

OBJECTS: LANGUAGE AND METAPHYSICS

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will examine the distinction between the semantic account of objects and the metaphysical account. I will start with the semantic, bringing to light its advantages, but ultimately argue against it. At the end of the paper, I will briefly argue for a metaphysical theory which I will accept in general. I will not argue very hard for my metaphysical thesis, but will discuss its advantages. First, I present a few preliminaries.

Ontological theories have to explain two seemingly very different types of entities, namely particulars and universals. Ontologies may include other types of entities, whatever they may be, but the distinction between the two categories above must be addressed. Included as particulars are objects, which are non-repeatable entities. Universals include properties and relations and are generally conceived of as being repeatable entities. There are theorists that reduce particulars to sets of universals, or vice versa. This distinction between objects and properties is something that is of great importance later.

It is often taken that the subjects of sentences generally denote objects (perhaps not always though), and that the predicate denotes a property or relation. In a quantifier based theory (to be explained later), objects are denoted by bound variables. A prime example would be “Socrates is wise.” “Socrates” denotes an object and “is wise” is the universal.¹ This general distinction provides much impetus for the semantic account of objects. To begin, I will go over a semantic theory influenced by Frege, and then quickly over Quine’s. Both succumb to similar ontological issues, in that they overpopulate the world with objects by including some entities as objects which do not seem to belong.

SEMANTICS AND OBJECTS

By calling a theory semantic I am not saying that it eschews the metaphysical importance of objects, or metaphysical facts in general. I am merely pointing out that it takes a certain approach to distinguishing metaphysical entities, in this case objects, through a review of language. This is also not to say that a metaphysical approach to objects ignores the importance of the linguistic side of things. The semantic approach holds linguistic categories as more basic and the metaphysical theory holds that ontological categories are basic. I will begin by giving a rough sketch of the Fregean semantic approach to objects, followed by a note on the Quinean approach.

Frege laid out his semantic theory of objects in various works, and it plays an important role in his overall semantic theory. Frege's theory of objects is fairly clearly stated in his "On Concept and Object" (Frege 42-55). To begin, Frege states clearly how he views concepts and objects. Concepts for Frege are predicables. In a footnote he further clarifies by stating of a concept that "It is, in fact, the reference of a grammatical predicate" (43). Objects on the other hand, which are signified by proper names, taken very broadly to include definite descriptions and singular referring phrases, cannot be predicated of anything. Frege is quick to point out that sentences containing two proper names, such as, "The morning star is Venus," have a different logical use of "is" than a predicative sentence, such as "Socrates is wise." He points out that the "is" in the first sentence is akin to the equals sign in arithmetic, while the "is" in the second sentence is a copula, or "a mere verbal sign of predication" (ibid). The first sentence could be translated into a predicating sentence as, "the morning star is no other than Venus," in which case the predicate is "no other than Venus," and not just Venus. This distinction between objects and concepts will be important later.

Frege's objects and concepts are quite distinct metaphysically. The metaphysical distinction is reflected in the logical analysis that is given to sentences. A concept is incomplete, just as a logical predicate is incomplete. A logical formula² of just a predicate "F" is not well formed, just as a sentence of just "is wise" is not, and therefore the entity "wise" is incomplete. The logical formula needs a variable, or constant, to be complete, and the natural language sentence needs a proper name, so the entity "wise" needs some object to complete it. This reflects the metaphysical distinction between objects and concepts. Concepts are incomplete by themselves, and require objects, which are complete in themselves, to complete them.

Why this theory is semantic, and not metaphysical, is that the distinction between concepts and objects is determined by how the terms used to refer to them cohere grammatically and logically. It should be noted that the semantic theory is not a form of idealism. It is not that reality is constituted by language, but it is apprehended through language (Miller 68). However, it is apprehended in a way in which linguistic categories (not grammatical categories) take priority over ontological categories.

The Quinean view is a very quick and easy change from the Fregean approach. It is made apparent in Quine's response to what he calls "the ontological question" (Quine 1). Quine wants to argue that one is not necessarily forced to include universals into our ontologies, and argues that we just need what is the value of a bound variable, and those are inherently objects.³ Quine takes Frege's semantic approach and applies

it specifically to logical notation. Not much is altered in this iteration of the semantic theory however, for what is to be taken as an object is what is quantified over. Similarly to Frege's proposal, determining the difference between objects and properties is done by a linguistic (artificial language) analysis of what is referred to.

