

# Attributing Properties

Benjamin Schnieder

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## *Abstract:*

The paper deals with the semantics and ontology of ordinary discourse about properties. The main focus lies on the following thesis: A simple predication of the form ‘*a* is *F*’ is synonymous with the corresponding explicit property-attribution ‘*a* has *F*-ness’. An argument against this *Synonymy Thesis* is put forth which is based on the thesis that simple predications and property-attributions differ in their conditions of understanding. In defending the argument, the paper accounts for the way in which we come to adopt the conceptual framework of properties.

## 1. Introduction

### *a. The Synonymy Thesis*

The English language contains various devices for explicit discourse about properties. It comprises different systematic means to generate singular terms for properties by *deriving* them from predicative phrases. One means of doing so consists in deriving an *abstract noun* from an adjective. Thus, the property-designator ‘wisdom’ derives from ‘wise’, ‘redness’ derives from ‘red’, ‘sincerity’ from ‘sincere’, and so on. These examples show that the derivation process is not wholly uniform; different suffixes are appropriate to different adjectives. It may also be noted that not *all* adjectives correspond to abstract nouns that can be used as property designators: ‘dead’, for instance, corresponds only to ‘death’, which is not a property designator (but apparently a general term true of events, or perhaps a singular term for a kind of event). In what follows, ‘*F*<sub>[NOUN]</sub>’ will be used as a placeholder for the abstract noun that corresponds to a general term *F* and can be used as a property-designator (if there is any). (Alternatively a property-designator can be derived from a general term *F* by building the gerundive construction ‘the property of being *F*’.)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There are still other ways of referring to properties; cp. Strawson (1974: 129).

*Discourse* about properties requires sentences, not only terms. So, let us turn to the former now. Henceforth, sentences of the following form will be called *simple predications*:

(Simp-Pred)      $a$  is  $F$ ,

Property-designators can be combined with some linking word, such as ‘have’ or ‘possess’, in order to form whole predicates. If the general term in a simple predication corresponds to an abstract noun that can be used a property designator, then an *explicit property-attribution* can be constructed, a sentence of the form:

(Prop-Att)      $a$  has (or: possesses)  $F_{[\text{NOUN}]}$ .

Obviously, corresponding sentences of the two forms (Simp-Pred) and (Prop-Att) are intimately related in meaning (think of ‘Socrates is wise’ and ‘Socrates has wisdom’). In non-philosophical contexts any one of them would usually be regarded as an acceptable paraphrase of the other. Though this circumstance alone does not yet show exactly in what kind of semantic relation they stand to each other, it may at least *suggest* that it is simply the relation of *synonymy*. So, the following thesis seems attractive:

(*Synonymy Thesis*)     A simple predication and its corresponding property-attribution are synonymous.

The discussion – and rejection – of this thesis is the primary interest of the present paper. Furthermore, a different account of the relation between simple predications and property-attributions will be defended; this defence will also yield results relevant to an understanding of the general conceptual framework of properties employed in ordinary thinking, and in particular about how one can *adopt* this framework.

#### *b. Proponents of the Synonymy Thesis*

Many philosophers find the *Synonymy Thesis* attractive, if not evidently true. Frank Ramsey even went further, when he once wrote:

Now it seems to me as clear as anything can be in philosophy, that the two sentences ‘Socrates is wise’ and ‘Wisdom is a characteristic of Socrates’ assert the same fact and express the same proposition. (Ramsey 1925: 404)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cp. also Ramsey (1925: 416).

(Though, strictly speaking, Ramsey did not subscribe to the *Synonymy Thesis* here but only to a particular instance of it, it seems clear that the instance is arbitrarily picked and is meant to be representative of all instances.)

Ramsey is certainly not the only philosopher who found the *Synonymy Thesis* evident. Accordingly, it is often implicitly and without argument relied upon, particularly for logical purposes. It explains, for instance, why E. J. Lemmon wrote about the sentence ‘Tweety is a robin’ that it ‘affirms that a certain particular thing [...] has a certain property [...]’ (1965: 4), and went on to parse the logical form of the sentence as ‘*m* has *F*’ (instead of ‘*m* is *F*’).<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, philosophers endorsing the *Synonymy Thesis* may belong to either of two camps: they can be realists about property discourse as well as antirealists. Quine and Strawson, for instance, reconciled their usual animosities when it came to this issue.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Strawson wrote (in a passage critically addressed to Quine):

The idea is that (A) [‘Socrates performs swimming’] or (B) [‘Socrates possesses bravery’] *commit* us, as regards swimming and bravery, in a way in which we are not at all committed by (a) ‘Socrates swims’ or (b) ‘Socrates is brave’.

