normative use of the kind term is the result of the context forcing an alternative reading, in this case the interaction of focus with the meaning of the kind term. Without such a focused reading (and without further pragmatic factors), explicitly quantified generalizations only have their ordinary meaning. This is shown by the following sentences:

(19) Most philosophers care about the truth.

(20) All men are tough.

Neither of these quantified generalizations has both a descriptive and normative reading readily available. Yet if Leslie were correct in proposing that kind terms like "philosopher" and "man" are polysemous in a way that could explain the standard availability of two different readings for descriptive/normative generics, one would expect these quantified generalizations to standardly have two different readings just as well. One would expect (19), for example, to not only have a descriptive reading but also have a reading on which it says that *most people who perform the social role of a philosopher care about the truth*. Similarly, there should be a reading available for (20) according to which it says that *all people who perform the social role of a man are tough*. Yet without further contextual factors – like a focused reading of the kind terms – these normative readings are not available. The fact that there is no normative reading readily available for these quantified sentences also suggests that it is not the kind terms themselves but something about the generic formulation of (5) and (6) that is responsible for their two readings. After all, for these generic sentences, both a descriptive and a normative reading is readily available even without any forcing contextual factors.

To conclude, when kind terms such as "philosopher" and "men" are used in non-generic sentences, only their ordinary sense is available, unless the context forces one to look for the non-ordinary sense intended by the speaker. Given that generics like (5) and (6) have both a descriptive and a normative reading even in a standard context, however, there must be something about the generic formulation itself that is causing these sentences to have two different readings. In the second part of the paper, I defend the view that generics are prone to having several different readings due to their contextualist semantics.

3. CONTEXTUAL UNDERSPECIFICATION

3.1 A relational theory of kindhood

When uttered in a standard context, descriptive/normative generics have two different readings because they are contextually underspecified. To argue for this position, I will introduce a novel semantic theory for generic sentences, according to which they express context-dependent kindhood generalizations. Other philosophers and linguists have also proposed that the content of generic sentences is context-dependent in some way (Greenberg, 2002; Krifka et al., 1995; Nguyen, 2020; Nickel, 2010, 2016; Sterken, 2015).[6] Unfortunately, discussing these alternative contextualist theories

---

[6] The contextualist theory presented here is inspired by Nickel's account (2010, 2016), according to which *Gen* has the meaning of a universal quantifier restricted in scope to *normal* individuals. This notion of normality, Nickel further argues, is context-dependent and always interpreted in relation to a contextually selected *causal-explanatory strategy*. The theory I present here can be considered an

is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will present the essential elements of my own theory and argue that it explains why generics sentences about philosophers and men standardly have both a descriptive and a normative reading. I trust that the argument presented here will also be of interest to those who have defended alternative contextualist theories.

Whereas it is quite common to point out that generics characterize the members of a kind, the importance of the notion of *kindhood* for the meaning of generics has not been sufficiently recognized (although see Liebesman & Sterken, 2021). Generic generalizations, I propose, say something about the properties that make a category of individuals into a *kind*. Speaking somewhat impressionistically first, a generic like "Tigers are striped" says that *being striped* is part of what makes the category *tigers* into a kind; it says that this property is partly constitutive of the kindhood of *tigers*. Note already that a property can be part of what makes a category a kind without being necessary for membership in the category. *Being striped*, for example, is not necessary for being a member of the category *tigers.* It is, however, a property that individual tigers instantiate in such a way that it makes the category *tigers* into a kind. I say more about this notion of kindhood in the current section, before explaining how it features in the semantics of generic sentences in the next.

Some categories are just collections of individuals, like *ravens in my backyard right now*. Whereas this category can certainly have members, it is not a kind. Other categories, however, have members that are of the same kind, like the category *ravens* itself. A long and venerable philosophical tradition has aimed to analyze the nature of this difference. What is it that makes some categories of individuals into kinds, wherein lies their kindhood?

One prominent view among philosophers is that kindhood lies in the projectibility of a category with respect to several properties (Crane, 2021). When a category is a kind, members of that category – actual and counterfactual – are similar in such a way that one's observation of some category-members allows one to form reliable expectations about the properties of other members.

