

Determinable universals

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”principle of ontological determinacy” (no indeterminate universals): ? : sct. 4.2 – ? : 52 calls it the ”total ultimate presupposition”

Gunky property-space: no lowest determinates

Heuristic: think of the determinate as a way of having the determinable.

Whenever we have different determination dimensions, we can picture property instances as points within a multi-dimensional space. Glueing together the spaces of more than one respect in which things may be similar to each other, we get “qualitative locations” with respect to two or more properties. Combining the determination dimensions of all fundamental properties, we arrive at a “property space”, in which every property bearer is uniquely located and within which indiscernibles share the same location. Within that property space, determinates are (or correspond to) subregions of their determinables, giving us an ontological account of how a determinate is a way of having its determinable.

The claim that there are lowest determinates (or *infima species*, as they used to be called) is a substantive metaphysical “postulate”, even if perhaps “universally adopted”:

“The practical impossibility of literally determinate characterization must be contrasted with the universally adopted postulate that the characters of things which we can only characterize more or less indeterminately, are, in actual fact, absolutely determinate” (Johnson 1921: 185).

The claim that the existence of lowest determinates is conceptually or metaphysically necessary has been made,¹ but it remains very controversial.

How are we to think of determinables without lowest determinates? If we think of the qualitative characteristics of (actual and possible) things as locations within a property-space with as many dimensions as they are respects of independent variation between properties, and think of the determination relation as topological inclusion with respect to that space, then the hypothesis that (for some determinable) there are no lowest determinates is modelled by the *gunkiness* of (some part of) property space. A (region of) space is gunky iff every part of it has proper parts. The gunkiness of ordinary space-time is a respectable scientific (Bohm (1957: 139) and Weinberg (1992: 230–240)) hypothesis. Analogously (for a posteriori realists), there is no antecedent (philosophical and/or a priori) reason to assume that property space is necessarily non-gunky. Gunky property space gives us a plausible ontological model for infinite higher-order vagueness. A precisification of a vague predicate will pick out a subspace of the part of the property space spanned by the determination dimensions of the determinable picked out by the vague predicate. If this process goes on infinitely, the subspace is gunky: every subspace has proper subspaces.

Vertical determination, horizontal constitution

If something is constituted by something else, it is a *manifestation* of the latter, an *aspect* of it, perhaps an *abstraction* of it. It is natural to take manifestations of other things to be “less objective” than them, “less substantial”, and it is a natural thought that these entities of a “lesser sort” do not *really* exist, that our ontological commitment is only to what grounds them:

¹Most notably by Armstrong (1961: 59), who already claimed in his refutations of phenomenalism that “it makes no sense to say that a physical object is light-blue in colour, but is no definite shade of light blue” (cf. also Armstrong 1978: 118)

...metaphysical reality is to be identified with what is “objective” or “factual”. The antirealist, on this conception, denies that there are any facts “out there” in virtue of which the propositions of a given domain might be true. The propositions of the domain are not in the “business” of stating such facts; they serve merely to indicate our engagement with the world without stating, in objective fashion, how the world is. As familiar examples of such a position, we have expressivism in ethics, according to which ethical judgements are mere expressions of attitude; formalism in mathematics, according to which mathematical statements are mere moves within a system of formal rules; and instrumentalism in science, according to which scientific theories are mere devices for the prediction and control of our environment. (Fine 2001: 3)

Example: discussion between Wallace and Scanlon about whether a candidate substantive value is something we have reason to advance or pursue depends on whether it is an instantiation of the property of intrinsic goodness of which it is a determinate. Do we value the determinate because of the determinable? Or is rather the case that the substantive value property is a determinate of intrinsic goodness because we value it?

No competition for causal powers

It has often been noted, in the case of determinates, that a determinate does not compete with its determinable for causal power. As is well known, Yablo (1992) used this to account for mental causation.

No need for ‘perfect’ similarity

Idea to be rejected: if you don’t do all the parts of the job, you don’t do the job. Contra (Campbell 1990: 83) – “A determinable is a natural kind with a more relaxed resemblance standard than the determinates falling under it.” – resemblance with respect to a determinable is not partial resemblance.

Determinates fall under the same determinable not in virtue of being *themselves* partially similar but in virtue of making the things that exemplify them partially similar – and they do this by making it fall under the determinable: the determinates “are put into the same group (under the determinable colour) and given the same name, *not* on the ground of any partial agreement, but on the ground of the special kind of difference which distinguishes one colour from another” (Johnson 1921: 176)

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