

# More on Ontological Commitment

Ontological Commitment in Medieval Logic: Winter School

Philipp Blum, December 13, 2016

## More on identity inferences: semantic relationalism

That names are individuated by coordination links among utterances is not really a new idea. In retrospective, it can be seen lurking behind much of what has been said in the last thirty-five years about the rigidity of proper names, i.e. the fact that they keep their reference constant across both actual and counterfactual circumstances. The question naturally arises how proper names can be bestowed with such an amazing capacity - and it seems a plausible idea that it is our use of them, and the intentions guiding that use, that make them keep their reference:

“What kind of linkage can insure that a name keeps the same reference in all possible worlds? [...] On the one hand names and other genuine singular terms must keep their reference in order for quantification to make sense. On the other hand, history is full of examples of names that due to confusion have come to change their reference. It took me many years to notice something that should have struck me immediately: What I show in this dissertation [(Føllesdal 1961)] is not that names and other referring expressions keep their reference in all possible worlds, I show only the conditional statement that *if* quantification into modal (and other intensional) contexts shall make sense, *then* names and other referring expressions have to keep their reference.

We have hence no guarantee that names keep their reference, we only know that *if* we get confused about reference, *then* we get confused about quantification. When we use a name, a pronoun or a quantificational variable, we signal that we intend to keep on referring to the same object, and we commit ourselves to do our best to keep track of it. [...] Constancy of reference is therefore not something which is guaranteed, but something we must strive for when we use singular terms. It is a norm that we are expected to live up to as language users.” (Føllesdal 2004: xxviii-xxix)

Intentions of coreference are sometimes even built in the very definition of rigidity:

“Kripke’s point [...] was that *given* that, as a matter of fact,

(2) Water is H<sub>2</sub>O

[...] and given that (Kripke points out) speakers *intend* that the term ‘water’ shall refer to just those things that have the same lawful behavior and the same ultimate composition as various standard samples of actual water (i.e. speakers have such intentions even when talking about hypothetical cases or ‘possible worlds’), it follows that (2) must be true in every possible world... [...] this ‘metaphysical necessity’ is explained by mundane chemistry and mundane facts about speakers’ intentions to refer.” (Putnam 1981: 46-47)

“Someone uses a substance term rigidly if, in talk of any counterfactual or hypothetical situation, she uses it to refer to whatever in that situation the same substance as the substance referred to by the term in the actual situation.” (Putnam 1990: 57)

“...a name is initially bestowed on a thing specified by description, and on each subsequent occasion is used with the intention of continuing to refer to what it has been being used to refer to.” (Burgess 1996: 20)

According to direct reference theories, coordination in both the temporal and the modal dimension is essential to our uses of proper names. It is *because* you are able to intend to refer to the same thing I do, whatever it is, that you are able to pick up a name from me you have never heard before and use it to make true or false assertions about a thing you have perhaps never encountered or otherwise heard of. It is *because* you can intend to use a name in the same way for the description of both actual and counterfactual circumstances that you are able to ask of this very person whether she might have won the elections.

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Kit Fine (2007) has argued that it is only by recourse to a semantic relation he calls “coordination” that we are able to explain the difference between the semantic behaviour of the free variables *x* and *y*.<sup>1</sup> To account for the facts that

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1. Kaplan (1990: 95, fn. 6) formulated a similar idea in terms of a *syntactical* difference: “I have come to think that two sentences whose syntax – perhaps here I should say, whose *logical syntax* – differs as much as “*a = a*” differs from “*a = b*” should never be regarded as having the same semantic value (expressing the same proposition), regardless of the semantic values of the individual lexical items “*a*” and “*b*”.”

1. there is no cross-contextual difference in semantic role between the variables  $x$  and  $y$ ;
2. there is a cross-contextual difference in semantic role between the pair of variables  $x, y$  and the pair  $x, x$

we must, Fine (2007: 22) says, reject semantical intrinsicism, the view that “the intrinsic semantic features of an expression, in contrast to its extrinsic semantic features, do not concern its semantic relationship to other expressions” and that “there can be no difference in intrinsic semantic relationship without a difference in intrinsic semantic feature”. We should rather develop a relational semantics, which attributes semantic values not just to sequences of expressions but to *coordinated* sequences of expressions. Whether or not two expressions are coordinated is a matter of how they represent, i.e. of whether they represent an object as the same:

“I would not wish to deny that the semantic relationship – of representing-the-same – might hold in virtue of a syntactic relationship – of the name being the same. It is, after all, a common occurrence that a semantic feature or relationship can hold in virtue of an underlying syntactic feature or relationship” (Fine 2007: 41)

This is the additional step I propose to take: two ‘tokens’ are coordinated iff they are ‘tokens’ of the same word. Coordination is identity.

