

The ontological status of minimal entities

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What I am going to do in this paper

- The nature of **minimal** or **pleonastic** entities has been investigated by - among others - **Schiffer** (1996, 2003), **Thomasson** (2001, 2007) and **Hofweber** (2005, 2006, 2007).
- Roughly speaking, minimal entities are those that **fall under minimal notions**, where the latter are defined in terms of only **platitudinous principles**. For instance, the following platitude characterizes the minimal notion of **a fact**:
S if and only if it is **a fact** that S.
- In this paper, I first provide a precise characterization of **the minimal notions of a fact, a property and a proposition** inspired to **Horwich's minimal notion of truth**. Briefly, all these notions have the essential function of **facilitating the explicit formulation of generalizations in situations of partial information**.
- I then argue that we are **committed to the existence** of the entities that fall under the **minimal notions of a fact, a property and a proposition**.
- Finally, I investigate the **ontological status** of these minimal entities. The question I intend to answer is:
Are these entities **fully existent** (like cats, dogs, electrons, you and me) or are they something we just **project onto the world** by our linguistic practices?

I argue that the latter alternative is true: minimal entities are just **linguistic posits** - exist only **intrinsically to language**.

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1. Schiffer's pleonastic entities

There are facts

- Ontological questions seem to have **trivial** answers in certain cases.
- Consider the question: **are there facts?**
This is a possible answer: Yes, there are facts. For instance, suppose that:

[1] Today is Friday.

From [1], we can innocently infer:

[2] **It is a fact** that today is Friday.

Then, from [2], we can infer:

[3] **There is a fact**; namely, that today is Friday.

- Inferences like these appear **trivially correct** - we can surely move from [1] to [3] **in ordinary discourse**.
So, after all, **there are facts!**

1.1 Schiffer's pleonastic entities

There are properties

- Consider now the question: **are there properties?**

Answer: Yes, there are properties. For instance, suppose:

[1] This apple is red.

From [1] we can innocently infer:

[2] This apple has **the property of being red**.

From [2], we can then infer:

[3] **The property of being red** is instantiated by this apple.

Finally, from [3], we straightforwardly derive:

[4] **There is** something instantiated by this apple; namely, **the property of being red**.

- This inference appears **trivially correct** - we ordinarily accept inferences of this type.

So, after all, **there are properties!**

1.2 Schiffer's pleonastic entities

There are propositions

- Consider now the question: **are there propositions?**
The answer may be: Yes, there are propositions. For instance, suppose that:

[1] Today is Friday.

From [1], we can infer:

[2] **The proposition** that today is Friday is true.

And from [2], we can in turn infer:

[3] **There is something true**; namely, **the proposition that today is Friday**.

- Inferences like these appear **trivially correct** - we can surely move from [1] to [3] in ordinary discourse.
So **there are propositions!**

1.3 Schiffer's pleonastic entities

Something-from-nothing transformations

- Schiffer (1996, 2003) calls inferences like those just considered **something-from-nothing** transformations.
- These inferences are such that we move from one statement in which **there is no reference to an entity of a given type** - for example, a proposition (e.g. 'Today is Friday') - to another statement in which **there is a reference to an entity of that type** (e.g. 'There is something true; namely, the proposition that today is Friday').
- For Schiffer, we can use something-from-nothing transformations to refer to entities of different sort - e.g. **propositions, properties, facts, events, states, truths**, and probably many others.
- Hofweber 2005 notices that the something-from-nothing inferences include at least **two consequent steps**:
 - the step of **Nominalization**, at which we infer a sentence including **a noun phrase** (e.g. from 'today is Friday', we infer '**The-proposition-that-today-is-Friday is true**');
 - and the step of **Quantification**, at which we infer an **existential generalization** (e.g. from 'The-proposition-that-today-is-Friday is true', we infer '**There is something true; namely, the proposition that today is Friday**').

1.4 Schiffer's pleonastic entities

Pleonastic entities

- Schiffer (1996, 2003) broadly characterizes pleonastic entities as those whose existence is typically secured by something-from-nothing transformations.
- For Schiffer, pleonastic entities have no hidden and substantial nature waiting to be uncovered. The essential truths about them are fully determined *a priori* by the linguistic practices that are constitutive of the concepts of them together with other necessary *a priori* truths applicable to things of any kind (such as if $x = y$, x and y share all properties).
- What *a priori* principles define the pleonastic concepts of, for instance, property, fact and proposition?
At least, the platitudinous schemata appealed to at the step of Nominalization (and intermediate steps).
- For instance, for properties, at least these schemata:
 - [i] a is P iff a has the property of being P ;
 - [ii] a has the property of being P iff the property of being P is instantiated by a .
- For facts and propositions, respectively, at least the following schema:
 - [iii] S iff it is a fact that S ;
 - [iv] S iff the proposition that S is true.

