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REALISM, IDEALISM, AND GENERAL TERMS[1]

Bencivenga (1990) pointed out that classical and free quantification theories are naturally associated with the frameworks of the transcendental realist and the transcendental idealist, respectively.[2]

The former's conceptual starting point is objects, and a singular term can only *be* a term if it refers to an object: non-denoting singular terms are an absurdity. The latter's conceptual starting point, on the other hand, is language, and singular terms are expressions fulfilling certain grammatical roles. Thus it is perfectly possible that some such expressions refer to nothing (real): non-denoting singular terms are just part of life.

Lambert (1967) brought out an analogy between the 'problem' addressed by free logic and the traditional problem of the existential import of general terms. The analogy is best illustrated by considering the traditional square of opposition: relations of contrariety, subcontrariety, and subordination only hold around the square (for a given statement form '*S* are *P*') if the general term in subject position has instances. Since 'unicorn' has no instances, 'All unicorns are white' (*A*) and 'No unicorns are white' (*E*) are both true, 'Some unicorns are white' (*I*) and 'Some unicorns are not white' (*O*) are both false, and *A* does not entail *I* (nor does *E* entail *O*). Limiting the square (and hence traditional logic) to general terms having instances is for Lambert the analogue of the treatment of singular terms in classical quantification theory, whereas inserting a 'filter' statement explicitly requiring subject terms to have instances is the analogue of the strategy adopted by free logicians.

When these two contributions are brought together, the following reflection emerges. Non-denoting singular terms no longer seem a problem for which free logic provides a better solution than its classical counterpart. In the conceptual framework most appropriate to classical quantification theory, there simply cannot be non-denoting singular terms, and hence there is no relevant problem. The transcendental realist is forced to say that there can be at most an *appearance* of non-denoting singular terms, and hence his problem is at most that of dispelling the appearance.[3] Does this mean that in the realist's case the analogy between singular and general terms breaks down? For the existential import of general terms does seem to be a problem no matter what one's conceptual framework is: it seems undeniable that there are general terms with no instances, and that the relations of contrariety, subcontrariety, and subordination fail to hold for statements containing such terms in subject position

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in the traditional square. For a realist, it seems, the traditional strategy of limiting the validity of the square to general terms having instances is one way of dealing with this problem, whereas the 'analogous' strategy concerning singular terms is not a *strategy* at all, but a conceptual necessity. In the present note I intend to argue that the analogy can be saved: the 'strategy' is a conceptual necessity in the case of general terms, too.

For the realist, I said, a singular term *is* a term – as opposed to, say, an inkblot – *because* it refers to an object. What about a general term now? What makes *that* a term? A simple answer would be this: 'Napoleon' is a *singular* term because it refers to the *single* object Napoleon, and 'horse' is a *general* term because it refers to the *several* objects (that are) horses. Ultimately, I think that this simple answer is the correct one, but there are two problems with it that I need to address. One is that many would take the reference of a general term to be (not directly the objects that are instances of it, as I just did, but) a property or a concept or some such – an object, maybe, but an 'abstract' one, or 'unsaturated', or something of the sort. So they would say that 'horse' is a general term because it refers to the property of horseness, and 'xywz' is not a general term because there is no property of xywzness for it to refer to. However, this is not going to go very far, for what makes something a property? There seem to be only three possible answers to this question. Either (a) anything whatsoever is a property (including xywzness), and then anything whatsoever (including 'xywz') is a general term. Or (b) that something be a property is defined in terms of its having instances, and then we are back to the simple answer above and properties only add a useless epicycle to this whole machinery. Or else (c) something is a property if the relevant term is part of some established vocabulary, and then we have lost our realism along the way, and we are characterizing terms by their linguistic roles *and objects by the linguistic roles of the corresponding terms*.

Since (b) seems the only plausible realist course, I can disregard properties altogether. There may very well be some such entities: mine is not an ontological stand. But, whether or not there are any, referring to them is not going to help the realist with the *logical* issue of telling general terms from nonsense any more than referring to the objects *having the properties* would. So turn now to the second problem with my simple answer. Some would say that the answer is too much of an *actualist* one, and that it consequently begs our current question. Of course, if a necessary conceptual condition for something to be a general term is that it refers to (several) objects, there cannot be general terms without instances, and the traditional policy concerning the square of opposition is a conceptual necessity. But something (these people would argue) is a general term even if it refers to nothing *existing*, so long as it *could* refer to something. 'Unicorn', after all, is a general term though there are no unicorns, and it is one because it is *possible* that there be some – whereas it is impossible that there be any xywz's.

There are two steps to understanding what is wrong with this response, and

both of them can be illustrated by reference to Leibniz's critique of Descartes's ontological argument. First, what Leibniz objected to Descartes is that he had only proved that God existed *if the idea of God was consistent*. Unless this additional premiss was established, Descartes had no evidence that by combining words the way he did he was not crossing the bounds of sense and ending up with total gibberish (cfr. the combination that gives me terms like 'thoughtful windowsill', or 'red sorrow', or 'unequal equality' – the stuff poetry, and sometimes politics, but not sensible discourse, is made of).