## More on commitment and paraphrase: Ramsey

Frank Plumpton Ramsey argued in 1925 that “the whole theory of particulars and universals is due to mistaking for a fundamental characteristic of reality what is merely a characteristic of language” (Ramsey 1925: 13,405). In this paper, I want to reassess his arguments and the arguments of others to the same effect, elaborate their criticism of the traditional distinction between particulars and universals and see how much of it can be salvaged.

Quickly dismissing alleged differences between universals<sup>2</sup> and particulars of a physical or psychological sort, Ramsey first undercuts the most obvious way of finding a ‘logical’ difference, namely the contention that particulars must, whereas universals may or may not occur as the subject, as opposed to the predicate, of an atomic proposition. His argument to this effect is that

(**subj**) Socrates is wise.

and

(**pred**) Wisdom is a characteristic of Socrates.

“assert the same fact and express the same proposition” (Ramsey 1925: 12,404), while having their subject and predicate exchanged respectively. A distinction based solely on the difference in grammatical role between the subject and the predicate term in (**subj**) thus does not seem to cut any ice. Two lines of criticism immediately suggest themselves: First, (**subj**) and (**pred**) incur different ontological commitments and therefore cannot be synonymous (Simons (1991b: 152), Mulligan (2000: 12)); second, “Socrates”, the subject term of (**subj**), is not the predicate in (**pred**) (Simons (1991b: 152), Mulligan (1998: 12)). (**subj**) and (**pred**) are then analysed as “ $Fa$ ” and “ $Gb$ ” respectively, with relational, but nevertheless atomic, properties  $F$  (*being wise*) and  $G$  (*being a characteristic of Socrates*).

Unfortunate as this is for the friends of the distinction, both these arguments beg the question against Ramsey. Ramsey’s argument, as I understand it, is best presented as follows: We start with the sentence “Socrates is wise”, without any particular logical form attached to it. Someone who wants to ground the distinction between particulars and universals on a grammatical asymmetry between the terms representing them e.g. in the sentence under consideration has to claim that *at most one* of two possible precisifications of its logical form, namely “...is wise (Socrates)” ( $Fa$ ) and “...is a characteristic of Socrates (Wisdom)” ( $Gb$ ), gives the true ontological picture. Ramsey does not have to dispute that, *within* a theory of logical form, these two precisifications differ e.g. with respect to what they logically entail – but what, he asks, makes us prefer one precisification over the other and what makes us justify our conception of this choice as marking out an *ontological* distinction if, as Ramsey contends, they do in fact “assert the same fact and express the same proposition”.<sup>3</sup>

After this first critique of the legitimacy of the distinction, Ramsey (1925: 14,405) goes on to question the prospects of any distinction based on the subject/predicate model on an even more basic level. The subject/predicate distinction, he claims, is inapplicable to complex propositions. Surface grammar does not give us any ground to accept complex and relational universals, i.e. universals which occur in propositions the categorical structure of which they not uniquely determine.<sup>4</sup> If there were such a ground, Ramsey (1925: 14,406) asks, how could it then be the case that  $(\lambda x(aRx))b$ ,  $(\lambda y(yRb))a$  and  $(\lambda x, y(xRy))(a, b)$  represent (are logical forms of) the same proposition, given that they have different components?

This argument can be seen as questioning Russell’s notion of the ‘logical subject’ of a phrase. There is no canonical way, Ramsey suggests, to mark out one or several of the singular terms occurring in a sentence as being its logical subject or subjects. Because this choice is arbitrary, it lacks an ontological ground.

Interpreted this way, Ramsey may be seen as challenging Russell’s notion of “aboutness”, as exposed in the *Principles of Mathematics* as follows:

...in some propositions, there is only a single way [of analyzing them into subject and assertion]: these are the subject-predicate propositions, such as “Socrates is human”. The proposition “humanity belongs to Socrates,” which is equivalent

2. By ‘universal’ I mean here and in the following whatever it is that, if it existed, were involved, over and above Socrates, in the truthmaking of simple sentences such as “Socrates is wise”. I use “property” as the ontologically non-committing generic term (properties are semantic values of predicates, whatever their ontological analysis is). The arguments I discuss and put forward may be suitably adapted to apply to fusions or sets of tropes.

3. If we choose the first, as most of us probably would, we have to justify it against the second (this was the way Ramsey originally put the dilemma). If we choose the second, we have a symmetrical obligation – and the additional difficulty of explaining what *being a characteristic of Socrates* and, say, *being a characteristic of Plato* have in common.