But philosophers who defend this view have also analyzed the projectibility constitutive of a category's kindhood in several different ways. Some philosophers argue that the kindhood of a category lies in the projectibility of the category with respect to the co-instantiation of several properties (Slater, 2015). On this view, kinds are categories that allow one to predict which properties category-members will instantiate, due to the regular co-occurrence of these properties. The category *philosophers* is a kind on this account because there are several properties (e.g., writes philosophical texts, teaches philosophy classes, etc.) one can reliably expect a philosopher to (habitually) instantiate.

extension of this view; rather than being restricted to normal individuals, generics are restricted based on the notion of *kindhood*. Kindhood, furthermore, is always interpreted in relation to a *categorizing strategy*, which includes but is not exhausted by explanatory strategies.

Others argue that kinds are rather projectible with respect to the *cause* of several properties of category-members (Nickel, 2010). When a category is a kind, one can form reliable expectations about the causal factors that are responsible for a member's instantiation of a property, because these causal factors tend to be the same across members of the category. On this view, the kindhood of a category like *tigers* lies in the fact that a tiger's instantiation of *having four legs*, *having a tail*, and *having stripes* can be causally explained in the same way for each tiger.

There are, furthermore, also functional accounts of kindhood (Weiskopf, 2011) and even explicitly normative ones. As some have argued, the category *anger,* for instance, is a normative kind. Instances of this category are projectible primarily with respect to the set of situations in which they are warranted (Griffiths, 2004).

So, philosophers have proposed several different types of projectibility – and many more specific versions of them – that can make a category into a kind. Often a combination of several types of projectibility is proposed to fully account for the kindhood of a particular category. In the case of biological species, for example, many philosophers hold that a species' kindhood consists in the regular co-instantiation of several properties due to their resulting from the same causal history (Godman & Papineau, 2020; Godman et al., 2020; Khalidi, 2018).

One reason why the projectibility constitutive of the kindhood of a category has been analyzed in different ways, is that *kindhood* is a relational notion (Boyd, 2000; Crane, 2021; Slater, 2015). Although I cannot fully defend it here, I subscribe to this widely shared view that no category is a kind *per se*. Rather, to be a kind is for a category to be projectible in a way that accommodates the categorizing strategy responsible for the recognition and use of that category. A categorizing strategy is the *rationale* behind the recognition and use of a particular category. Why categorize particulars in this way? What type of projectibility does one expect this way of categorizing individuals to provide? These categorizing strategies – and the projectibility expectations they entail – vary for different categories and for the contexts in which they are used.

Especially in the literature on scientific categorization, several philosophers have argued that the type of projectibility constitutive of a category's kindhood depends not only on the nature of the category itself but also on the categorizing strategy that is operative in the relevant discipline (Boyd, 2000; Slater, 2015). A scientific category can be a kind relative to the categorizing strategy that is operative in the domain of particle physics, for instance, or relative to the categorizing strategy operative in the domain of evolutionary biology. These disciplines categorize particulars based on very different projectibility expectations, and hence the type of projectibility that is constitutive of kindhood in these disciplines also varies.

But this relational nature of kindhood generalizes to folk categories as well, resulting in even more ways in which kindhood can be realized. There are many more reasons to categorize things and people

than just the projectibility expectations and epistemic practices distinctive of a scientific discipline or research program. One example would be the normative kind *anger*, which is a kind relative to the strategy of grouping emotional responses that are warranted in the same set of situations (Griffiths, 2004). Another example is a kind of tool, like *hammers*. The kindhood of this category lies in the fact that hammers are projectible with respect to the actual co-instantiation of several properties (e.g., having a handle, having a firm head, etc.), based upon which one can expect a hammer to be useful for a particular set of tasks.

Kindhood, then, is a relational notion. Some categories are kinds, but only relative to a particular categorizing strategy, including a set of projectibility expectations. The kindhood of a category lies in that type of projectibility due to which it accommodates the categorizing strategy responsible for the recognition and use of the category. In what follows, I support this relational view of *kindhood* by arguing that it explains both the context-sensitivity of generic sentences and the fact that both a descriptive and normative reading is readily available for some of them.

3.2 Contextualist semantics

Having introduced the notion of kindhood in the previous section, we can now return to explaining the meaning of generic sentences. Here is a first – still incomplete – account of the truth-condition of generic sentences:

> *Truth-condition 1:* A generic of the form "*Ks* are *F*" is true iff all *Ks* that – with respect to the determinable of *F* - instantiate a property that is partly constitutive of the kindhood of *Ks*, instantiate *F.*