Where ' a ' functions syntactically as a singular term, ' P ' functions syntactically as predicate, and ' a is P ' and ' S ' satisfy at least superficial constraints of truth-aptitude.

1.5 Schiffer's pleonastic entities

What's the function of the something-from-nothing transformations?

- Schiffer does **not** answer this general question.
- Notice that the principles that ground the something-from-nothing transformations are **not metaphysically substantive**, such as, for instance:
 - [*] a is P iff a exemplifies the **universal P -ness**;
 - [**] the proposition that a is P is true iff the individual a and the property P , in **the set-theoretic construction $\langle\langle a \rangle, P \rangle$** , are such that a exemplifies P .
- If the something-from-nothing transformations were grounded in **substantive** principles of this type, these inference would **hardly** appear **trivially** correct. For instance, those who **reject** principles like [*] and [**] would also **reject** the relevant something-from-nothing inferences.
- But if no **substantive** principle grounds something-from-nothing transformations, these inferences are ineffective to provide **metaphysical explanations**. For instance, by appealing to [*] **we can explain the phenomenon of attribute agreement** (at least, many philosophers think so). But principles like:
 - [i] a is P iff a has the property of being P ,
 - [ii] a has the property of being P iff the property of being P is instantiated by a ,can **hardly** explain the phenomenon of attribute agreement, or anything else.
- So, **what's the function of the something-from-nothing transformation?**

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2. Extending Horwich's characterization of minimal truth

Horwich's minimal truth and something-from-nothing transformations

- I want to suggest that an important function of platitudinous principles like [i]-[iv], and of the something-from-nothing inferences that they sustain, is that of **helping to formulate explicitly blind generalizations** (or **generalizations in situations of lack of information**).
- According to **Horwich 1998**, this function is proper to the **Equivalence Schema**, that is:

[ES] S iff it is true that S (or: S iff that S is true),

which defines **the minimal notion of truth**.

- Minimal truth is no **substantive property**. For instance, it is neither **correspondence** with independent reality nor **warrant** or **justification** of any sort. Minimal truth possesses **no deep nature** awaiting for being discovered. Minimal truth is, so to say, just **a logical device**, grounded in [ES], with the essential function of allowing the explicit formulation of blind generalizations.
- I suggest that this very same function characterizes essentially what I call the **minimal notions of a fact, a proposition and a property**.
- Minimal notions are - in this sense - **precisifications** of corresponding **pleonastic notions**.

2.1 Extending Horwich's characterization of minimal truth

[ES] as a device for generalizing

- Suppose, I want to endorse what John has asserted, though I do not know what it is. (If I knew it, I could just re-assert it). Notice that I cannot state:
 $\exists x(x \text{ \& } x \text{ has been asserted by John}).$

For this is no well-formed sentence.

- I can however express my belief with a turn of phrase that alludes to a potentially infinite disjunction of conjunctions. For instance:

(That Hegel was tall has been asserted by John and Hegel was tall) or (that Melbourne is cold has been asserted by John and Melbourne is cold) or ... and so on.

- To obtain an explicit generalization from this turn of phrase I can apply:

[ES] S if that S is true.

First, I re-formulate the original turn of phrase as:

(That Hegel was tall has been asserted by John and that Hegel was tall is true) or (that Melbourne is cold has recently been by John and that Melbourne is cold is true) or ... and so on.

Then, I express the same content by using this explicit generalization:

$\exists x(x \text{ has been asserted by John \& } x \text{ is true}).$

Colloquially: There is something true that has been asserted by John.

2.2 Extending Horwich's characterization of minimal truth

Other platitudes as devices for generalizing: (a) platitudes about propositions

- Suppose, again, I want to express my belief that **there is something that John has asserted**, though **I do not know what it is**. I use the following **turn of phrase**:
(That Hegel was tall has been asserted by John and Hegel was tall) or (that Melbourne is cold has been asserted by John and Melbourne is cold) or ... and so on.
- A way to obtain an **explicit generalization** from it makes use of the platitude:
[iv] S iff **the proposition that S is true**.

As Horwich and Schiffer recognize, [iv] is just the **explicit** formulation of [ES].

