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Names, predicates, and the object – property distinction

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Proper names and predicates are different kinds of expressions, with different semantic functions. Names refer and predicates attribute properties or classify things into kinds. To some of us that is almost a platitude. Nevertheless, some philosophers contend that the difference is just apparent, and they have endorsed views advocating that names are really predicates and should be treated as such. W.V.O. Quine (1960, and other works) and later Tyler Burge (1973) are prominent proponents of such views. After Burge's 1973 article, there was discussion of the cons and pros of the approach by Steven E. Boër (1975) and by Jennifer Hornsby (1976). But it has been in the last few years that the view has resurfaced with force both in linguistics and in philosophy. Authors such as Reinaldo Elugardo (2002), Ora Matushansky (2008) and Delia Graff Fara (2015 (a) and (b)), among others, have endorsed the view on the basis of syntactic and semantic evidence that appears to support the treatment of names as predicates. Their arguments have been contested by other linguists and philosophers (see for instance Jeshion 2015). Here I will not engage the specific arguments offered by the contemporary proponents of the predicativist view. My purpose is to argue from a different perspective. I will claim that the proposal to treat proper names as predicates is wrong for fundamental semantic reasons that are grounded in conceptual and metaphysical considerations.

2.1 Subject and predicate. Object and property

Of all the things which exist some are such that they cannot be predicated of anything else truly and universally, e.g. Cleon and Callias, i.e. the individual and sensible, but other things may be predicated of them (for each of these is both man and animal); and some things are themselves predicated of others, but nothing prior is predicated of them; . . . It is clear then that some things are naturally not stated of anything: for as a rule each sensible thing is such that it cannot be predicated of anything, save incidentally: for we sometimes say that that white object is Socrates, or that that which approaches is Callias.

Aristotle: *Prior Analytics*, Book I, chapter 27

The distinction between an object and its properties, a distinction we've had since Plato and Aristotle, is fundamental and it reveals the way we conceptualize the world around us. The distinction underlies our scientific theories and our everyday life. But the world we interact with does not present itself to us as a collection of objects separated from their properties. I see a large yellow bus turning the corner. I do not see a *thing* accompanied by the properties of *bigness*, *busness* and *yellowness*. We experience objects and their properties as units, and it is in thought that we can perform a separation.

The separation between object and property, like the distinction between substance and attribute, or matter and form, is a *metaphysical* distinction, one that is then reflected in logic and in language, and it is at the very basis of the way in which we conceive the world and we structure our experience of it. While we find unity in the world, we perform separation in thought and in language, and that separation allows us to perform two operations: one, singling out objects, abstracting from what they have in

common, and second, sorting them into classes, attending to what they have in common. Names and predicates allow us to express that separation and to perform the operations of singling out, on the one hand, and classifying together, on the other. The structure subject-predicate is, as Strawson claimed¹ *the basic combination* that “reflect(s) fundamental features of our thought about the world.” (Strawson 1974: 4).

Now, there may be important syntactic or semantic objections to the view that names are predicates,² but I believe that there is a prior problem in that the view does not reflect the underlying *metaphysics* correctly, for it does not reflect in the semantics a distinction that is crucial in our conception of the world and its structure, a distinction that is metaphysically important. The contrast exists in thought and in logic, and it exists in language. It should not be obliterated in semantic theory.³

But surely, it may be argued, the fact that we perform a separation between subject, the thing we single out and talk about, and predicate, what we attribute to the subject, still does not show that names and predicates are two essentially different types of expressions. After all, we can single out an object using predicates, and in fact, until 1970 most semanticists were quite ready to accept that this is what we do when we use a name. Kripke’s (1980) and Donnellan’s (1970) well known arguments may have convinced most philosophers that proper names should not be treated as run of the mill descriptions such as “the most famous Roman orator,” but this is a far cry from establishing that names are not predicates in their own right. Clearly when we utter “the teacher is a biologist” in a classroom, we use “the teacher” to single out a person. In this case “the teacher” performs the operation of singling out, by selecting the individual

¹ According to Strawson (1974: 4) it was so characterized also at some point by Quine.

² See Jeshion (2015).