On this account of the meaning of generic sentences, they express kindhood generalizations. The unpronounced *Gen* operator has the meaning of a universal quantifier but is restricted in scope based on the notion of *kindhood*. A generic like (1), for instance, says that all tigers that – with respect to their fur pattern – instantiate a property that is partly constitutive of the kindhood of *tigers*, are striped. Put differently, this sentence says that all tigers whose fur pattern is part of what makes the category *tigers* into a kind, are striped. In this example, "fur pattern" is the determinable of *F* because having stripes is one determinate version of a fur pattern.[7]

---

[7] That generic sentences (of the form "*Ks* are *F*") are restricted in scope in part based on the determinable of *F* has also been proposed in some form by Cohen (1996) and Nickel (2010, 2016). According to the semantic theory defended here, "Tigers are striped" says that all tigers *whose fur pattern* is partly constitutive of the kindhood of tigers, have stripes. The generic "Tigers bear live

Since the notion of *kindhood* only makes sense relative to a categorizing strategy, however, the content of a generic sentence is context-dependent. Recall that for a category to be a kind, is for this category to be projectible in a way that accommodates a particular categorizing strategy. Hence it is only in relation to a contextually selected categorizing strategy – and the projectibility expectations that it entails – that it makes sense to consider which properties are constitutive of the kindhood of the category. Recognizing this context-sensitivity, the truth-condition of a generic sentence can be spelled out more completely as follows:

> Truth-condition 2: A generic of the form "*Ks* are *F*" is true in context *C* iff all *Ks* that – with respect to a determinable of *F* – instantiate a property that is projectible of *Ks* in a way that accommodates the categorizing strategy *S* selected by *C*, instantiate *F.*

On this account of generic meaning, the generalizing content of a generic sentence depends on the contextually selected categorizing strategy, which determines the type of projectibility that is constitutive of the category's kindhood. How exactly a categorizing strategy is contextually selected is a large question that cannot be fully answered here. Generally, however, it is the intentions of the speaker that select a categorizing strategy from those that are available in the common ground, based on common beliefs and assumptions about the nature of the category.[8]

In many cases, there is only one categorizing strategy available in the common ground. This is the case for generics like (1) and (2). It is common ground that the recognition of folk species categories is partially based on the expectation that there is a set of properties – e.g., their appearance, diet, way of moving about – of which members of the same species tend to instantiate the same determinate version due to their sharing some other biological properties that are central to species-membership. Given this common ground, a speaker who utters "Tigers are striped" is standardly interpreted as intending to talk about the kindhood of tigers in relation to this categorizing strategy. When uttered in a standard context, this generic has statistical-explanatory meaning; the kindhood generalization it

---

young," on the other hand, says that all tigers *whose way of bearing offspring* is partly constitutive of the kindhood of tigers, bear live young.

[8] More specifically, I suggest that King's coordination account for demonstratives applies to the context-sensitivity of generics as well. On this account, "the semantic value of a use of a demonstrative d in a context c is that object o that meets the following two conditions: (1) the speaker intends o to be the value of d in c; and (2) a competent, attentive, reasonable hearer who knows the common ground of the conversation at the time of the utterance would know that the speaker intends o to be the value of d in c" (King, 2012, 102). For a similar application of King's coordination account to the context-sensitivity of generics, see Sterken (2015).

expresses entails that tigers tend to be striped and that this property is caused by some further biological properties central to species-membership.

Other generic sentences have two different readings, however, because two different categorizing strategies are available in the common ground. This is the case for descriptive/normative generics such as (5) and (6), due to PHILOSOPHER and MAN being dual character concepts. Take "Philosophers care about the truth" (i.e., (5)) as a first example. What type of projectibility makes *philosophers* a kind? That depends. On the one hand, one can conceive of the category *philosophers* as a professional category, and hence as a category that is recognized based on the expectation that people with the same profession will share a host of other properties as well. Considered as a professional category, the kindhood of *philosophers* is constituted by the set of properties that philosophers tend to instantiate due to their sharing the same profession. On the other hand, one can also conceive of the category *philosophers* as a social role, and hence as a category that is rather recognized so as to keep track of the social obligations of people (among other reasons). Considered as a social role category, the kindhood of *philosophers* is constituted by the set of properties that all philosophers are obligated to instantiate in virtue of these properties being required to adequately perform the social role of a philosopher.