But this is absurd. The theory of “commitment” by noun, but not by adjective or verb, is as absolutely implausible as any philosophical view could be. (Strawson 1974: 33)<sup>5</sup>

Quine, however, did not hesitate to admit the absurdity of the position under attack by Strawson:

He was right about the implausibility and absurdity of the idea, but wrong in supposing, if he did, that the idea was mine. The difference between (A) and (a) or between (B) and (b) is, as he rightly suggests, ‘simply a matter of stylistic variation’. Clearly it is too frail a reed to bear the weight of an ontology. (Quine 1980: 164)

Quine agrees with Strawson that the difference between a simple predication and a corresponding explicit property-attribution is ‘simply a matter of stylistic variation’ (as Ramsey, they only talk about a *particular* pair of predication and property-attribution; but their remarks are obviously intended to apply to analogous cases). On any plausible understanding of ‘stylistic variation’, mere stylistic variants of each other are synonymous

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<sup>3</sup> Cp. also Lemmon (1965: 4–5, 92–94).

<sup>4</sup> Others who *explicitly* adopted the *Synonymy Thesis* include, for instance, Bolzano (WL II, §127: 11) and Künne (1983: 30–31).

<sup>5</sup> Cp. also Strawson (1987: 405) and (1990: 318).

expressions. Thus, in the quoted passages, Quine and Strawson buy into the synonymy thesis (even though, due to his views about the notion of meaning, Quine would certainly not formulate the thesis in terms of synonymy).<sup>6</sup>

Despite the general agreement that one finds Strawson and Quine in, they disagree about the grounds and consequences of the alleged synonymy of simple predications and corresponding property-attributions. While Quine is suspicious of properties (in particular because of their non-extensionality), Strawson readily accepts them. This disagreement may well bear on the question about how to evaluate their respective approval of the *Synonymy Thesis*. It should be acknowledged as a possibility that the truth-value of this thesis depends upon whether realism or antirealism about properties is correct; such that, for instance, an antirealist ought to *endorse* the thesis while a realist ought to *deny* it. Indeed, it will later be argued that this is exactly the case.

As far as this article is concerned, a realist position on properties will be presupposed without argument. The article explores into what one has to say about simple predications, *if* one adopts some kind of realist stance towards property discourse. So it will be assumed that, at least in standard cases, we really refer to properties where we seem to do so, and that we really quantify over them where we seem to do so. (Whether one should interpret ordinary property discourse in a realist fashion hinges particularly on the question whether all apparent instances of abstract reference, such as ‘wisdom is a virtue’, and quantification over properties, such as ‘there are some extremely rare virtues’, can be provided with some adequate, non-realist analysis. These questions will not be discussed here.<sup>7</sup>)

### *c. Some Related Claims*

Let us briefly return to Quine and Strawson again. In the quoted passages, they subscribe to the *Synonymy Thesis*, but not *only* to this. It seems helpful to distinguish between

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<sup>6</sup> A note in passing: the quoted passage reflects only one of two attitudes towards properties with which Quine sympathised. In general, he liked to think of discourse about properties as dispensable, non involving any genuine reference to abstract objects. But because of some contexts in which reference to attributes is not easily eliminable, he sometimes countenanced properties while opting for *identifying* them with *classes* (cp. Quine 1960: 122–23, 209–10 and Quine 1975: 111–12). This latter view is not relevant to the above quotation, because Quine did not think that the difference between a simple predication ( $x$  is  $F$ ) and the corresponding statement about set-membership ( $x \in \{y: y \text{ is } F\}$ ) is merely a matter of stylistic variation.

<sup>7</sup> For some classic discussion see Pap (1959), Jackson (1977), Loux (1978), and Moreland (1990).

different claims they make, employing different notions. One claim that Strawson formulates (and that Quine seems to accept) is that

(Ont-Com)        A simple predication and the corresponding property-attribution do not differ in their *ontological commitments*.

The following discussion will mainly concentrate on the question of *synonymy*; the notion of *ontological commitments* will be avoided where possible (in particular, the question about the relation between the two notions will not be discussed).