³ This is not to say that predicativism entails that there is no distinction between objects and properties. The point is just that the distinction is not reflected in their semantics.

that satisfies *being a teacher* in the context in question, and “is a biologist” does the classifying or attributing. It is not clear that there is anything intrinsically faulty in this regard with a theory that sustains that an utterance of “John is happy” is to be interpreted, roughly, as “*the* John is happy,” where the appropriately relevant, intended or contextually salient individual that satisfies *being a John* or *being called John* is selected and *being happy* is attributed to it.

But the separation of subject and predicate that we have in sentences such as “the teacher is a biologist” is not enough to constitute the expression of the separation of the object from its properties—from all of its properties—that is required to distinguish the object, the substance, from its attributes. If we didn’t have a mechanism in language to express that separation, we should invent it. Luckily, we already have it: proper names.

2.2 What proper names do

Proper names have a logically irreducible use. They permit us to entertain a separation in language of the object under discussion from its properties.

Ruth Barcan Marcus (1975/1993:107)

If proper names can perform that “logically irreducible” function, according to Marcus, it is because they connect to things without the mediation of associated mechanisms, and in particular, without the mediation of attributive mechanisms that select a referent by satisfaction.

One of the lessons of Kripke’s and Donnellan’s powerful case against the descriptivist theory of proper names, possibly the most acknowledged lesson, is that the

referent of a use of a name is the only contribution of the name to truth-conditional content and to the determination of truth-conditions. This is an important lesson, but it does not quite get at the heart of the issue that concerns us here, for the fact that a name contributes an object to truth-conditional content does not preclude that such contribution be performed via some attributive mechanism that selects the contributed object by satisfaction (like in the case of indexicals, for instance).

A deeper lesson of Kripke's and Donnellan's arguments, one that is not always sufficiently highlighted in my view, is that proper names are genuinely referential devices that designate by convention without associated mechanisms whose function is to *select* a referent: "To count as a proper name an expression must refer without being tied to any particular characterization of the object" (Marcus 1975/1993, p. 107). Because they have no associated mechanisms, uses of names can single out objects without appeal to any of their properties.

When we use predicates, even if use them to identify a unique object in an appropriate context, like in the case of "the teacher," we select an object via what it has in common with other things. When we use a name only the object is at stake. In general, we could say that names singularize; predicates shoot for the common denominator. Names make objects subjects of discourse, and they are particularly useful when we need to talk about an individual, because they allow us to single out and say things about an object, without the effort of identifying its properties and the subsequent risk of getting them wrong.^{4 5}

⁴ It makes sense to name individuals we expect to do things that will be worth talking about, things that matter to us (see Jeshion 2009). An interesting detail, in this regard, is that in ancient Rome women typically did not have *praenomen*, i.e., *given* names. Usually women would be identified with the name of their family or the name of their *gens* and, if necessary, "prima,"

A predicativist may argue that, while it is true that it requires an effort to learn an object's identifying properties, and while it is also true that we sometimes get those properties wrong, the threat of ignorance and error does not affect attributes such as *being a John* or *being called John*.⁶ The point though is that the semantic function of names and the semantic function of predicates are different because names discriminate, they single out. They refer, and thus they underwrite the abstraction of the object from its properties. Predicates do not do that.

"minor" or some other means to distinguish them would be added. Perhaps Romans did not expect that History would need to say much about their women. See Rawson 1986. See also Boër on the difference between hereditary and given names.

⁵ One of the pieces of evidence often mentioned by predicativists is the observation that in many languages names are preceded by what appear to be definite articles. Catalan is cited as one of those languages. Although it is not part of my strategy here to dispute the arguments at that level, it seems to me it is very doubtful that the lexical items that precede names in Catalan are definite articles. It is true that in Catalan it is correct to use "el Miquel" or "la Maria." However, a more archaic form, still used nowadays, consists in prefacing the names with "en" and "na" ("en Miquel," "na Maria"). According to Coromines (1982: 309), those particles are the remnants of the Latin "domine" and "domina" (Coromines also mentions evidence of the existence of similar forms in ancient Portuguese). It does not seem to me to be entirely out of the question that the contemporary use of "el" and "la" could have substituted the use of the "en" and "na" archaic forms, as a form of recycling (see Longa, Lorenzo and Rigau 1998 for a description of the phenomenon of recycling). In that case, "el" and "la" would not have the function of definite articles, and they would act as what linguists characterize as expletives. Of course, this affects, it would appear, only Catalan, but Lekakou (manuscript) suggests that there is evidence that similar particles in Greek are also expletive and hence semantically inert.