For, in [ES], the **that-clause** (i.e. 'that S') is meant to **refer to a proposition** (i.e. the proposition that S). So, the procedure is the same as before, with the only difference that, now, **it is explicit that I refer to propositions**.

First, I re-formulate the original turn of phrase into:

(That Hegel was tall has been asserted by John and **the proposition that Hegel was tall is true**) or (that Melbourne is cold has recently been by John and **the proposition that Melbourne is cold true**) or ... and so on.

Then, I express the same content by this **well-formed** generalization:

$\exists x(x \text{ has been asserted by John} \ \& \ x \text{ is true})$.

Colloquially: There is a true proposition that has been asserted by John.

2.3 Extending Horwich's characterization of minimal truth

Other platitudes as devices for generalizing: (b) platitudes about facts

- Suppose, I want to express my belief that **there is something that John does know**, though **I do not know what it is**.

I can express my belief with the following **turn of phrase** that **alludes** to a **potentially infinite** disjunction of conjunctions:

(Hegel was tall and this is known by John) or (Melbourne is cold and this is known by John) or ... and so on.

Then, by appealing to the platitude:

[iii] S iff **it is a fact that S** (or: S iff **that S is a fact**),

I can **change** that turn of phrase into:

(**That** Hegel was tall **is fact** and this is known by John) or (**that** Melbourne is cold **is fact** and this is known by John) or ... and so on.

I can now express the same content through the following **explicit** generalization:

$\exists x(x$ **is a fact** & x is known by John).

More colloquially: There is a fact that John knows.

2.4 Extending Horwich's characterization of minimal truth

Other platitudes as devices for generalizing: (c) platitudes about properties

- Suppose I want to say is that **vegemite and marmite share some property or feature**, though I do not know what property or feature.

A way to do it is to use a **turn of phrase** that alludes to an **infinite** disjunction of conjunctions. For instance:

(Vegemite is boldness-curative and marmite is boldness-curative) or (vegemite is shyness-curative and marmite is shyness curative) or ... and so on.

By appealing to the platitudes:

[i] a is P iff a **has the property of being P** ,

[ii] a **has the property of being P** iff the property of being P is instantiated by a ,

I can re-formulate the above turn of phrase into:

(**the property of being boldness-curative is instantiated by** vegemite and **the property of being boldness-curative is instantiated by** marmite) or (**the property of being shyness-curative is instantiated by** vegemite and **the property of being shyness-curative is instantiated by** marmite) or ... and so on.

The same content can now be expressed by this **explicit** generalization:

$\exists x(x$ **is instantiated by** vegemite & x **is instantiated by** marmite).

More informally: vegemite and marmite share some property.

2.5 Extending Horwich's characterization of minimal truth

A precise characterization of minimal entities

- In analogy with the characterization of Horwich's minimal truth, I propose to characterize the **minimal notions** of **a property**, **a fact** and **a proposition only** *via* the relevant platitudes that, in conjunction with ordinarily accepted logical rules, allow the **explicit** formulations of **blind generalizations**.
- Precisely, the following schemata characterize the **minimal** notion of **a property**:
 - [i] a is P iff a has the property of being P ;
 - [ii] a has the property of being P iff the property of being P is instantiated by a .

These schemata characterize, respectively, the **minimal** notion of **a fact** and of **a proposition**:

- [iii] S iff it is a fact that S ;
 - [iv] S iff the proposition that S is true.
- Possibly, further minimal notions could be characterized along the same lines.
 - **Minimal entities** are those that fall under **minimal notions** characterized as above. Minimal entities **have no features other than those that can be attributed to them *a priori* on the grounds of the platitudinous schemata that define them**.
 - **Minimal** entities do not coincide with **pleonastic** entities in Schiffer's sense, which are theoretically **thicker**. (For instance, Schiffer believes that an *a priori* principle definitive of pleonastic properties says that the latter are **not in space and time**).

2.6 Extending Horwich's characterization of minimal truth

Some remarks

- Horwich is a **monist** about truth. For him, **the only workable** notion of truth we can characterize is **the minimal notion**.

In contrast, I believe that we can be **pluralist** about the notions a **fact**, a **property** and a **proposition**. In the sense that we can characterize **non-minimal** versions of these notions, that apply in **specific areas of discourse**, by adding further *a priori* principles to [i] - [iv].

(In this way we could for instance characterize the notion of a **physical** fact, which is certainly more substantive than that of a **minimal** fact).