Apart from (Ont-Com), Strawson and Quine also claim that

(Styl-Var)        The difference between a simple predication and the corresponding property-attribution is but a difference in style.

With this thesis, they also buy the *Synonymy Thesis*. But they buy more; mere stylistic variance is a peculiarly *strong* form of synonymy. Proponents of the *Synonymy Thesis* could hold that despite there being no difference in meaning between the sentences in question they nevertheless differ in important, *non-stylistic* aspects. Thus, one might hold that one of them is preferable from the philosophical point of view, because its grammatical form depicts its logical form in a more perspicuous way than the alternative formulation. Bolzano, for example, holds that sentences of the forms (Prop-Att), while strictly synonymous with those of the form (Simp-Pred), nevertheless are logically more perspicuous.<sup>8</sup> And despite his talk about mere stylistic variance, Quine seems to hold something like the reverse of Bolzano's view. He would prefer sentences of the form (Simp-Pred) to those of the form (Prop-Att) because these latter wrongly suggest that in addition to their subjects they are concerned with some further entities.

Such differentiations will not be discussed any further here; rather, an argument will be put forth against the *Synonymy Thesis*, and if it proves successful, it will equally affect any stronger version of it.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Bolzano (1837, vol. II, §127). Indeed, the *Synonymy Thesis* seems to figure in the background of many a realist's proposal about how to *analyse* predication as property attribution (cp. Loux 1998: 25–31).

## 2. Against the Synonymy Thesis

### *a. The Argument*

The argument against the *Synonymy Thesis* is quite simple:

- (P1) Simple predications and corresponding property-attributions differ in their conditions of understanding.
- (P2) If two sentences differ in their conditions of understanding then they are not synonymous.
- (C) Simple predications are not synonymous with the corresponding property-attributions.

The argument's validity is out of question. So, what about the truth-values of its premises? First, premise (P2) deserves some comments: admittedly, talk about 'understanding conditions' is somewhat vague, just as talk about *meaning*, *synonymy* etc. is. But nevertheless, the phrase has often been put to fruitful use in philosophy of language. Since these notions are only employed as *tools* here, applied to some views about property designators, a detailed discussion of them would not be appropriate (it would require an article of its own). So, basically it is presupposed that the reader has at least a vague understanding of the phrases; a clearer grasp can then be won from seeing how they are handled in what follows. But to give at least some hint, it can roughly be said that the conditions of understanding a sentence *S* should comprise the grasp of the concepts that enter into the propositions expressed, and some knowledge about what it takes the sentence to be true. If (P2) is understood along these lines, it seems hardly controversial.

Now for the crucial premise (P1): to understand a property-attribution a speaker must possess certain *knowledge about properties* (and therefore: certain singular concepts of properties). More particularly, whoever understands a property-attribution knows that *what property it is about* (the speaker must be able to produce at least a trivial answer to the question what property he was just talking about);<sup>9</sup> and thus, she has some knowledge about properties.

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<sup>9</sup> As it is argued in Schnieder (2006: 128), this is also a consequence of a semantic peculiarity of abstract nouns: the meaning of such a designator determines its reference in a way that makes an understanding of the designator sufficient for knowing the reference of the term. For a fuller description of the semantics of abstract nouns and property designators of the form 'the property of being *F*' see Schnieder (2006).

But the same is not true for simple predications. A speaker may competently talk about thick or thin, red or yellow, and wise or naïve things or people, without knowing that there are, in addition to thick, thin, red etc. things also properties. She need not have *any* idea about the existence and the nature of properties at all. Indeed, she need not recognise any entities relevant to her parlance apart from thick, thin, etc. things. So, a simple predication and its corresponding property-attribution differ in their condition of understanding, and since this is a sufficient condition for not being synonymous, they are not synonymous.

*b. On the Acquisition of the Conceptual Framework of Properties*

Mastery of simple predications does not require knowledge about properties, it was argued, while mastery of property-attributions does require it. It employs conceptual resources that are not employed by simple predications. But how does one acquire the conceptual framework of properties? Answer: by learning to use new linguistic forms, a new fragment of one's language. This fragment is essentially constituted by a bunch of sentences of specific forms and relevant inferential relations between such sentences and simple predications. The following forms and rules of inference give an outline of this fragment:<sup>10</sup>

1. Introduction of designators of properties in property-attributions.

From a simple predication,

*a* is *F*.

one can infer the corresponding property-attribution (and vice versa):

*a* has (or: possesses)  $F_{[\text{NOUN}]}$ .

