*Metaphysics and Natural Language*

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IHPST

May 22, 2017

Handout 1

**Descriptive and Revisionary Metaphysics and Criteria for Objecthood**

**1. Ontology, descriptive metaphysics, and natural language ontology**

**1.1. The general characterization**

Ontology and metaphysics

Ontology is about the things there are; metaphysics is also about the nature of things.

Metaphysics

has as its subject matter what there is and the nature of things in most general terms

An ambiguity in the word ‘ontology’ /’metaphysics’:

* the discipline pursuing the most general theory of what there is
* the overall set of categories of objects described by such a theory.

**1.2. The aims of metaphysics: two projects**

The Stawsonian distinction (Strawson *Individuals*)

Descriptive metaphysics

aims to uncover what is reflected in our common intuitions, or implicit conceptual scheme

Revisionary metaphysics

pursues metaphysics for a particular purpose, the advance of science, simplicity or some reductionist project

Descriptive metaphysics in a particularly strict form

metaphysics that aims to uncover the ontology reflected in natural language, appealing not to ‘intuitions’ as such, but to linguistic intuitions, intuitions about the acceptability of constructions, sentences, and discourses

Kit Fine

‘Naïve metaphysics’ (‘shallow metaphysics’) vs ‘foundational metaphysics’

The ontology of natural language

What it is not:

the ontology a speakers accepts when reflecting upon what there is.

But rather:

the ontology a speaker accepts when using a language.

The ontology a speaker accepts when using a language may diverge from the ontology a speakers accepts when reflecting upon what there is, or when doing philosophy.

Issues concerning natural language ontology

- need not correspond to what there really is, but may be driven by cognitive factors, and as such may be mistaken

- may be driven by discourse-related factors, e.g. construal of objects for the sake of simplifying communication

- appears to be much richer than what is needed for a full description of the world

Examples of referential terms referring to highly derivative objects:

*the group consisting of John, Mary and Bill*

*the book John need to write*

*the building described in the house (which does not exist)*

*the state of being happy*

*the possibility that it might rain tomorrow*

*the direction of the arrow*

*the truth value true*

Two-level approach (e.g. Kit Fine):

First, natural language ontology: uncover the ontology that goes along with our linguistically reflected intuitions.

Second, the more fundamental ontology: think about whether the ontology reflected in linguistic intuitions can be reduced to more basic terms, to what there really is or to what is more fundamental

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**2. What is an object?**

**2.1. Language-independent and language-dependent characterizations**

Language independent characterization

E.g. an object is what has a boundary, can be counted, and has identity conditions, enabling it to persist over time and be identified across different situations (worlds).

Language-dependent characterization

Roughly, objects are the things we talk about.

Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment

‘To be is to be the value of a bound variable.’

More precisely:

An object is what an existential quantifier that is not in the scope of negation quantifies over

∃x Px

Quine’s criterion applies to quantifiers in a formal language of a scientific theory or a language meant to translate natural language sentences.

The Fregean criterion of an object

An object is what a singular term (in natural language) stands for.

Related to Frege’s context principle

Expressions have meaning only in the context of a sentence.

The function of a singular term in a sentence is to stand for an object (to contribute an object to the compositional semantics of the sentence).

The crucial question

What is a singular term?

Frege’s answer

A singular term is a term that can ‘flank the identity symbol’ and allows for the definite determiner.

Further criterion

Bob Hale (*Abstract Objects*):

A singular count can be replaced by a quantifier (under particular conditions), such as something.

Examples:

(1) a. The morning star is the evening star.

b. The direction of the arrow is the direction of the hotel.

(2) a Mercy is the property Stalin most perspicuously lacked.

b. Something is the property Stalin most perspicuously lacked.

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**3. Problems for the Fregean criterion**

**3.1. What is an identity symbol in natural language?**

Candidates in English:

* *is*
* *is identical to*
* *is the same as*

Two issues:

*Is the same as* and *is identical to* may express similarity rather than identity

(3) a. John’s car is the same as Mary’s.

b. John’s car is identical to Mary’s car.

c. John’s car is Mary’s car.

*Is* in uses other than as the ‘identiy symbol’

Specificational sentences

(4) a. What John did was kiss Mary.

b. What John is is happy.

c. What John needs is an unlimited supply of resources.

d. What John said was that he is tired.

e. The best player is Bill.

A common analysis of specifcational sentences

Specificational sentences do not describe the identity among two objects, but express question-answer pairs:

(4) a’. The question ‘what did John do?’ has as an answer ‘John kissed Mary’.

b’. The question ‘what is John?’ has as an answer ‘John is happy’.

c’. The question ‘what does John need?’ has as an answer ‘John needs an unlimited

amount of resources’.

d’. The question ‘what did John say?’ has as an answer ‘John said that he is tired’.

e. the question ‘who is the best player?’ has as an answer ‘Bill is the best player’.