4. Ramsey includes under this heading both relational and impure universals, the latter arising from logically complex propositions.

to “Socrates is human,” is an assertion about humanity; but it is a distinct proposition. In “Socrates is human,” the notion expressed by *human* occurs in a different way from that in which it occurs when it is called *humanity*, the difference being that in the latter case, but not in the former, the proposition is *about* this notion. This indicates that humanity is a concept, not a thing. [...] Socrates is a thing, because Socrates can never occur otherwise than as term in a proposition: Socrates is not capable of that curious twofold use which is involved in *human* and *humanity*. (Russell 1903: 45 §48)

Ramsey’s point is that “Socrates” (and Socrates) *is* capable of this “curious twofold use”, unless we have some prior assurance that it does not occur in (**pred**), or at least not as a term.

If we dismiss any distinction based on grammar, Ramsey asks, how are we then to explain (away) the intuitive difference between (what we unanimously take to be) particulars and (what we unanimously take to be) universals? In what exactly does this difference consist? Ramsey explicates it by what Simons (1991a) calls “variation classes”. “Socrates ...” seems to give us but one such class, namely the class of sentences in which “Socrates” occurs. “...is wise”, however, seems to give us two: the class of sentences of the form “*x* is wise” in which “wise” occurs as part of the predicate and the (wider) class of sentences of the form “*f*(wise)” (including “Neither Plato nor Socrates are wise”, “nobody is wise” etc.) in which it occurs in any position. Do we not, then, have the grammatical difference we were after? We seem so, Ramsey argues, only because we tendentiously interpreted the data. All we have to do to restore symmetry is acknowledging basic universals – he calls them ‘qualities’ (as opposed to ‘characteristics’) – and form “Socrates is *q*” for qualities *q* as opposed to “*f*(Socrates)”. For both “Socrates” and “...is wise”, then, do we have a wider and a narrower variation class.

Colin McGinn (2000: 55–56) has elaborated Ramsey’s symmetry considerations into an argument against the Quinean contention that predicates have ‘divided reference’, i.e. are true of things but do not denote any properties: “*a*” in “*Fa*” stands for a single entity of which we predicate a plurality to which “*F*” ‘dividedly’ refers; *Fa* is true iff the referent of “*a*” belongs to the extension of “*F*”. McGinn’s point is just that this picture is not forced on us: we may with equal right construe “*Fa*” differently, with “*F*” referring to a property and “*a*” referring ‘dividedly’ to the set of all and only the properties *a* has (its ‘secondary extension’). “*Fa*” would then be true iff the extension of the predicate is a member of this secondary extension of the singular term.<sup>5</sup> Again, we have a symmetrical picture: any semantics committing us to particulars may uniformly be translated into another semantics committing us to universals.

Ramsey tries to make us think symmetrically of particulars and universals. Instead of conceiving properties as ways of grouping individuals, as we normally do, he asks us to consider particulars as ways of grouping properties. If universals depend for what they are on the particulars that exemplify them, we are justified in declining the invitation: for we are then justified in holding that universals have what might be called ‘a qualitative character’, i.e. are more than just ways of grouping particulars.

## More on the reference principle: easy ontology

Competing theories of truth do differ in what they claim about the nature of truth (and even those who deny that truth has a nature are talking about *something*), even though every competent speaker knows that the concept of truth is governed by the following introduction rule:<sup>6</sup>

- (i) 
$$\frac{a \text{ is } F.}{\text{The proposition that } a \text{ is } F \text{ is true.}}$$

Does this mean that common sense acknowledges the existence of propositions as the referents of nominal clauses like “that *a* is *F*”? It all depends on what you mean by a “proposition”. If acknowledging their existence just means to accept (i), then propositions are acknowledged by common sense. If (i) is understood to introduce a new entity, an ordered pair or an abstract inhabitant of the third realm, however, common sense would wonder how something as innocuous as *a*’s being *F* can have such wide-ranging consequences. But in what sense can the existence of such entities be said to be a *consequence* of (i)? It is not as if “*a* is *F*”, or the fact that it is true, somehow bring eternal entities into existence. Whether truth has a nature, whether, if it has one, it’s nature depends on the nature of propositions, and what it means to say that truth has a nature, and what it means to say that if it has any, then so have propositions, are questions we cannot easily get information about; they cannot be looked up in dictionaries or encyclopedias, and they cannot non-controversially be ‘deduced’ from (some account of) some concepts we all possess.

5. A possible precursor of this line of argument may be found in the contention of Nelson Goodman (1977: 347–348) that discusses the view that “a predicate applies initially to a property as its name, and then only derivatively to the things that have that property”. He thinks this view is mistaken on the ground that nominalists might want to cut the middleman out.

6. Saying that the introduction rule (i) “governs” the concept of truth is not to say that it may always non-contradictorily be applied, nor is it to say that (i) is anything more than truth-preserving. That it is nevertheless so governed is shown by the fact that the Liar paradox strikes us as a *paradox*.

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