Persistence and the Prospects for Determinate Meaning

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Late in the twentieth century, W.V.O. Quine vigorously defended the view that referring terms like "rabbit" were indeterminate in meaning. He reasoned that we could interpret such terms according to distinct views about how things might be individuated, and no fact could decide between competing candidates.[1] Philosophers have been no less vigorous in their attempts to refute Quine's thesis, usually by appealing to potential meaning determining facts that Quine disregarded. Noam Chomsky, for example, argued that Quine's naturalism was unduly restrictive in the sense that it constrains, without warrant, naturalistic inquiry into the domain of mental content. Insofar as the indeterminacy thesis rests on Quine's insistence upon the "reduction" of all real phenomena to physics, it fails to prove indeterminacy; for it is nowhere demonstrated or even argued that something like a concept or a thought must be explained in terms of "quarks and the like."[2]

Chomsky is surely right about the failure of explanatory reduction, but the idea that intentional facts supervene on physical facts does not require the explanation of intentional facts in the language of fundamental physics. Nevertheless, this more modest naturalism does require explanation of intentional phenomena in terms of something non-intentional. That is, intuitions about differences in intentional facts must be accounted for in terms of differences in neurological facts, or facts about objects, or historical facts, or *some* fact we may loosely call a physical fact.

What might solve Quine's problem is the idea that some ways of conceiving of things are more natural than others, where naturalness is a feature of just those properties that "carve nature at its joints." The more natural conceptions are

thereby more eligible to be the meanings of our natural kind terms. These notions of naturalness and eligibility go back to David Lewis,[3] but I will here be focusing on a more recent application by Ted Sider, which applies Lewis' account of natural properties to the question of personal identity to argue that the meaning of "person" is indeterminate. But, contrary to the case I will make here, Sider thinks that "person" is a special example of indeterminacy—that science and ideal philosophical analysis, plus the nature of the thing in question, do yield determinate meanings for a broad spectrum of terms.

The case for "person" notwithstanding, Sider is interested in refuting broad application of what he calls "the Schematic Argument":

1. There exist multiple candidate meanings for T, corresponding to the conflicting theories about T.
2. None of these T-candidates fits *use* better than the rest.
3. None of these T-candidates is more *eligible* than the rest.
4. No other T-candidate combines eligibility and fit with use as well as these candidates.
5. Meaning is determined by use plus eligibility.
6. *Therefore*, T is indeterminate in meaning among T-candidates corresponding to the conflicting theories of T, and so there is no fact of the matter which of these theories is correct.[4]

On its face, the Schematic Argument appears to be a contemporary advance of meaning skepticism, one that does away with Quine's dubious empirical assumptions and allows naturalness to play a role in what determines meaning. But, Sider thinks the argument schema would not extend to "rabbit" because, in the event that there are multiple candidate meanings for "rabbit," one candidate is more natural than the others and hence more eligible to be meant. So premise 3 will turn out to be false in that instance. I will argue that the Schematic Argument is sound for "rabbit."

I. The Schematic Argument Applied to "Person"

Consider premise 1 of the Schematic Argument: *There exist multiple candidate meanings for T, corresponding to the conflicting theories about T*. Sider is clearly thinking of conceptual analysis here, where "conflicting theories about T" refers to distinct sets of conditions that determine the extension of the concept in question. Now consider the metaphysical dispute as to whether persons are essentially psychological or biological entities. It is a dispute about how the concept should be analyzed, in part because our ordinary person talk shifts between two different (and incompatible) meanings: sometimes this talk seems to apply to bodies and other times to psychological characteristics. Sider writes:

> When someone dies, we say things like "Grandpa is gone"; but also we say, "There's Grandpa, there in the casket." The first corresponds to the psychological criterion of personal identity, the latter to the bodily criterion. …
>
> Something like the same shift occurs in our talk about cases of amnesia, and perhaps even in cases of extreme personal transformation due to mental illness or radical religious conversion. …
>
> Thus, usage in actual cases of death, amnesia, and radical psychological transformation does not support either candidate over the other.[5]

Once premise 1 is established, Sider's argument for the indeterminacy of "person" rests largely on his defense of premises 2 and 3: that ordinary use and intuitions concerning counterfactual situations involving the concept do not settle whether persons are body-persons or psychological-persons; and there is nothing more natural, and hence, more eligible, about either the property of *being a body-person* or the property of *being a psychological-person*.