- This form of pluralism is somehow analogous to **Wright's pluralism about truth**, according to which we possess **the minimal notion of truth** and also **more substantive notions of truth** suitable to different areas of discourse.
- But the analogy is **imperfect**. For Wright seems to think of **the minimal notion of truth** as the one characterized in terms of **all a priori** principles that any competent speaker is typically requested to accept to use the truth-predicate correctly.
In contrast, the minimal notions characterized before are defined on **only some** of the *a priori* principles that any competent speaker is typically requested to accept to use the expressions '**fact**', '**property**' and '**proposition**' correctly.
(For instance, platitudes about **propositional attitudes** have not been included).

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3. We are committed to the existence of minimal entities

The grounds of the something-from-nothing inferences

- We can now say that **minimal** (and not only **pleonastic**) **entities** are introduced, in ontology, *via* **something-from-nothing inferences**.
- As we know, the something-from-nothing inferences include at least **two consequent steps**:
 - the step of **Nominalization**, at which we infer a sentence embedding **a noun-phrase**.
 - and the step of **Quantification**, at which we infer an **existential generalization**.
- In the something-from-nothing inferences introducing minimal **facts**, **propositions** and **properties**, the step of **Nominalization** (and intermediate steps) can be justified on the basis of the *a priori* principles [i]-[iv] that characterize essentially **these minimal entities**.

These principles are plausibly **conceptually true**.
- The step of **Quantification**, in the same something-from-nothing transformations, can be justified on the grounds of **the logical function that these minimal entities fulfil** - i.e. allowing the formulation of blind generalizations.

In other words, the fulfilment of this function requires that **we can quantify over these minimal entities**.

3.1 We are committed to the existence of minimal entities

The logical schema that underlies the step of Quantification

- The following inferential schemata **underlie** the steps of **Quantification** in the something-from-nothing inference that introduce **facts**, **propositions** and **properties**:

It is a fact that S

$\therefore \exists x(x = \text{that } S \ \& \ x \text{ is a fact})$

The proposition that S is true

$\therefore \exists x(x = \text{the proposition that } S \ \& \ x \text{ is true})$

The property of being *P* is instantiated by *a*

$\therefore \exists x(x = \text{the property of being } P \ \& \ x \text{ is instantiated by } a).$

- This **more general** schema underlies **all** above schemata:

$[E] \ b \text{ is } Q \ \vdash \ \exists x(x=b \ \& \ x \text{ is } Q).$

(Where '*b*' functions **syntactically** as a **singular term**, '*Q*' functions **syntactically** as **predicate**, and '*b is Q*' satisfies at least **superficial constraints of truth-aptitude**).

- $[E]$ is a theorem of predicate logic with identity. We could drop $[E]$ if we appealed to an appropriate **free logic**.

Yet, if we did so, **minimal entities would no longer have the function of allowing the explicit formulation of existential generalizations**. For fulfilling that function requires accepting this schema as valid:

$[E^*] \ b \text{ is } Q \ \vdash \ \exists x(x \text{ is } Q).$

If we accept $[E^*]$, once we introduce the symbol of identity ('='), **we have to accept $[E]$ too**.

3.2 We are committed to the existence of minimal entities

We are *prima facie* committed to the existence of minimal entities

- It follows from Quine 1948's criterion of ontological commitment that:
(OC) Accepting a (first-order) sentence S of a language L as true carries commitment to given entities iff these entities must be included among those over which the variables of L range in order for S to be true.
- On (OC), we appear often committed to the existence of minimal entities. Precisely, whenever we can carry on a something-from-nothing inference starting from a basic sentence that we accept as true.
- For instance, if we accept as true that:
[1] Today is Friday,
we have to accept as true that:
[2] It is a fact that today is Friday.
But, then, we have to accept as true that:
[3] $\exists x(x = \text{that today is Friday} \ \& \ x \text{ is a fact})$.
In order for [3] to be true, a fact must be counted among the entities over which 'x' ranges, as [3] says that x is a fact. So, if we accept that it's true that today is Friday, we must accept that a fact exists.
- Is there any way to elude ontological commitment to minimal entities?
Of course, one might try to reject (OC) even if it appears strongly intuitive. But one would need independent reasons for doing it. I am not going to explore this possibility in this paper.

3.3 We are committed to the existence of minimal entities

Unsuccessful attempts to escape ontological commitment to minimal entities

- Couldn't we be **error-theorists** about **minimal entities**? **Only with great difficulty.**

Error-theorists about X-entities (e.g. numbers, moral properties) typically claim that the sentences about X-entities entailing that X-entities exist **are all false, as no X-entity exists** (e.g. no epistemology of X-entities is possible, or X-entities are too odd to exist).