2. Using designators of properties *as singular terms* by allowing quantification into their position.

Relevant inferences are for example the steps from sentences of form

*a* possesses  $F_{[\text{NOUN}]}$  and *b* possesses  $F_{[\text{NOUN}]}$  too,

to those of form:

There is something that *a* and *b* have in common.

3. Using designators of properties in subject position in sentences about properties.

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<sup>10</sup> Cp. Brandt (1957) on the build-up of realist languages.

Apart from sentences involving predicates custom-made for properties, as for example:

Wisdom is a virtue,

Red is a colour,

another important class are identity statements, both *contingent* ones, such as:

Wisdom is the virtue which Socrates was most famous for,

and *necessary* ones, as for example:

Being a bachelor is being a male who has never been married.

Knowledge about properties requires mastery of the outlined fragment of English (or a corresponding fragment of another language), and this mastery is in turn everything that is required. Talking about wisdom, intelligence, thickness, thinness etc. requires knowledge about properties and thus mastery of the relevant linguistic forms. But, and this is the crucial point, no such mastery is required for the ability to talk about wise, intelligent, thick, and thin people by using simple predications. *Therefore*, since a property-attribution involves richer conceptual resources than the corresponding simple predication, they are not the synonyms one might think they are.

Notice that it is *not* an implication of the present proposal that knowledge about properties is *meta-linguistic* knowledge. Properties are not linguistic entities and therefore knowledge about properties is not to be construed as knowledge about language. Nevertheless, *mastery* of certain linguistic forms *constitutes* (perhaps in combination with some additional factors) knowledge about properties. Similarly, knowledge about natural numbers is not a form of meta-linguistic knowledge, while at the same time mastery of certain linguistic forms (idioms relevant to counting) may constitute knowledge about numbers (some knowledge about numbers will not require much more than the mastery of certain linguistic forms, while other knowledge about numbers will in addition require most complicated processes of reasoning).

*c. A Reply: Predication is Attribution of a Property*

Now for a potential objection to the argument against the *Synonymy Thesis*. It might be pointed out that

(PA)            Predication can, at least in simple cases, be described as the attribution of properties.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jubien (1997: 37) takes a thesis like this to be characteristic for Platonists.



Indeed, what a speaker does if he predicates something of something is often thus described, and it may well be fruitful to do so. But now someone might mount an argument against the defended position; one might hold that it follows from (PA) that

(UA) A speaker cannot understand a simple predication without being aware of which property is attributed in it to the subject of the sentence.<sup>12</sup>

If it followed, it would seriously endanger premise (P1) of the argument against the *Synonymy Thesis*. But the inference to (UA) is a *non sequitur*. What may follow from (PA) is that

(UA\*) Whoever understands a simple predication of the form ‘*a is F*’, and who furthermore knows that, in making a predication, a speaker attributes a property to the subject of the predication, must know which property is attributed in it.

The antecedent of this conditional is itself composed of two conjuncts, the second of which is not trivially true of every competent user of simple predications. One need not know anything about properties to master simple predications. *Not anything*, and in particular one need *not* know that one attributes properties with them. An understanding of the general conceptual framework of properties, and especially the possession of the concept of a property, is a preliminary requirement for the acquisition of the knowledge of principle (PA) above.

The point made is an instance of a more general consideration: philosophers theorising about language can describe someone who makes a simple predication in several ways. They may describe her as recognising something as an element of a certain *set*, as subsuming something under a certain *concept*, or as grouping something with other things into a mereological *fusion*. Such descriptions may be legitimate and useful, as long as the ontological commitments that go along with these descriptions – and that can therefore be attributed to the theorising philosophers – are not unwarrantedly attributed to the speaker. That is, as long as it is not declared without argument that in making a simple predication *the speaker* commits herself to either sets, concepts, or mereological fusions (or, it may be added, to properties). To do so is to commit a mistake that Evans called ‘mildly perverse’:

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<sup>12</sup> Cp. McGinn (2000: 64), who holds that any competent user of a predicate *P* possesses – in virtue of her linguistic competence – *individuating knowledge* about the property ascribed by *P*.