Use pretty clearly does not settle the question. With regard to eligibility, Sider claims that these candidate meanings are equivalently natural in the sense that neither is a "perfectly" natural kind—i.e., they are not the sorts of kinds describable by a complete physics—nor is either property relatively more natural. This is to say that neither property has "a more 'complicated' or 'disjunctive' basis in the perfectly natural kinds."[6] Roughly, this means that *being a body-person* and *being a psychological-person* are each higher-level properties with roughly the same level of complexity when it comes to specifying conditions of satisfaction. This is supposed to be unlike the relative naturalness of *being blue* over *being grue*. "Grue," recall, "applies to all things examined before *t* just in case they are green, but to other things just in case they are blue."[7] As such, the property of *being grue* is more disjunctive, and so less natural, than the property of *being blue*, since "blue" applies simply to all things (at all times) that are blue.

Moreover, claims Sider, no other T-candidate, say for example, *being a body person or a psychological person*, combines eligibility and fit with use as well as these candidates. For one thing, the puzzle of personal identity from a first-person perspective suggests that in use we reject the disjunction. If I judge it possible to leave this body and inhabit another, that judgment implies that I am not my body. For another, the disjunctive property is by definition less eligible than either of the other candidates. Thus, if meaning is determined by use plus eligibility, the meaning of "person" is indeterminate.

This argument is persuasive, but it does not go far enough. The same sort of argument applies to rabbit talk, in virtue of the metaphysical dispute regarding persistence conditions of objects.

II. The Schematic Argument Applied to "Rabbit"

Quine argued that there are different sorts of things that might be meant by "rabbit" according to different ways of interpreting the "individuative devices" of the language—i.e., grammar. A contemporary spin on the argument suggests that the extension of a concept depends on metaphysics; more precisely, the extension of a concept depends on the persistence conditions of objects, also known as fundamental ontology. But, there is dispute about what those conditions ought to be. If you are what Sider calls an "endurantist," either of the "chaste" or "promiscuous" sort, objects (and so rabbits) are whole and enduring things. However, if you are a "perdurantist" or "exdurantist," objects are space-time worms or stages thereof, respectively. So, it would seem that, just as there are multiple candidates for our person talk corresponding to conflicting metaphysical theories about what it is to be the same person over time, there are multiple candidate meanings for our rabbit talk corresponding to conflicting theories about what it is to be the same object over time.

Sider would object that there is a disanalogy here. Premise 1 of the Schematic Argument covers just those cases where there are conflicting metaphysical theories about the nature of the thing in question. Where T is "person," the debate is about whether, when considering counterfactual cases where the psychology and the body split, persons go where their bodies go, or where their psychologies go. Thus the question is whether our person talk refers to body-persons or psychological persons. Though the debate surely takes place in ordinary English—i.e., in complete ignorance of abstract metaphysics—Sider thinks that there are distinct candidate meanings for "person" only if certain select theories of persistence are "correct." Worm theorists confronting a tale of bifurcation will agree that there is a worm "in the vicinity" of the person that instantiates *psychological-person* and a distinct worm that instantiates *body-person*. If worm theory is the correct ontology then, there are two highly eligible candidates and it makes sense to ask, "Which worm is the person?" Similarly, promiscuous-endurantists agree that there are distinct enduring entities instantiating *body-person* and *psychological-person*, and if so, there are two highly eligible candidates to be meant by "person." So, with respect to each of these ontologies, there are multiple candidate meanings for our person talk.

Not so, according to Sider, if one is a chaste endurantist. This theory, if correct, would preclude indeterminacy of "person" because no chaste endurantist would accept two *things* occupying all and only the same space at the same time, nor would she accept extant four-dimensional worms of any kind. Thus, since there is only one highly eligible candidate, no chaste endurantist would accept premise 1. Sider's general point is that premise 1 of the Schematic Argument will be accepted only when all disputants agree that the rival object exists, and the dispute comes down simply to which object we mean by T.

