*Philosophy of Language: Revisiting Events Semantics*

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**Handout 7**

**On the Ontology of Acts**

**1. Last time: Events in the verbal domain and the mass count distinction**

The mass-count distinction is first of all a syntactic distinction among nouns:

Criteria: plural, syntactic selection of numerals and determiners, amount nouns *number* vs. *amount, deal.*

The standard view about the semantic content of the mass-count distinction

Consists in different mereological properties of extensions

Singular count nouns: atomic extension

Mass nouns: homogeneous (cumulative and divisive) extension

Plural nouns: closure under sum formation of singular count noun extension

consequence: extensions of plural nouns are cumulative and have atoms.

A widespread view

Events in the verbal domain reflect the same semantic mass-count distinction

Achievements and accomplishment verbs:

have an atomic extension, or rather consist of closure under sum formation of an atomic set (repetitive readings).

Activities and state verbs:

have homogeneous extension (cumulative and divisive)

Problems for the standard view of the content of the mass-count distinction

Problem cases:

furniture-type nouns: mass nouns containing atoms in their extension

sequence-type nouns: singular count nouns with non-atoms in their extension

Alternative views of the mass count distinction

Mass-count distinction reflects ‘grammaticized individuation’:

* Semantic type distinction: Rothstein
* Syntactic distinction: presence / absence of classifier category: Borer

Selection of numerals cares about semantic type / syntactic structure.

* Also more ontological views of grammaticized individuation (my own)

General observation:

Verbs do not have the plural for event argument position (languages with pluractionality)

Adverbials are syntactically mass, numerals cannot apply to verbs in the absence of the numeral classifier *time*

As expected on the alternative views of the mass-count distinction:

verbs classify as mass, rather than dividing into mass and count.

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**2. The ontology of acts**

**2.1. The puzzle about acts**

Are these descriptions of a single act or of three acts?

(1) a. the act of moving the finger

b. the act of pulling the trigger

c. the act of killing Jones

Two positions:

1. monism: there is a single act, described differently

2. pluralism: there are different acts being specified (defined) by the act descriptions

Fine’s argument for pluralism:

The predicate *intentional*:

(2) a. The act of killing Jones is intentional.

b. The act of moving the finger was intentional.

c. The act I was speaking about was intentional.

The monists’ argument: *intentional* is an intensional predicate.

But *intentional* is not a predicate that would allow for *de re* and *de dicto* interpretations in (2a, b) and (2c) should have the same two ‘readings’.

Distinction between *descriptive* and *definitive* aspects of act specifications

(3) a. Smith’s loud act of singing

*Loud* is descriptive or definitive.

(3) b. Smith’s act of singing loudly.

*Loudly* can only be definitive not descriptive.

Recall: the definitive – descriptive distinction was already made in Kim (1976):

Event-constitutive and event-characterizing modifiers.

Fact:

Davidsonian event semantics does not allow for definitive functions of adverbials.

Question:

Was Davidson mistaken by taking adverbials to be descriptive rather than definitive?

Or is the definitive function restricted to action descriptions?

Fine

The nouns *act* triggers definitive readings of adverbials in its clausal modifier

Linguistic remark

Fine’s act descriptions involve clausal gerunds (imperfect nominals), usually reserved for facts (where everything in the fact description is fact-constitutive).

**2.2. Fine’s notion of a qua object**

For an object d and a property P, d/P is the object *d qua P*

D: base

P: gloss

Applied to objects:

1. The statue: The clay qua having a form

Clay: base, having a particular shape: gloss.

Note: statues are not rigid embodiments: permit the replacement of material.

2. John qua teacher

John base, being a teacher: gloss

3. The killing of Jones:

The movement of the finger qua pulling the trigger qua causing Jones’ death

Conditions on qua objects (Fine 1982)

Existence:

For an object d and a property P, d/P exists (at t) iff P holds of d (at t).

Identity:

Two qua objects d/P and d/P’ are identical iff d = d’ and P = P’.

Inheritance:

For an *ordinary* property A a qua object d/P has A if d has A during the time d/P exists.

Part:

Both d and P are part of d/P

Rigidity (essentiality): a qua object d/P is essentially the object d/P

Issues:

1. Inheritance:

Mainly meant for temporal and spatial location:

(4) a. The statue is where the clay is.

b. The statue exists as long as the clay has the statue-defining shape.

More problematic cases:

Properties of shape / form:

(5) a. The statue is tall / round.

b. ??? The clay is tall / round.

Properties of evaluation:

(6) a. The statue is elegant.

b. ??? The clay is elegant.

(7) a. The statue is a masterpiece.

b. ??? The clay is a masterpiece.

Other properties:

(8) a. The statue is new.

b. The clay is old.

John as a teacher: properties must be based on John’s being a teacher, not just automatically inherited

(10) a. John likes cats.

b. ??? John as a teacher likes cats.

c. John as a teacher has a lot of success.

Facts

Qua objects do not inherit all the properties from their base.

Qua objects obtain properties in other ways than by inheritance.

Composition of qua objects

1. Horizontal: d/(P & P’)

Sum formation – goes along with conjoining glosses

(11) a. The act John’s speaking loudly in the rain

b. The act of John’s speaking loudly and the act of John’s speaking in the rain.

2. Vertical: (d/P)/P’

(12) a. The acting of killing Jones

b. (The act of moving the finger / causing the shot to be fired) / causing Jone’s death

**2.3. Applications**

**Timing of acts**

The puzzle about the location of the killing Jones:

Is that act just where the hand movement or pulling of the trigger occurred or also where Jones dies?

Fine’s solution: conceive of the killing of Jones as a qua object:

The act of killing Jones = Pulling of the trigger/being the cause of the death of Jones

Jones death is an aspectual part (= part of the gloss), not a component part of the act

The by-relation

Doing one thing by doing another

The notion of a qua object provides a straightforward account of the by relation:

d/P: is done by doing d

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**References**

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