Why is it perverse? The perversity lies in the fact that we attribute to the speakers of the language the ontological commitments which properly belong to the *theorist*. We are in fact no more justified in holding that the speakers' ontology encompasses sets on the basis of the existence of expressions of theirs which introduce functions on sets than we are in supposing that they require an ontology of truth-values in order to have expressions for the truth-functions. (Evans 1976: 221)

Entities that *we* (as philosophers) invoke for a theoretical description of some linguistic behaviour are often not entities that this behaviour is *about*, or to which *the speakers* are committed.

This reasoning would apply even if properties were regarded as the *meanings* of predicates, as something to which a competent user of the predicate must stand in some intellectual relation (*grasping*, as it might be called). Still, a speaker would not have to know anything *about* such a relation or its *relata*.

#### *d. The Proper Relation Between Simple Predications and Property-Attributions*

Whoever denies the *Synonymy Thesis* could be confronted with the following question: What then *is* the semantic relation between simple predications and property-attributions? Unless it cannot be explained what the obviously very close relation consists in, if *not* in synonymy, the denial of the *Synonymy Thesis* will be unattractive.

Fair enough. But the question can be answered: abstract nouns exhibit some kind of semantic complexity, in having complex understanding conditions.<sup>13</sup> Whoever understands the term 'wisdom' must know that its referent is a property possessed by all wise people and only by them – a proper understanding of the term cannot be attributed to anyone who fails to see this fact.

This shows that abstract nouns such as 'wisdom' express *complex concepts*. In accordance with the indicated understanding conditions, the following expresses a substantial truth fixing the identity of the concept of wisdom:

(Wis)  $x = \text{wisdom} \rightarrow \forall y (y \text{ possesses } x \leftrightarrow y \text{ is wise}).$

Although this principle provides *some* information about the concept of wisdom, it does not suffice for a genuine analysis, because (Wis) cannot be turned into a biconditional:

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<sup>13</sup> The following observation is intimately connected to the peculiar fact about the meaning of abstract nouns sketched in footnote 9.

while two sets cannot agree in their members, two properties may well be had by the same objects.

However, some philosophers have argued that properties are nevertheless individuated by their exemplification conditions, but with respect to all *possible* exemplifications. They hold that no two properties can be *necessarily* coexemplified and hence opt for the following identity-conditions for properties:

(Ind-Prop) For all properties  $x, y$ :  $x=y \leftrightarrow \Box \forall z (z \text{ possesses } x \leftrightarrow z \text{ possesses } y)$ .

If one accepts these conditions, one can explicate the concept of wisdom as follows: by ‘wisdom’ one understands the property which is necessarily such that all and only wise people possess it.<sup>14</sup> And one can even construct a schema whose instances provide countless analyses like the one proposed:

(Schema Property Analysis)

By ‘ $F_{[\text{NOUN}]}$ ’ we understand that property which is necessarily such that all and only  $F$ s have it.

This account provides the answer to the initial question about the relation between simple predications and property-attributions: a property-attribution employs a *complex* concept analysable with recourse to a general concept employed in the simple predication. Thus one may analyse a property-attribution of the form

(Prop-Att)  $a$  has  $F_{[\text{NOUN}]}$ .

as follows:

(Prop-Att\*)  $a$  has the property which is necessarily such that all and only  $F$ s possess it.

On this account, the meanings of simple predications and property-attributions are indeed modelled as intimately related, yet not as identical.

Two presuppositions of this proposal should be commented upon: *firstly*, because the proposal is intended to provide a genuine conceptual insight, it has to be assumed that in order to understand discourse about properties one must have at least a primitive grasp of a principle of individuation of properties. The assumption is plausible because in general one should not interpret a certain kind of discourse as involving reference to  $\phi$ s (and predication about  $\phi$ s) if it is not a requirement of mastering the discourse to know some

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<sup>14</sup> Cp. Peterson’s similar proposal (1986: 296).

identity-conditions for  $\phi$ s.<sup>15</sup> The relevant knowledge need not be explicit; some form of implicit knowledge suffices. This will manifest itself in a basic understanding of how to *count* and *re-identify*  $\phi$ s, and thus in the ability to distinguish between a good many true and false identity statements about  $\phi$ s (in the present case: identity statements about properties).