Before I continue, I have a few notes about the intent of the semantic approach. The semantic approach is not a way of determining what exists. Quine lays his logical approach out as a measure of ontological commitment for a particular theory, but he points out that it does not determine what there is in a theoretical vacuum. What there is, is determined by the theory, and this is shown by what is quantified over within the particular theory.⁴ Frege's argument, as well, is not a determinant of all that there is. He leaves open, at least in his discussion of concepts and objects, the issue of non-referring proper names (such as names that fail to refer like phlogiston). What the semantic theory does is provide a way of ontologically carving up the world by linguistic categories.

There are many advantages to the semantic theory. Frege's theory provides a great base for further semantic work, beyond ontology, by easily supporting his thesis of componential meaning. The meaning of each sentence is determined by the meaning of its constituent parts, tied together in a proper logical form. "Socrates is wise," gathers its meaning from its constituent parts, the object "Socrates" and the concept "wise," with "is" as the copula representing predication. Another advantage is that it provides an easy answer to how linguistic categories connect to ontological categories, in that ontological categories are determined by linguistic categories.⁵

Although the semantic approach has many advantages it still runs into several very significant issues. Both versions of the semantic theory suffer from overpopulated ontologies. E.J. Lowe has pointed out that phrases such as "The grin on John's face is broad," or "John is wearing a broad grin," would require us to include grins as objects (510). I agree with Lowe that this is a very odd inclusion into one's ontology of objects, and it can be done for several other entities. One might wonder, for example, if events are to be considered objects because they have proper names.

Perhaps some paraphrase can be provided for the problematic terms ("grin," or the name of an event) but paraphrase is a rather controversial ontological tool and loses its usefulness with the semantic theory of objects. Consider the two statements about John's grin. They both could be paraphrased into "John is grinning broadly," which solves the problem of quantification over grins, or singular terms involving grins (Lowe 510). However, as William Alston has argued, along with Lowe, paraphrase is a symmetrical relation (Alston 9). If the paraphrase of the problematic subject (grin) is to be taken as having the same meaning, to express the same proposition, then it does not really save an ontologist from being committed to the troublesome entity. One proposition has a commitment to grins as objects and, if the other is equivalent, it must as well or it does not mean the same thing. If they are not equivalent then paraphrase should not be possible.⁶ More importantly for my purposes, because the previous argument is controversial, is that there is nothing within a theory of meaning to determine which paraphrase provides the correct ontology in terms of grins. Eliminating a term is not proof, under the semantic theory, that the term is not object denoting for there is nothing outside of the symmetrical relation of paraphrase to determine one's ontologi-

cal commitment.

One could argue that a stipulation could be added that would help shore up one's ontology. There is the famous Quinean slogan "no entity without identity," and Frege had a similar stipulation. This, however, seems to be a concession to the fact that a metaphysical grounding is necessary for objects. Also, this assumes that there are no basic objects. Basic objects are such that their identity cannot be explained in other terms, for it is basic. One would have to deny these basic objects, which would leave a vast amount of ontological explanation to do (Lowe 511).

Another problem that this theory must contend with is one that was pointed out back when Frege presented his theory of concepts and objects (the Kerry paradox). One can talk about concepts, (or in parlance that is more contemporary, properties and relations) such that they are referred to by proper names, qualifying them as objects. The original problem was presented in the form "the concept horse is not a concept," but it can be presented in more contemporary terms as "the property red is not a property," a clearly paradoxical statement that is applicable to all predicates.⁷ One may protest that this is a use mention issue; however that is mistaken because it is not the phrase "the property red" that is being referred to but the actual property of red. And, since objects are defined by the linguistic role of their referring terms the statement is true, because "the property red" is being used as a proper name, and therefore denotes an object. This leaves the semantic approach with a paradox, for one is trying to say something about a concept (property) but what they are referring to is an object. It should also be noted that in response to this problem Frege lamented at the issue and the failures of language, even asking the reader to cut him some slack.⁸

One could point out that I am making an assumption in that properties⁹ cannot be objects. This, however, is a result of the semantic theory itself. While I do believe that there is a metaphysical distinction between properties and objects, and something must be one or the other and not both, it is not being employed in this argument. The semantic argument holds that singular referring phrases are objects, and are not properties. If one remembers earlier, Frege argued that objects are complete and concepts (properties) are incomplete. It is the object that completes the concept (property). The semantic approach assumes this metaphysical distinction but runs into issues when one wants to discuss concepts themselves, and they therefore take the subject in a sentence, or are the value of a quantified variable.¹⁰

I believe it should be understood that the semantic approach to determining objects has some serious issues to overcome. Moving on from here I will discuss the metaphysical theory of objects, outlining E. J. Lowe's particular stance. Although the metaphysical theory of objects has some serious issues that I will not be able to address, I will make a few comments on its advantages.