The content of an utterance of (5) depends on which of these two categorizing strategies is contextually operative. In the context of the utterance, is the category of *philosophers* recognized as a professional category or a social role category? If *philosophers* is taken to be a professional category, then (5) says that all philosophers whose relation to truth is projectible such that it accommodates the categorizing strategy behind professional categories, care about the truth. Given the nature of this categorizing strategy, this entails that *caring about the truth* is one of the properties that philosophers tend to instantiate in virtue of their profession. If, on the other hand, *philosophers* is taken to be a social role category, then (5) says that all philosophers whose relation to truth is projectible in a way that accommodates the categorizing strategy responsible for the recognition of a social role, care about the truth. Given the normative nature of social roles, this entails that caring about the truth is one of the properties that all philosophers are obligated to instantiate.

These same points apply to "Men are tough" (i.e., (6)). Given the dual character conceptualization of the category *men*, this category can be considered a kind in relation to two different categorizing strategies. One strategy is to group people based on a biological property that one expects to be predictively and explanatorily fruitful; another strategy is to group people based on their normatively laden social role. Depending on whether (6) is interpreted relative to the first or the second strategy, it expresses either a statistical-causal generalization or a normative social role generalization.

Hence descriptive/normative generics such as (5) and (6) have two different readings due to a combination of two factors. First, the content of a generic utterance depends on the contextually

operative categorizing strategy, determining the type of projectibility constitutive of the category's kindhood. Second, it is common ground that the kindhood of categories such as *philosophers* and *men* can be understood relative to two different categorizing strategies. In a standard context in which no further information is available about the intentions of the speaker, a generic utterance about one of these kinds can therefore be understood in two different ways. That is to say, the reader of (5) or (6) recognizes the two possible ways of understanding these sentences not because they recognize that kind terms like "philosopher" and "man" are polysemous, but because they recognize that there are two different ways of understanding what it is that makes *philosophers* and *men* a kind, rather than a mere collection of individuals.

3.3 Contextualism supported

In this final section, I present two arguments for the view that the content of generic sentences is context-dependent, thereby also supporting a contextualist underspecification account of descriptive/normative generics.[9] One way to test whether a type of expression is context-dependent, is to check whether it passes the *Inter-Contextual Disquotation test* (Cappelen & Lepore, 2003, p. 28). To do so, one checks whether the expression "S" is such that one can truthfully assert an instance of the following schema:

(ICD) Even though it is not the case that S, there can be true utterances of "S".

According to this ICD-test, if the content of a generic sentence is context-dependent, it should be possible to assert the falsehood of that generic sentence while also asserting that the same sentence uttered in a different context is true. Here is an example in which this is the case, using the descriptive/normative generic "Philosopher care about the truth":

(21) If you look around, it's obvious that a vast majority of professional philosophers don't care about the truth. Unlike what many people believe, philosophers don't care about the truth. I know this really bothered my former supervisor though. She taught us that philosophers have a fundamental role to play in society, often saying to us: "philosophers care about the truth". This is true of course, but also an ideal that few philosophers live up to. Unfortunately, philosophers don't care about the truth.

In this example, the speaker first asserts the negation of "philosophers care about the truth" relative to a context in which *philosophers* is taken to be a professional category. In this context, the

---

[9] For more evidence that the content of generic sentences is context-dependent based on other tests, see Sterken (2017).

negation of this generic entails that *caring about the truth* isn't one of the properties that philosophers tend to instantiate. Yet even in this context, it is possible to also recognize that an utterance of "philosophers care about the truth" expresses something true when uttered in a different context, if in that context one recognizes the category *philosophers* as a distinct social role. In the context in which the speaker's former supervisor utters this generic sentence, it entails that *caring about the truth* is one of the properties required to perform the social role of a philosopher. This case shows that it is possible to both assert the falsehood of a generic sentence while at the same time asserting that there are true utterances of the same generic sentence in a different context. As such, (descriptive/normative) generics pass the ICD-test.

A second way to test whether an expression is context-dependent is to see whether it blocks so-called *Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Reports* (the IDI-test). Cappelen and Lepore provide the following example to explain this test:

> Take an obviously context sensitive expression, e.g., the first person pronoun "I". Consider an utterance of the sentence "I went to Paris" by Rupert. If Lepore tries to report what Rupert said with "Rupert said that I went to Paris", his report is false because the expression "I" fails to pick out what "I" picked out in the original utterance. The presence of "I" in the disquotational report figures prominently in an explanation of why the report is false. (Cappelen & Lepore, 2003, p. 34)

Generic sentences similarly block disquotational indirect reports when the context of the original utterance and the context of the report differ with respect to the operative categorizing strategy. Consider, for example, a case in which a conservative father is talking to his son at the dinner table, aiming to explain how men and women are to behave in order for them to perform their proper role in society. In that context, the father says: "Most men nowadays are weak. This is all wrong. Men are tough". The next day, the son is asked by his teacher whether he can list any of the properties that men tend to have. In response to that question, the child reports: "My dad said that men are tough". This report is false. The original normative content of the generic utterance does not carry over to the new context, in which the same sentence now expresses a descriptive generalization. As such, descriptive/normative generics also pass the IDI-test for context-sensitivity.