If a sentence in which there is a reference to a **minimal** entity is **false** - via *modus tollens* - the **basic sentence** that originates the relevant something-from-nothing inference must be **false** too. But, in many cases, we are **reluctant** to accept so. For example, if we claim that ' $\exists x(x = \text{that today is Friday} \ \& \ x \text{ is a fact})$ ' **is false**, we are committed to claiming that 'Today is Friday' **is false!**

- Couldn't we be **fictionalists** about **minimal entities**? **Probably not.**

Fictionalists about X-entities typically claim that when one utters 'there is an X-entity', one is not really **asserting** that there is an X-entity. Yet when we **assert** a **basic sentence** that yields a **something-from-nothing inference**, we are committed to **asserting** a sentence that says that there are **minimal entities**, as the former sentence **logically entails** the latter.

- Couldn't we be **non-cognitivist** about **minimal entities**? **Plausibly not.**

The non-cognitivist about sentences speaking of X-entities typically claims that these sentences are not **truth-apt**. The problem is that the sentences about minimal entities are **logically deducible** from other sentences, so they must be **truth-apt** at least in a **deflationary** sense. (Perhaps, **deflationary truth-aptitude** carries no ontological commitment, **but we need a convincing argument to show it!**)

3.4 We are committed to the existence of minimal entities

Couldn't we appeal to substitutional quantification?

- Hofweber 2005 and 2007 suggests that when we use terms that **apparently** refer to pleonastic or minimal entities, **we do not mean that these entities really exist**. So, the proper reading of the quantifier used at the step of **Quantification** should be, not **objectual**, but rather **substitutional** (or internal). In this case, the terms that **apparently** refer to minimal entities turn out **not to refer**. As a consequence, we are **not** committed to the existence of minimal entities.
- Consider again the **general** schema that underlies the step of Quantification:
[E] b is $Q \vdash \exists x(x=b \ \& \ x \text{ is } Q)$.

On the **objectual** reading of quantifiers, which presupposes **standard Tarskian semantics** for predicate logic:

' $\exists x(x=b \ \& \ x \text{ is } Q)$ ' is true iff there exist an individual x (in the domain of quantification) that **satisfies** the open formula ' $x=b \ \& \ x \text{ is } Q$ '. And this is the case iff ' b ' **refers to** x and x **belongs to the extension** of ' Q '.

On the **substitutional** reading of quantifiers, which presupposes **truth-value semantics** for predicate logic:

' $\exists x(x=b \ \& \ x \text{ is } Q)$ ' is true iff there exist at least **one substitution** for the variable ' x ' with **an individual constant** ' c ' such that ' $c=b \ \& \ c \text{ is } Q$ ' **is true**. And this is the case iff both **atomic** sentences ' $c=b$ ' and ' $c \text{ is } Q$ ' **are true**.

In truth-value semantics, the truth-value of the atomic sentences **is given as basic**, like in propositional logic. Since there is **no domain of quantification**, no individual constant **refers** and no open sentences **can be satisfied**.

3.5 We are committed to the existence of minimal entities

Appealing to substitutional quantification is not satisfactory

- Apparently, if substitutional quantification is presupposed, on (OC), we are not committed to the existence of minimal entities. For the truth of $\exists x(x = b \ \& \ x \text{ is } Q)$ does not require 'x' to range over Qs or any entity whatsoever.
- BUT there is a problem. For we all are plausibly committed to deflationary semantical notions like those defined through the following platitudes:
[Ref] $\forall x(x=b \text{ iff 'b' refers to } x)$; [Ext] $\forall x(x \text{ is } Q \text{ iff } x \text{ belongs to the extension of 'Q'})$;
[Sat] $\forall x(x=b \ \& \ x \text{ is } Q \text{ iff } x \text{ satisfies 'x=b \ \& \ x is Q'})$.
- Given [Ref], [Ext] and [Sat], the advocate substitutional quantification is committed to asserting exactly what the advocate of objectual quantification says:
 $\exists x(x=b \ \& \ x \text{ is } Q)$ is true iff there is an individual x that satisfies 'x=b & x is Q'. This is the case iff 'b' refers to x and x belongs to the extension of 'Q'.
- The advocate of substitutional quantification is thus committed to claiming that $\exists x(x=b \ \& \ x \text{ is } Q)$ is true iff 'x' ranges (in a deflationary sense) over something. Namely, something that (in a deflationary sense) can be referred to by 'b', belongs to the extension of 'Q' and does satisfies 'x=b & x is Q'.
- Then, the truth of $\exists x(x=b \ \& \ x \text{ is } Q)$ requires 'x' to range (in a deflationary sense) over Qs. If 'Q' is 'is a fact', the advocate of substitutional quantification appears committed to the existence of minimal facts on (OC). (This generalizes to other minimal entities).
- A reply might be that, as all semantical notions involved are just deflationary, there is no real ontological commitment. But why should this follow? And in what sense of 'real'?