*Secondly*, the proposal relies on a view about the *individuation* of properties (two properties cannot be necessarily coexemplified). This is not the right place to defend this view in detail.<sup>16</sup> Fortunately, the general idea behind the proposal is independent of such a view. The account could be modified in order to accommodate for a more fine-grained conception of properties, if one replaced the modal constraint of (Ind-Prop) by some stronger notion (as for instance a notion of essence that is stronger than that of necessity).<sup>17</sup> The basic idea is that concepts expressed by property-designators are derived from the concepts expressed by the associated general terms, such that an understanding of the property term requires knowledge about what it is to have the property, while the concept expressed by the associated general term enters into the content of such knowledge.

### 3. Concessions – Virtual Set Theory and Virtual Property Talk

To deny that simple predications and corresponding property-attributions are *very close* in meaning would surely be absurd; but this absurdity is nothing that the present account could be accused of, because it involves an explanation of the close semantic connections between these sentences. As can be seen from the quotation above, Quine would nevertheless sense absurdity here; it is already the simple *denial* of the *Synonymy Thesis* that he regards not only as false, but as absurd. The strong intuitions on which Quine relied should be taken seriously. In this section it will be shown how these intuitions can be accommodated within the defended position (or rather, an extension of it which will be presented in a minute). Part of what is required has already been accomplished; the proximity in meaning that the present proposal attributes to simple predications and property-attributions can be called upon to explain how the intuitions in question (albeit

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<sup>15</sup> A thesis defended by Evans (1975: 355–56).

<sup>16</sup> The defence would rely on a distinction between finely individuated *concepts* and more coarsely individuated properties: see Bealer (1982), Jackson (1998: 15–16, 126–27), and Künne (2003: 26, *et passim*), and cp. Strawson (1987: 404).

<sup>17</sup> Cp. Fine (1994).

misguidedly) arise. But there is more to be said; it will now be argued that the intuitions are not only *close* to the truth, but that they *are* true indeed – the apparent clash between them and the present view can be dissolved. To show how this is possible Quine's idea of *Virtual Set Theory* (hereafter *VST*) will be exploited.<sup>18</sup> But first, an outline of *VST* shall be presented.

Imagine a fragment of English not containing any idioms related to mathematical set theory; call it  $\mathfrak{R}_S$  (for: English **r**educed with respect to **s**et-theory). By the following stipulation one may introduce some new linguistic forms into  $\mathfrak{R}_S$ :<sup>19</sup>

(Df. *Set*)  $y \in \{x: Fx\} \leftrightarrow_{\text{df.}} Fy$ .

What is introduced by the definitional schema (Df. *Set*) is the predicate ' $\in \{x: Fx\}$ ' – it is introduced *as an unbreakable whole* by a kind of contextual definition. The new sentences by which the language is thus enriched are, by definition, nothing but *stylistic variants* of sentences which had already been available to the speakers of  $\mathfrak{R}_S$ . One may go on and define some additional symbols, which are commonly used as predicates and functors for sets; for example one may have

(Df.  $\subseteq$ )  $a \subseteq b \leftrightarrow_{\text{df.}} \forall x (x \in a \rightarrow x \in b)$

(Df.  $\cup$ ) ' $a \cup b$ ' abbreviates ' $\{x: x \in a \vee x \in b\}$ '.

While one has thus enriched the vocabulary of  $\mathfrak{R}_S$ , it is important to see that this is only an enrichment of the stock of *phrases* available in  $\mathfrak{R}_S$  whereas the conceptual resources of  $\mathfrak{R}_S$  have remained exactly the same. In particular it should be noted that the new phrases of  $\mathfrak{R}_S$ , although look-alikes of set-theoretic statements, *are not about sets*. They are just about whatever those sentences of  $\mathfrak{R}_S$  were about that were used to define them. The sentence

(1)  $\text{Socrates} \in \{x: x \text{ is wise}\}$ ,

for example, will involve no more reference to a set than

(1\*)  $\text{Socrates is wise}$ ,

does – none at all. The new sentences of  $\mathfrak{R}_S$  just *simulate* certain parts of set-theory by their looks and thus form a *virtual* set theory. The set-theoretic sentences common to *VST*

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<sup>18</sup> Cp. Quine (1963: 15–21, 1970: 69–72).