Both preceding tests support the view that the content expressed by (descriptive/normative) generics is context-dependent. Note, however, that Leslie could respond that descriptive/normative generics pass both these tests not because of the context-sensitivity of *Gen,* but rather due to the polysemy of "philosopher" and "man". It could be the case, after all, that descriptive/normative generics pass both tests for context-sensitivity because there are two different senses of the kind terms available, both of which can be selected by the context.

Yet this polysemy explanation is not supported by the evidence. If it had been the case that descriptive/normative generics pass these tests due to the polysemy of the kind terms, one would expect quantified generalizations using these same kind terms to also pass both tests. However, quantified generalizations about philosophers and men *only* pass these tests if one of the kind terms receives a focused reading, forcing a non-ordinary understanding of it. Without this focus on the kind term, there is no distinct normative reading of the generalization available and the test is failed. Consider, for example, the following ICD-test about the quantified generalization "Most philosophers care about the truth":

(22) If you look around, it's obvious that a vast majority of professional philosophers don't care about the truth. Unlike what many people believe, most philosophers don't care about the truth. I know this really bothered my former supervisor though. She taught us that philosophers have a fundamental role to play in society, often saying to us: "most philosophers care about the truth". This is true of course, but also an ideal that few philosophers live up to. Unfortunately, most philosophers don't care about the truth.

One cannot truthfully assert (22). It is inconsistent for a speaker to both assert that most philosophers don't care about the truth, while also asserting that "most philosophers care about the truth" uttered in a different context (i.e., by the speaker's supervisor) is true. The content expressed by this quantified generalization is not context-dependent in the way that is required to pass this ICD-test. It does appear possible, however, to truthfully assert (22) when the supervisor places special focus on the kind term, stating that "most [philosophers]$_F$ care about the truth". Yet this only provides further evidence that the content expressed by the generic "philosophers care about the truth" is context-dependent due to the meaning of *Gen* itself, since this generic passes the ICD-test even without a focused reading of the kind term.

A similar point applies when testing whether a quantified generalization such as "all men are tough" passes the second test. This quantified generalization passes the IDI-test only if one imagines that the conservative father places special focus on the kind term, like so: "Most men nowadays are weak. This is all wrong. All [men]$_F$ are tough". If the son later reports in class that "My dad said that all men are tough", this report is false. Yet this quantified generalization only passes the IDI-test due to the father placing special focus on the kind term. Without this focus, the father's utterance would simply be contradictory; there would be no normative reading available. The statement "Most men nowadays are weak. This is all wrong. All men are tough" is simply contradictory. And yet the generic "Men are tough" passes the IDI-test even without a focused reading of the kind term, providing further evidence for the distinct context-dependency of the generic formulation itself.

4. CONCLUSION

Some generic sentences, like "Philosophers care about the truth" and "Men are tough", have both a descriptive and a normative reading readily available. In this paper, I have argued that this is not due to the hypothesized polysemy of the social kind terms "philosopher" and "man", as proposed by Leslie. Even though these kind terms *can* be used with a distinct social role sense, this is only the case in contexts that force this non-ordinary reading.

Compared to explicitly quantified generalizations such as "Most philosophers care about the truth" and "All men are tough", a normative reading is more readily available for generic generalizations about these same kinds. Because generic sentences express kindhood generalizations, their content depends on the contextually operative categorizing strategy relative to which the notion of *kindhood* is to be understood. Given that descriptive/normative generics like (5) and (6) concern categories that are conceptualized in a dual character way, two different categorizing strategies are available in the common ground. In this way, the context-sensitivity of generics provides an alternative explanation of how dual character concepts can lead to some generic sentences having both a descriptive and a normative reading, even when uttered in a standard context; these sentences are contextually underspecified without further information about which categorizing strategy the speaker intends to be the operative one.

REFERENCES

Boyd, R. (2000). Kinds as the "workmanship of men": Realism, constructivism, and natural kinds. In Nida-Rümelin, J. (Ed.), *Rationalität, realismus, revision: Vorträge des 3. Internationalen kongresses der gesellschaft für analytische philosophie*, (pp. 52-89). Berlin: De Gruyter.