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4. Minimal entities are linguistic posits

(1) Are minimal entities mind-dependent or mind-independent?

- Could we say that minimal entities are **not fully real** because **they exist only mind-dependently**? The claim that minimal entities **exist only mind-dependently** does **not** seem quite correct. Consider the following apparently true sentence:

[1] Possibly, **there is no mind** and the moon is round.

Given platitude [iii] (i.e. S iff it is a fact that S) which is **conceptually** true and so, plausibly, **necessarily** true, we derive from [1]:

[2] Possibly, **there is no mind** and **it is a fact** that the moon is round.

From [2], it follows:

[3] Possibly, **there is no mind** and $\exists x(x = \text{that the moon is round} \ \& \ x \text{ is a fact})$.

- Thomasson 2001 infers from examples like this that - in certain cases - minimal entities **exist mind-independently** (so they are **substantive** entities).
- Can we conclude that minimal entities exist **mind-independently**?
Not every one will accept this conclusion: **antirealists** may want to reject [1] (e.g. Dummett 2004). If the antirealist **denies** [1], to the effect that it is **mind-dependent** that the moon is round, she can derive the **negation** of [3], to the effect that it is also **mind-dependent** that **the fact** that the moon is round exists.
- The conclusion seems to be that whether a minimal entity exists **mind-independently** or **-dependently** hinges on whether what is described by the basic sentence from which the relevant something from nothing inference originates (e.g. 'the moon is round') exists, respectively, **mind-independently** or **-dependently**.

4.1 Minimal entities are linguistic posits

(2) Are minimal entities mind-dependent or mind-independent?

- The same result obtains on **more sophisticated** notions of mind-dependence and mind-independence. For instance, the followings:

Mind-dependence of the state of affair that S

[MD] $\Box(S \leftrightarrow (\text{there is an epistemic agent in good conditions to judge whether } S \rightarrow \text{she asserts that } S))$,

(where being in ideal conditions to judge whether S does not presuppose that S).

Mind-independence of the state of affair that S

[MI] $\Diamond(S \ \& \ \neg((\text{there is an epistemic agent in good conditions to judge whether } S \rightarrow \text{she asserts that } S))$.

- Suppose I accept that the state of affair that the moon is round is mind-**dependent**, and so I assert the instance of [MD] with 'S' = 'the moon is round'. Through a something-from-nothing inference, I'm committed to asserting the instance of [MD] with 'S' = ' $\exists x(x = \text{that the moon is round} \ \& \ x \text{ is a fact})$ '. The existence of the latter **fact** appears to be mind-**dependent**.
- Suppose, instead, I accept that the state of affair that the moon is round is mind-**independent**, and so I assert the instance of [MI] with 'S' = 'the moon is round'. *Via* a something-from-nothing inference, I'm committed to asserting the instance of [MI] with 'S' = ' $\exists x(x = \text{that the moon is round} \ \& \ x \text{ is a fact})$ '. Now, the existence of this **fact** appears to be mind-**independent**.

4.2 Minimal entities are linguistic posits

Realism and non-realism about *the world* and about *ontology*

- I submit that criteria of mind-dependence and mind-independence like those just considered - e.g. [MD] and [MI] - are helpful to distinguish between **realists** and **non-realists** about **the world** (or about **regions of it**). Yet these criteria are not suitable to distinguish between **realists** and **non-realists** about **ontology**.
- Realism and non-realism about **ontology** concerns, not just the world, but **the structure** of the world. Namely, it concerns the things and the types of things **the world is self-organized into**, e.g. facts, properties, individuals, events, etc.
The debates about **ontological** realism and non-realism are, typically, disputes about whether a given description of the world “**carves reality at its joints**”.
- If we are **non-realists about the world** we are also **non-realists about ontology**. This appears intuitively plausible - at least, to me.
Yet, if we are **realists** about the world, we may still be either **realists** or **non-realists** about **ontology** (i.e. about **specific ontological items** such as **properties** or **facts**).
The problem with criteria of mind-dependence and mind-independence like [MD] and [MI] is that **they do not seem to account for the latter possibility**.
Consequently, these criteria are probably unsuitable to distinguish between **realists** and **non-realists** about **ontology**.
- The question about the reality and non-reality of minimal entities is a question of **ontological** realism and non-realism.
We need criteria for **ontological** realism and non-realism to answer this question.