METAPHYSICS AND OBJECTS

The metaphysical approach is obviously opposed to the semantic approach in that it holds ontological categories as separate from linguistic categories. Proper names, while they do refer to objects, do not determine objects. There is an underlying metaphysical fact about objects that make them objects, regardless of how we refer to

them. E. J. Lowe provides a position that is easily juxtaposed to the semantic theory, and provides a solid grounding for a metaphysical solution. I will start by reviewing his theory.

Lowe argues that the metaphysical fact determining objects is that of having a determinate identity conditions. What this means is that for any object x , it should be determinate that $x=y$ (Lowe 511). This, Lowe contests, means that grins are to be cut out of one's ontology of objects because it is indeterminate whether one's grin at 3 pm is the same grin at 4 pm. Ordinary language reflects both that it is one grin and that it is not (i.e. one may be said to have an infectious grin, meaning that her grin at all times is infectious, and one may say that a particular grin is wide.) Examining underlying metaphysical distinctions allows an ontologist to avoid the overpopulated ontology of the semantic approach.

Besides avoiding the issues of the semantic theory noted above, the metaphysical theory has several advantages. One advantage that I find particularly compelling about Lowe's metaphysical distinction is that it distinguishes objects and events. While it is clear that some events are obviously distinct, such as a particular evening walk of Kant and the Battle of Hastings, it is not clear that Kant's walk is equivalent to all of the steps that he took (surely there were some arm movements as well. And, there are the great thoughts he had. Are those also a part of his walk simply because he had them while on his walk?) Also, the metaphysical theory does not run into issues with non-referring terms. What these terms mean, and what they refer to are an important issue for all semantic and metaphysical theories, but it causes particular problems for the semantic theory that it does not for the metaphysical theory.

The disadvantage of the metaphysical theory is that it becomes less clear how our ontological categories and linguistic categories are connected. Is it merely a matter of chance that our proper names denote objects? This seems too fortuitous to be true. It could merely be a matter of evolutionary advantage, somehow referring to objects with proper names provides an evolutionary advantage and stuck, although I am sure that evidence from linguists would make this clearly false. The metaphysical distinction of objects does not provide an easy answer to how it is possible that language and world match up rather uniformly. This is not an issue I am going to take up here, for is far too complex to be added here, but this problem seems preferable to the paradoxes and issues noted for the semantic theory.¹¹

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I hope I have made a case for the metaphysical theory, at least a case against the semantic theory. Our understanding of ontological categories, while apprehended through language cannot be said to be determined by linguistic categories. While the metaphysical theory presented is not a perfect solution, it could still use some work, I think it represents the appropriate approach to determining ontological categories. It should be noted that I have ignored the issue of plural referring phrases. This is a problem for all theories of objects and is one that needs examination on its own.

NOTES

1. In logical form, $\exists x(Wx)$ It seems fair but potentially redundant to consider constants as object denoting, but if this is not true it is of no major consequence.
2. In first-order predicate logic
3. See Lowe 512 for further explanation of why this is so.
4. Quine “On What the Is.” Quine, in “On What There Is,” does provide an ontological limitation. He argues that definite identity needs to be considered existent.
5. We will see later that this is an apparent difficulty for the metaphysical theories.
6. Alston argues that paraphrase serves the purpose of avoiding grammatical indeterminacy but not of saving one from ontological commitment.
7. I say more contemporary terms because Frege used “concept” in a way that is different than its use today. Frege’s use of “concept” lacks the psychological connotation that it carries today, and is more akin to a mathematical function that connects inputs to outputs. For Frege, concepts, representing properties and relations, connected objects to a truth value by being completed by the object.
8. Frege says “It must indeed be recognized that here we are confronted by an awkwardness of language, which I must admit cannot be avoided, if we say that the concept horse is not a concept. (46)
9. I am employing “properties” as a catch-all to include relations and such.
10. It has been argued that an appropriate theory of properties can resolve this issue. In particular a trope theory, or theory of properties as particular instantiations upon which our idea of universals is constructed. It seems to me that such a theory runs against how we often talk about universals. If I were to say that “red is the color of light where the wave length is between X and Y,” I am not just predicating something of a particular commonality between color instantiations. There is something necessary to being the color red that is universal and must be accounted for in a concept of universals. This, however, is of no great importance to the major argument of this paper, and I am sure will be hotly contested. See Miller 73.
11. The connection between language and world is something that semantic theory must struggle with and therefore should not be too harsh of a criticism of the metaphysical theory.

Works Cited

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