Cappelen, H., & Lepore, E. (2003). Context shifting arguments. *Philosophical perspectives*, *17*, 25-50.

Chen, H. Y. (2021). Contextualism and the semantics of "woman". *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy*, *20*(8).

Cohen, A. (1999). *Think generic: The meaning and use of generic sentences.* Stanford: CSLI Publications.

Crane, J. K. (2021). Two approaches to natural kinds. *Synthese*, *199*(5), 12177-12198.

Del Pinal, G., & Reuter, K. (2017). Dual character concepts in social cognition: Commitments and the normative dimension of conceptual representation. *Cognitive Science*, *41*, 477-501.

Diaz-Leon, E. (2016). *Woman* as a politically significant term: A solution to the puzzle. *Hypatia*, *31*(2), 245-258.

Falkum, I. L. & Vicente, A. (2015). Polysemy: Current perspectives and approaches, *Lingua*, *157*, 1-16.

Godman, M., & Papineau, D. (2020). Species have historical not intrinsic essences. In Bianchi, A. (Ed.), *Language and reality from a naturalistic perspective: Themes from Michael Devitt.* Philosophical Studies Series 143 (pp. 355-367). Springer Press.

Godman, M., Mallozzi, A., & Papineau, D. (2020). Essential properties are super-explanatory: Taming metaphysical modality. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 6(3), 316-334.

Greenberg, Y. (2002). Two kinds of quantificational modalized genericity, and the interpretation of bare plural and indefinite singular NPs. In Jackson, B. (Ed.) *Proceedings of SALT.* Cornell University: Cornell Linguistics Circle.

Griffiths, P. E. (2004). Emotions as natural and normative kinds. *Philosophy of science*, *71*(5), 901-911.

Hesni, S. (2021). Normative generics: Against semantic polysemy. *Thought: A Journal of Philosophy*, *10*(3), 218-225.

Khalidi, M. A. (2018). Natural kinds as nodes in causal networks. *Synthese*, *195*(4), 1379-1396.

Knobe, J., Prasada, S., & Newman, G. E. (2013). Dual character concepts and the normative dimension of conceptual representation. *Cognition*, *127*(2), 242-257.

King, J. (2012). The metasemantics of contextual sensitivity. In Burgess, A. & Sherman, B. (Eds.), *Metasemantics: New essays on the foundations of meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Krifka, M., Pelletier, F. J., Carlson, G. N., ter Meulen, A., Chierchia, G., and Link, G. (1995). Genericity: An introduction. In Carlson, G. N. & Pelletier F. J. (Eds.), *The generic book*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Laskowski, N. G. (2020). Moral constraints on gender concepts. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 1-13.

Leslie, S.J. (2007). Generics and the structure of the mind. *Philosophical Perspectives*, *21*, 375-403.

Leslie, S.J. (2008). Generics: Cognition and acquisition. *Philosophical Review*, *117*(1), 1-47.

Leslie, S.J. (2015). "Hillary Clinton is the only man in the Obama administration": Dual character concepts, generics, and gender. *Analytic Philosophy*, *56*(2), 111-141.

Liebesman, D., & Sterken, R. K. (2021). Generics and the metaphysics of kinds. *Philosophy Compass*, e12754.

Löhr, G. (2021) Does polysemy support radical contextualism? On the relation between minimalism, contextualism and polysemy, *Inquiry*, online first.

Nguyen, A. (2020). The radical account of bare plural generics. *Philosophical Studies*, *177*(5), 1303-1331.

Nickel, B. (2010). Ceteris Paribus laws: generics & natural kinds. Philosophers' Imprint 10(6): 1-25.

Nickel, B. (2016). *Between logic and the world: An integrated theory of generics*. Oxford University Press.

Reuter, K. (2019). Dual character concepts. *Philosophy Compass*, *14*(1), e12557.

Saul, J., (2012), Politically significant terms and philosophy of language: Methodological issues, In Crasnow, S.. and Superson, A. (eds.), *Out from the shadows: Analytical feminist contributions to traditional philosophy*, (pp. 195-216). New York: Oxford University Press.

Slater, M. H. (2015). Natural kindness. *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, *66*(2), 375-411.

Sterken, R. (2015). Generics in context. *Philosopher's Imprint, 15*(21), 1–30.

Sterken, R. (2017). The meaning of generics. *Philosophy Compass*, *12*(8), e12431.

Weiskopf, D. A. (2011). The functional unity of special science kinds. *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, *62*(2), 233–258.