The contingency of premise 1 on fundamental ontology is one way to block the Schematic Argument's application to terms like "rabbit." If disputants must agree that there exists a distinct entity instantiating each candidate meaning for it to be a candidate meaning at all, proponents of rival ontologies will likely deny the existence of the sort of object the rival theory postulates; and hence in these cases deny the truth of premise 1 altogether. A perdurantist, for example, does not admit that one of the candidate meanings for "person" is *enduring body-person* because she does not allow enduring entities at all. Thus, the perdurantist need not admit that one of the candidate meanings for "rabbit" is an enduring creature of a certain sort. What is special about our person talk, Sider argues, is that it is ambiguous *given* a particular view of persistence.

But, this much agreement between disputants is unnecessary to establish premise 1 of the Schematic Argument. The Schematic Argument concerns conceptual analysis, and, as is evident in a number of other cases, the analysis of a concept does not imply existence. Suppose, for example, we were analyzing the concept of God. The ontological argument notwithstanding, surely one could advance an analysis that takes certain features of God to be necessary and sufficient, while admitting that such a being may fail to exist. Less controversially, bachelors would still be unmarried adult males even if the adult males had all been married off.

Nor does engaging in philosophical debate commit one even to the metaphysical possibility of seemingly rival candidates. If our rabbit talk is consistent with enduring 3D wholes or worm stages, and if there is some fact that might decide the issue—a highly eligible natural property, for example—then the metaphysical possibility of the "rival" is thwarted by that fact. This, in any case, is what Kripke argued with regard to cats: the fact that cats are animals means that no non-animal is possibly a cat.[8]

Nevertheless, there is a genuine dispute about how actual things actually persist.[9] And, since the dispute is metaphysical, no amount of physical evidence can help decide the issue. If this is right, there are consequences for rabbits. The perdurantist will likely insist *as a matter of ontology* that there are no enduring objects in the vicinity of the rabbits. Similarly, the endurantist will likely insist *as a matter of ontology* that there are no 4D worms in the vicinity of the rabbits. So, if the debate over fundamental ontology is really a debate, there is a true instance of premise 1 for "rabbit." Thus, *there exist multiple candidate meanings for "rabbit," corresponding to conflicting theories about persistence conditions of objects.*

Clearly, the argument generalizes over a wide spectrum of terms. Thus, the advocate of determinate meaning must claim that some other premise of the Schematic Argument is false in these instances, and it is relatively uncontroversial that use does not by itself distinguish between competing ontologies. This is surely the basis for Quine's arguments for indeterminacy, but the more recent treatments

of ontology just drive this point home. If premises 1 and 2 of the Schematic Argument are satisfied for "rabbit," perhaps among the candidate meanings for "rabbit," one is more natural than the others, in which case premise 3 is false.[10] This possibility would allow one to argue that there is a determinate meaning for "rabbit" after all, thanks to the relative eligibility of a single candidate. I will argue that eligibility is something of a moot point in this debate.

III. Natural Properties?

In "New Work for a Theory of Universals," David Lewis argues that "Putnam's Paradox" ought to be taken as a *reductio* for one of his premises—in particular, the premise that there are no constraints on reference beyond what we say and think (our theory of the world, as it were).[11] If it is a "Moorean fact" that "our language does have a fairly determinate interpretation," it is our job to look for another constraint, and natural properties are supposed to do the trick.[12] But, since any additional claims about the use of language just add more theory to the theory,[13] the additional meaning-constitutive facts must be facts about the referents themselves. The same applies for the users of a language or the causal relation between users and the things they are talking about. Natural properties do the job of delineating highly eligible referents and thereby do the job of determining the most eligible interpretation available. How might this work in the case of "rabbit"'?