<sup>19</sup> (Df. *Set*) can be modified in order to avoid certain complications that arise due to the involved variables (cp. Quine 1963: 16–17).

and genuine set theory (*GST*, for short) therefore differ in meaning; while interpreted as a sentence of *GST*, (1) mentions a set, interpreted as a sentence of *VST*, it does not. And similar remarks apply to sentential components in *VST* and *GST*: just as the sentences in *VST* only seem to be about sets, expressions of the form ‘{ ... }’ – as used in *VST* – only seem to be singular terms. Equally, the membership sign, ‘ $\in$ ’, only seems to signify a relation. No sets are recognised in *VST*, and thus there is no reference to them and nothing truly predicable of them – but of course, things are different with *GST*, where terms of the sort ‘{ ... }’ are singular terms referring to sets.

Now it is important to notice that virtual and genuine set theory do not only differ in their conceptual and referential resources, they also differ in what expressions count as well-formed. Some sentences of *GST* do not have well-formed equivalents in *VST*. In *GST*, singular terms for sets may flank the membership expression ‘ $\in$ ’ on either side. In *VST*, only the right-hand side allows for the occurrence of (apparent) singular terms for sets, because none of the definitions provides for the use on the left-hand side. Furthermore, the existential quantifier in *GST* ranges over sets (among other things, if there are *Urelements*). It does not in *VST*, since *VST* does not recognise sets at all.

A last word on these issues: a *hybrid* language, incorporating both *VST* and *GST*, can be imagined. Indeed, the reader does not have to engage her fantasy to do so. Since every reader of these lines should be familiar by now with *VST* and *GST*, her idiolect will be the language sought-after. This implies that set-theoretic sentences have become ambiguous – they allow for different readings, depending on whether one interprets them by the standards of *VST* or by those of *GST*. Indeed, sentences containing more than one term of the form ‘{ ... }’ may even be interpreted as *hybrid statements*. As an example take the sentence (where ‘ $\emptyset$ ’ abbreviates ‘ $\{x: x \neq x\}$ ’):

$$(3) \quad \emptyset \in \{x: x \notin x\}.$$

Interpreted as a sentence of *VST*, (3) is ungrammatical (remember, in that dialect, terms of the form ‘ $\{x: \dots x \dots\}$ ’ appear only on the right-hand side of the membership sign). Interpreted as belonging to *GST* it is either false or lacks a truth-value (depending upon the correct semantics for empty singular terms), because there is no set that contains everything which is not a member of itself. But if it is given a mixed reading such that the grammatical predicate is interpreted in terms of virtual set talk and the subject in terms of genuine set talk, then one gets a plain and simple truth:

$$(3^*) \quad \emptyset \notin \emptyset.$$

Enough about sets. Now imagine a fragment of English not containing any expressions for properties; call it  $\mathfrak{R}_P$  (for: English **r**educed with respect to **p**roperty-talk). One may adopt the following stipulations to introduce some new linguistic forms into  $\mathfrak{R}_P$ , involving either gerundive constructions:

(Df. *Property*\*)  $y$  has the property of being  $F \leftrightarrow_{\text{df.}} y$  is  $F$ ,

or derived abstract nouns:

(Df. *Property*)  $y$  has  $F_{[\text{NOUN}]}$   $\leftrightarrow_{\text{df.}}$   $y$  is  $F$ .

What is generated by (Df. *Property*) may be called *Virtual Property Talk* (*VPT*). One gets a language containing expressions that, at first glance, seem to refer to properties. But they are introduced as nothing but stylistic variants of expressions not dealing with properties at all. Property terms of *VPT* are not used as singular terms; rather, they form inseparable parts of predicates. So *VST* simulates property talk; however, the fragment of English language that deals with properties allows for far more locutions than those introduced by (Df. *Property*). And as one may expect, what was said about the difference between *VST* and *GST* can also be applied to virtual and genuine property talk. The analogy between the cases is evident.

This analogy has an explanatory value. The coherence of *Virtual Property Talk* cannot be disputed – (Df. *Property*) is a perfectly sound way of introducing property locutions into a language. But not only is it coherent, it is also a rather obvious possibility. Hence, realists about properties should acknowledge that a virtual understanding of property-attributions is available to natural speakers just as antirealists should.

Now the suggestion is that the availability of virtual property talk actually plays a role in our mastering of genuine property talk – we may at first *learn* to use basic idioms of genuine property talk *in their virtual reading* (equally, the availability of virtual set theory certainly plays a role in learning genuine set theory). But the process of learning which a native English speaker undergoes will not be completed until she also learns how to use property-designators *as singular terms*. And the use of property-designators as components of predicates is just one of a pattern of interlocking uses in which the status of these terms as singular terms consists.<sup>20</sup> That is, the speaker will learn to use predicates applicable to property-designators, learn to quantify into their position, and so on

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<sup>20</sup> This was clearly seen by Quine (cp. Quine 1960: 119).