4.3 Minimal entities are linguistic posits

The appeal to the Eleatic Criterion is neither conclusive nor illuminating

- The Eleatic Criterion says that everything that exists must make a difference to the causal powers of something.

This criterion might perhaps be appealed to in disputes of ontological realism and non-realism.

- Schiffer 2003 suggests that adding pleonastic - and so minimal - entities to our ontology does not disturb the pre-existing causal order. (For adding the platitudes that govern the pleonastic entities to an empirical theory T will in most cases produce a conservative extension of T. Namely, a theory T* such that any consequence of T* stutable in the language of T is also a consequence of T).
- If minimal entities do not disturb the pre-existing causal order, it might be argued that minimal entities are not real because they do not satisfy the Eleatic Criterion.
- One problem is that the Eleatic Criterion is not unanimously accepted. For instance, realists about possibilities and abstract entities typically reject it.
- Another problem is that claiming that minimal entities are not real because they do not disturb the pre-existing causal order might look even more puzzling.

Consider a realist about the world. As we have seen, she seems to be committed to asserting that minimal entities exist mind-independently, and this seems to qualify minimal entities as real entities (in an intuitive sense).

The realist might thus conclude that minimal entities are real entities that do not disturb the pre-existing causal order!

4.4 Minimal entities are linguistic posits

The *a priori* knowability criterion is not conclusive

- Schiffer suggests another reason why pleonastic - and so minimal - entities **are not to be considered fully real** (but just linguistic posits or linguistic projections):

Pleonastic entities are not fully real because the essential features of **real** things **can be discovered by *a posteriori* (scientific) investigation**, while the essential features of **pleonastic** entities **can be known only *a priori***, by reading them off the relevant linguistic practices.

- Schiffer's suggestion is **questionable**. Consider a **full-blooded realist** about, say, **propositions**.

This realist does **not** seem to be committed to believing that the essential feature of propositions can be discovered ***a posteriori***.

She could believe, instead, that the essential features of propositions can be known ***a priori***, through the knowledge of relevant ***conceptually true sentences*** (or of the correlated **linguistic practices**).

- Entertaining this belief requires endorsing the thesis that an **analytical** sentence *S* - which **can be known *a priori* to be true** - is true in virtue of, **not its meaning**, but of **independent states of affairs**.

Philosophers - prominently, Boghossian 1996 and 2003 - have given good arguments to substantiate this thesis.

4.5 Minimal entities are linguistic posits

The reason why minimal entities are not fully real

- The reason why minimal entities are **not genuinely real** becomes evident as we realize that the **deepest** and **most complete** explanation of **our ability to refer to minimal entities** can be given by making use of **mere deflationary notions of reference** – for example [Ref].
- Indeed, it seems that reference to minimal entities can be explained **only** in terms of deflationary semantical notions. For it would make no sense to try to use any substantive – e.g. **causal** or **semi-causal** – notion of reference to explain it.
- A causal or semi-causal notion of reference would apply to minimal entities if the latter had **causal powers** (like tables, cats and electrons). Yet that minimal entities have causal powers is not stated by the platitudinous principles that **characterize in full** the nature of these objects. Thus, minimal entities are plausibly **causally inert**.
We could add further principles to make minimal entities **metaphysically thicker**, but then they would no longer count as **minimal** entities!
- If minimal entities existed **extrinsically to language**, the deepest and most complete explanation of our ability to refer to them would have to involve a more complex notion of reference. For we would have to clarify how our words **can hook up to entities extrinsic to language**.
Deflationary notions of reference can establish, by themselves, **no link between language and extra-linguistic world**.
- The conclusion we should draw is that minimal entities cannot but be **intrinsic to language**. In this sense, they are **linguistic projections** or **linguistic posits**.

4.6 Minimal entities are linguistic posits

(1) Ontological *non-realism* of this kind is compatible with *realism* about the world

- Suppose I'm a realist about ordinary objects so that I believe that it is mind-independent that this apple is round, but I'm a non-realist about facts.