As Quine characterized the problem, it looks like competing candidate meanings for "rabbit" are the properties of *being a rabbit*, *being a rabbit-stage*, *being an undetached rabbit-part, being an element of rabbit-fusion*, etc. If so, employing the notions of naturalness and eligibility, one might object to Quine's indeterminacy thesis with the following argument. Consider the relative naturalness of *being a rabbit*, and, say, *being a rabbit-stage*. Rabbit-stages are like grue things in the sense that *being a rabbit-stage* has application conditions that are more "complicated or disjunctive" than *being a rabbit*. You seem to have to know what a rabbit is before you can start talking about rabbit-stages. Anyone can think about rabbits, but to think about rabbit-stages requires a theory. So *being a rabbit* is more natural, and so more eligible, to be meant.

This argument, however, fails to appreciate the fact that rabbit-stages are only more complicated or disjunctive from *within* a theory that takes whole enduring objects to be the things that have the property of *being a rabbit*.[14] From another such theory (e.g., Sider's), *being a rabbit* is instantiated by exduring stages, a perspective from which the claim that the property of *being a rabbit-stage* is less (or more) natural than the property of *being a rabbit* does not even make sense. Rival ontologies propose which sorts of things have the property of *being a rabbit*. Thus, the candidate meanings for "rabbit," where candidates are a function of metaphysical dispute about fundamental ontology, must be reconceived.

Following Sider's characterization of rival candidates for "person," I propose the following candidate-meanings for "rabbit": *being an enduring-rabbit*, *being a perduring-rabbit*, *being an exduring-rabbit*, *being simples-arranged-rabbit-wise*, etc.[15] Now, is one of these properties more natural than the others?

A perfectly natural property is the sort of property described by physics. Since the properties in question issue from metaphysical theories, none is perfectly natural. One might be relatively more natural than the others, but the difficulty in deciding relative naturalness stems from what it is to be a relatively natural property. Relatively natural properties do the work of delineating the most eligible meaning among the candidates by being the property a thing has in virtue of being the "most well-demarcated" thing. The problem is that rabbits—whether perduring, enduring, or exduring—are well-demarcated things in virtue of other facts that set them apart from non-rabbits. Since our candidates are equivalently natural in presuming whatever else it takes to be a rabbit, what then determines which of these candidate meanings is most natural? Is an enduring-rabbit more well-demarcated than a perduring-rabbit? I borrow Sider's eloquent rejection of a most eligible candidate for "person": "this would be like saying that Victorian houses comprise a more natural kind than Tudors."[16]

One might argue for the relative naturalness of one of these candidates on the basis of how well the theory comports with our pre-philosophical intuitions. This suggestion departs from the idea that naturalness is simply a function of how things *are*. It posits that, since no other kind of fact could make it so, pragmatic reasons are *constitutive* of which property is most *natural*. As Lewis puts it himself, "that way lies the futile bootstrap-tugging that we must avoid."[17] So the claim that natural properties can solve Quine's problem is unfounded. If the meaning of "rabbit" is determined by use plus eligibility, it follows that the meaning of "rabbit" is indeterminate: there is no fact of the matter which of these ontologies is correct.

NOTES

1. Most famously in Quine's *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* and *Word and Object.*
2. Chomsky 92
3. See Lewis 343-377.
4. Sider, "Criteria of Personal Identity" 2.
5. Ibid. 10-11.
6. Ibid. 14.
7. Goodman 74.
8. This, in spite of the epistemic possibility prior to discovery. See Kripke 126.
9. In that sense, disputants agree about the existence of something that persists. The question is how.

10. I must, in the interest of brevity, ignore the possibility that premise 4 is false for "rabbit," but I do not consider this a serious threat to my argument.

11. A.K.A. The Model Theoretic Argument. See Putnam, 1980.

12. Lewis 371.

13. Which is, in virtue of being a theory, susceptible to innumerable permutations and so "unintended" interpretations.

14. Goodman makes an analogous point with regard to the interpretation of "blue" and "green" from the perspective of "grue" and "bleen." See Goodman 79-80.

15. Accounting for Nihilism here.

16. Sider, "Criteria of Personal Identity" 14.

17. Lewis 372.

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