General observation

Often natural language sentences that appear to involve reference to abstract objects are in fact specificational sentences, involving no reference to abstract objects.

A particularly prominent example: Frege argument for reference to numbers as abstract objects

Apparent number reference in specificational sentences

(5) a. The number of the planets is eight.

Frege:

(5a) is an identity statement, requires treating numbers as objects

*The number of planets* is a term standing for a number.

*Eight* is a term standing for a number.

*Is* in (5a) expresses identity.

Problems for Frege:

(5) b. ??? The number of planets is the number eight.

c. ???? Which number is the number of planets?

d. ??? The number of planets is the number of the objects in the box.

Alternative

(5a) is a specificational sentence describing the relation between a question ‘how many planets are there?’ and an answer ‘there are eight planets’, thus not involving reference to numbers as objects.

**3.2. ‘Nonexistent objects”**

Negative existentials with ‘empty’ subjects

(6) a. The golden mountain does not exist.

b. The poet John thought about does not exist.

c. The building described in the guide does not exist.

Identity statements with ‘empty’ singular terms

(7) a. The poet John is thinking about is not the actor Bill is thinking about.

b. The building described in this guide is not the building described in that guide.

Quantifiers

(8) a. There is someone John is thinking about, the women described in the novel.

b. There is something John is thinking about, the women described in the novel.

Conclusion

‘Empty’ terms are not treated differently in natural language from singular terms standing for actual objects.

**3.3. Singular terms and nonreferential complements**

**3.3.1. Predicates acting as terms for properties?**

Predicates as complements of copula verbs (*be*)

Quantifier replacement is ok, but predicates cannot figure in identity statements and do not allow for replacement by definite description:

(9) a. John is wise

b. John is something

(10) a. ??? Wise is not stupid.

b. ??? John is the property of being wise.

*Wise* stands for a property that is an argument of the *be*-relation?

Better:

*is* in *is wise* does not express a relation between individuals and properties, but has no semantic contribution or just specifies time of evaluation.

*Wise* acts as a predicate, not as a singular term standing for an object that serves as an argument of a relation expressed by *is*.

Alternative treatment of quantifiers

*Something* as a ‘special’ quantifier: a nominalizing quantifier that introduces ‘new’ semantic objects into the semantic structure of a sentence.

**3.3.2. Clauses acting as terms for propositions?**

The standard view

*That*-clauses stand for propositions that are arguments of the embedding predicate.

Propositions:

Truth bearers, shareable abstract contents, meanings of sentences, and contents of propositional attitudes

(11) a. John thinks that Mary is happy.

b. THINK(John, the proposition that Mary is happy)

Tests for singular terms:

(12) a. John thinks something.

b. ???? That Mary is happy is not that John is happy.

c. ??? John thinks the proposition that Mary is happy.

Infinitival clauses:

(13) a. John hopes to work.

b. John hopes something.

c. To live is to work.

d. ??? John hopes the proposition that he will work.

Conclusion

*That*-clauses and infinitival clauses do not act as referential terms

But what then is their semantic function?

**3.4. Singular terms, plural terms, and kind terms**

**3.4.1. Plural terms: reference to a plurality or plural reference?**

A common view (‘reference to a plurality’)

Definite plurals such as *the students* stand for objects that are plural individuals (sets, sums).

Problem

No equivalence with substitution by a singular term explicitly referring to a group:

(14) a. The students are numerous.

b. ?? The class is numerous.

(15) a. John counted the students.

b. ?? John counted the class.

(16) a. John compared the students.

b. John compared the class.

Alternative (‘plural reference’)

Definite plurals such as *the students* stand for several individuals at once (the individual students), unlike collective singular terms.

Truth conditions with plural reference:

(17) *The students P* is true in case P holds of all the individuals *the students* stands for at once.

**3.4.2. Terms for properties**

*Wisdom, happiness*: nominalizations derived from adjectives (*wise, happy*)

(17) a. Wisdom is admirable.

b. Wisdom is rare.

c. Wisdom exists.

The standard view

*Wisdom* stands for an object that is a property.

Problem for the standard view

No equivalence with substitution of *wisdom* by an explicit property-referring term:

(18) a. The property of wisdom is admirable.

b. The property of wisdom is rare.

c. The property of wisdom exists.

Alternative

*The property of wisdom* and *wisdom* stand for different types of objects: properties vs kinds of property instances (particularized properties or tropes).

*Wisdom* as a plural term, standing for the plurality of wisdom instances

(19) a. Instances of wisdom are admirable.

b. Instances of wisdom are rare.

c. Instances of wisdom exist.