I can still use the expression 'the fact that this apple is round' in a deflationary way by applying platitude [iii] (i.e. S iff it is a fact that S).

- Suppose I derive, from the true sentence [1], 'This apple is round', the sentence [2], 'It is a fact that this apple is round' and, then, the sentence [3] $\exists x(x = \text{that this apple is round} \ \& \ x \text{ is a fact})$.

I can maintain that [1], [2] and [3] describe the same mind-independent reality, though the singular term 'that this apple is round' and the predicate 'is a fact' (or 'it is a fact') in [2] and [3] refer to nothing existing out of language.

- I obtain this result by applying Tarskian semantics to [1], in which the quantification domain includes language-independent objects, and truth-value semantics to [2] and [3], with the stipulation that the truth-values of [2] and [3] are identical to that of [1]. Finally, I apply only deflationary semantical notions to [2] and [3].

Platitude [iii] is, in this case, the bridging principle to move from Tarskian semantics to truth-value semantics and *vice versa*.

- One could say that, given these assumptions, the existential quantifier in [3] is a deflationary or minimal quantifier, so that minimal facts (and other minimal notions) just have a deflationary or minimal existence.

4.7 Minimal entities are linguistic posits

(2) Ontological non-realism of this kind is compatible with realism about the world

- This conception of minimal entities is coherent with the common assumption that **the same mind-independent reality** can be described **in alternative ways** by means of alternative **conceptualisations** or alternative **linguistic conventions**, where **not all** components of these descriptions **reflect items of the independent reality**.

Consider ‘My cat is in Sydney’ and ‘The undetached part of my cat are in Sydney’. Intuitively, these two sentences describe **the same mind-independent states of affairs**. Yet the expression ‘The undetached part of my cat’ can be argued to refer to just **a linguistic projection**, and **nothing that exists in the world**.

- As a **realist** about the world and a **non-realist** about facts, I can maintain that, when I infer from ‘This apple is round’, *via* [iii] and [MI] that:

It is **mind-independent** that $\exists x(x = \text{that this apple is round} \ \& \ x \text{ is a fact})$,

the feature of being mind-independent does not concern what is referred to by ‘**that this apple is round**’ and what belongs to the extension of ‘**is a fact**’.

For the semantical notions that apply to these expressions are **just deflationary and do not hook up to anything existing extrinsic to language**.

- The same applies to other minimal entities.

4.8 Minimal entities are linguistic posits

Response to a possible objection

- Consider a true statement falling under the following schema:
[1] *a* is *P* and this feature of *a* causes my perception that *a* is *P*.
Given platitudes [i] and [ii], from [1], we derive:
[2] The property of being *P* is instantiated by *a* and this feature of *a* causes my perception that *a* is *P*.

Doesn't the truth of [2] make the property of being *P* provided with causal powers? No. For the property of being *P* is defined only in terms of [i] and [ii] and has no other features than those attributed to it by these platitudes.

- Something analogous can be said about minimal truth. Suppose there is a true statement falling under the following schema:
[3] It is mind-independent that *S*.
Given [ES], we derive from [3]:
[4] It is mind-independent that it is true that *S*.

The minimalist about truth is not forced to admit, on examples like this, that truth is a thick property (or relation) because it has the substantive feature of being mind-independent. The minimalist can still claim that truth is a minimal notion, as it is characterized only in terms of [ES].

- As a result, even if, given [2], we can perhaps give a “causal explanation” of how we refer to the property of being *P*, this explanation will be redundant. The best explanation of reference to the (minimal) property of being *P* is given by using only deflationary semantical notions.

Contents

1. Schiffer's pleonastic entities
2. Extending Horwich's characterization of minimal truth to other entities
3. We are committed to the existence of minimal entities
4. Minimal entities are linguistic posits
5. Conclusion

5. Conclusion

What I've done in this paper

- I have given a precise characterization of the minimal notions of a fact, a property and a proposition, inspired to Horwich's characterization of minimal truth, according to which these minimal notions have the essential function of allowing the explicit formulation of blind generalizations.
- I have argued that, on an intuitive criterion of ontological commitment (traceable to Quine's), we are committed to the existence of the entities that fall under these notions.
- I have argued that these entities are not genuinely real because they exist only intrinsically to language. The reason being that the best explanation of reference to minimal entities makes use of only deflationary semantical notions.
- I have suggested that we do possess the semantical tools (basically, Tarskian semantics and truth-value semantics) to show that this kind of non-realism about minimal entities is compatible with realism about the world.

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