⁶ But see Boër's considerations on ignorance and error arguments.

2.3 Predicates and the properties things have in common

Now of actual things some are universal, others particular (I call universal that which is by its nature predicated of a number of things, and particular that which is not; man, for instance, is a universal, Callias a particular). So it must sometimes be of a universal that one states that something holds or does not, sometimes of a particular.

Aristotle: *De Interpretatione*, 17^a38

Properties are universals and, as such, they are *repeatable*; they are what different things have, or can have, in common, similarities that we can abstract and introduce a word, a predicate, for. The point to notice is that things are similar in a number of ways, and the introduction of a predicate serves the purpose of capturing a similarity; but the existence of the similarity typically antecedes the introduction of the predicate. The point of introducing predicates is to capture and express existing similarities. Predicates allow us to do that because they are the kind of expression that we use to classify things together according to the similarities they have.⁷ Proper names do not do that. When we name a thing, we do not attend to how similar or dissimilar it is to other things.

Treating names as predicates subverts the standard function of predicates as terms that translate to language the result of the operation of abstracting what things *do* have in common. The typical function of predicates is not to create similarities where

⁷ The language I use here is more Aristotelian than Platonic. I don't think this affects the import of the argument.

they do not antecedently exist. Some things are red; they are red because they reflect light in a certain way, and they do so independently of us calling them “red.” By contrast, the similarity *being a John*, or *being called John*, does not antecede the bestowing of the name. Dissimilar things do not become similar by being subsumed under an invented word.

The predicate “red” applies to my pen, because my pen is similar in a certain respect to other things, things under the extension of “red.” According to the predicativist, a similar story is to be told about names: in order for “John” to apply to, say, John Perry, it has to be the case that he is similar to other people under the “extension” of “John.” But what makes these people similar, why are they under the “extension” of “John”? P.F. Strawson, who opposed the treatment of names as predicates in no uncertain terms points the way to the answer:

. . . we must be surely be quite sceptical of that well-known view [*footnote:* Advanced by Quine in many books and articles] according to which, without frustrations of any essential purpose of the use of names, each name could be “parsed as,” or replaced by, a corresponding unitary predicate . . . For if we ask what links together all the various occasions of the referring use of a name for a particular person, the only answer we can give with any confidence is that the name is used in all those occasions to refer to that person. (Strawson 1974: 48)

John Perry would not be under the alleged predicate “John” if it weren’t for the fact that the name is used to make him the subject of discourse so that things could be said about him, so that properties could be attributed to him, i.e., if it weren't because there are

uses of the name that refer to him.⁸ That's what makes John a member of the set of things that are, according to the predicativist, under the extension of the "predicate" "John."

But what that suggests, it seems to me, is precisely that what grounds the predicativist explanation is the fact that names are referential devices, not predicates. Surely, John Perry and John Etchemendy are both *called John*; they have that property in common. But they do have that property in common because the names were bestowed on them. Reference was there before satisfaction.

The focus on language and its operation is a characteristic mark of analytic philosophy, and that is so because early analytic philosophers such as Russell, G.E. Moore and Wittgenstein saw in the analysis of language the key to address perennial philosophical questions, among them metaphysical questions. The underlying presumption was that language reflects the structure of reality and the way we conceive of it. The distinction between an object and its properties is at the basis of our conception of the world, and names and predicates allow us to express naturally that distinction. Perhaps that conception of the structure of reality is ultimately wrong;

⁸ Of course, the name "John" has been bestowed on many individuals, utterances of "John" in different occasions refer to different people. This has been used by another semantic current that, like the predicativists, subsumes names under another category, in this case indexicals. But names are also different from indexicals. The discussion of this latter claim is beyond the scope of this paper but, in any case, the point about names being mechanism-free devices is general, and it applies equally to attempts to reduce names to descriptions and to indexicals. It is that freedom from mechanisms that makes them capable of performing the indispensable role (of Ruth Barcan Marcus' dictum) that ultimately distinguishes them from predicates.

perhaps the structure of the world reflected in language is in fact different.⁹ If so, our common conceptualization of the world in terms of the distinction between things and their properties would be ultimately incorrect. But that is a rather fundamental issue that we cannot settle on the basis of the arguments predicativists have provided so far.¹⁰

⁹ Some philosophers have argued for a fundamental metaphysics that eschews the distinction between things and properties, in favor of processes.

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