The second step is based on Kant's objection to Leibniz's attempt at 'fixing' Descartes's proof (as reconstructed by Bencivenga, 1987). Leibniz argued that, since the idea of God is obtained by joining perfections, and perfections are positive, and hence involve no negation, there can arise no contradiction in the process (he did not consider the sort of category mistake that occurs in some of the examples above – and we too can leave those aside). And Kant objected that Leibniz could not say that there was no negation (and hence no contradiction) involved. All he could say is that, *as far as he knew*, there was no negation involved. By continuing the analysis of those 'positives' further, one might discover previously hidden negations, and maybe even establish that the idea of God was an absurd one after all. *Real* possibility (that is, something that is more than an *appearance* of possibility) can never be proved at the purely conceptual level – where only the temporary, revisable notion of *logical* possibility (possibility as far as we can tell) is accessible. Which means that, by mobilizing concepts (or any other purely logical tools) one never knows that an expression *really can* refer to objects.

How, then, could one know that? In a letter to Hilbert (also quoted by Bencivenga, 1987, p. 224), Frege insists that the only way of establishing the consistency, and hence the possible instantiation, of a set of conceptual specifications, is by giving an *actual* model of them. Which brings us back to the simple answer above. The detour through possibility proved delusive and the actualist construal is in fact the only one available to the realist:[4] the only expressions of which he can say that they are general terms are those that *do* refer to objects.[5] Whence the traditional 'strategy' of limiting the square of opposition to general terms with existential import.

Two remarks are in order, before closing. First, the realist's logic is awkward and cumbersome.[6] Both with singular and with general terms, empirical conditions must be satisfied before inferential patterns can be applied, and the only alternative (one that has been pursued regularly with singular terms but apparently not so often with general ones – though see later) is that of eliminating such expressions altogether and reducing oneself to using other expressions (say, individual variables) that cannot fail to hook up with the world. The idealist's logic, on the other hand, is much smoother. For him, general terms, too, can be defined by their grammatical roles, and even if this does not exclude thoughtful windowsills and the like, nor does it create any problem: it will just be a matter, here as with singular terms, of writing the

ruling out of such monstrosities into (some of) the inferential patterns themselves. But all of this was to be expected. Language and the world are distinct, and hence there is no reason to think that the structure of the one should fit the structure of the other. If the structure of the world is what comes first and matters most, as is the case for the realist, it is no wonder that the structure of language will have to suffer, and possibly go through some regimentation: after all, one is adapting something to something else. The idealist will encounter his problems in another context: when out of language he tries to reconstruct the world.

Second, if the traditional 'existentially loaded' treatment of general terms is the most adequate to transcendental realism, why does classical quantification theory proceed otherwise? Doesn't this logic issue, according to my analysis, in an uneasy compromise between realism at the level of singular terms and idealism at the level of general terms? One could argue that this is indeed the case: that classical quantification theory is the outcome of a half-baked conceptual revolution that is only completed by moving to free logic. It is also possible to claim, however, that classical quantification theory has simply given up on general terms, and replaced them with predicates – that is, *syn*categorematic expressions with no independent meaning.[7] A consequence of this line of thought – and one that receives some confirmation by the work of Bressan, Gupta, and others - is that, if general terms are to get back into the 'classical' picture, it will have to be with heavy existential commitments.

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NOTES

[1] This note has profited greatly from discussions with Karel Lambert.
[2] As couched in the now fashionable linguistic jargon.
[3] Among the tactics deployed to dispel this appearance, Russell's theory of descriptions is by far the most popular.
[4] I find it suggestive to quote here the parting shot by Almog (1991), one of the most consistent supporters of (what I would call) transcendental realism in the philosophy of logic: "With possibilities, less is more" (622).
[5] It is irrelevant to our present purposes that there be *several* objects involved here. If a term has at least one instance, the worst that could happen to it is that it does not have more. But that would not make it less of a term: it would only make it, possibly to our surprise, a *singular* one. In any case, there would be a clear distinction between it and nonsense.
[6] To avoid unnecessary and misguided objections, let me point out that by 'the realist's logic' I understand whatever complex tools he uses to analyze and evaluate ordinary language statements and arguments. Such complex tools *include*, but *are not limited to*, some formal systems, and of course the formal systems themselves are often simple, elegant structures. It is quite a different story when it comes to applying them – and justifying the claim that they are formal systems *of logic*.
[7] The two reactions are not unrelated, since syncategorematic expressions are defined by their roles in language. An *extreme* realist position would probably find an objectual counterpart for *all* linguistic expressions, and categorize expressions on such grounds. For an example of this extreme position, see Montague (1974).

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