(compare the list above).<sup>21</sup> By doing this, she also learns to use property terms with a meaning *different* from the meaning they had in *VPT*. So then, English expressions containing property-designators will be *ambiguous*; they allow for a reading according to *VPT* as well as for a different one, according to *GPT*.

Recognising this kind of ambiguity allows for a smooth explanation of the intuitions behind the *Synonymy Thesis*. It is grounded in the availability and importance of *virtual property talk*. But then, it is furthermore just *true*. Its truth, however, does not conflict with the denial of the *Synonymy Thesis*. The intuition is correct *under one reading* of property terms, namely the virtual reading. It is false, however, under the reading in terms of *genuine property talk*. Thus, Quine's and Strawson's intuition can now directly be integrated into the present proposal.

A further observation on the current picture: on reflection, it nicely fits with a certain awkwardness some people may feel about a consequence which is usually drawn from the discovery of the Russellian property of not exemplifying itself. Most philosophers would agree that such a property cannot exist, on pain of paradox. But yet it is true to say of some properties that they do not exemplify themselves: courage, for instance, is not courageous and therefore does not exemplify itself. Being exemplified by only one entity, to cite a second case, is a property exemplified by more than one entity, and therefore it does not exemplify itself. Of course, there are also properties that do exemplify themselves: the property of being abstract is itself abstract.

Now although courage does not exemplify itself, there is nevertheless good reason to reject the following sentence:

(5) Courage possesses the property of not exemplifying itself.

If the property designator in (5) is understood as a genuine singular term, then one of the existential presuppositions of (5) is not fulfilled. There is no such property as the property of not exemplifying itself. So, it cannot be true that anything exemplifies *it*, and (5) cannot be true. (Whether (5) is then false or rather lacks a truth-value depends upon how to treat empty singular terms; the question need not be decided here.)

But someone who was at first willing to assent to (5) may, after being told about the lurking threat of inconsistency, take refuge in the following answer: 'Well, I see your

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<sup>21</sup> The idea that the classification of a term (in a given usage) *as a singular term* depends on how the speaker treats it in relation to other terms (particularly to quantifying phrases) is central to Dummett's (1973: ch. 4) explication of a *singular term*, and to Hale's (1996: 35–39, 46–47) improved variant of it.



point. There cannot be such a property. But still it seems that we can say something true by uttering (5). For could we not simply mean by it that courage does not exemplify itself?’

Now, if the picture drawn is correct, then so is this answer. Indeed, (5) allows for different readings; if one interprets it by the standards of *GPT*, the statement comes out false, because it then presupposes there being a property which there cannot be. If one interprets it by the standards of *VPT* it yields non-sense, because no property designator can occupy subject-position in the sentences of *VPT*. But if one interprets (5) as a *hybrid* statement, by reading *only* its predicate *virtually* but not its subject, then (5) is equivalent to the *true* statement

(5\*)                      Courage does not exemplify itself.

The parallels with the two readings of (3) discussed above are obvious.

Finally, two remarks on Strawson and Quine are in place; one on a point on which they agreed, another on a point on which they disagreed. Agreement first: Strawson and Quine phrased their view on the relation between simple predications and property-attributions partly in terms of *ontological commitments*. With the current picture, good sense can be made of their claim that by using property-attributions one does not commit oneself to anything except that which one is already committed to by the use of simple predications. Indeed, whoever starts from simple predications and acquires property-attributions as a new linguistic form is not *eo ipso* committed to the acceptance of properties. The commitment will not arise until one proceeds to use property-designators *as singular terms*, thus adopting genuine property talk instead of virtual one. And doing this requires the adoption of more linguistic forms than just property-attributions. It is the whole fragment of language constituting property discourse that gives rise to commitments to properties; property-attributions may inherit these commitments by occupying a place in the system, but they will not have them on their own and in virtue of their syntactic form.

And now a word on an issue about which Strawson and Quine disagreed: realism and antirealism about properties. It is worthwhile to see that one can employ the notion of virtual property talk to describe the position of antirealists with regard to properties. Antirealists often hold that phrases apparently dealing with properties can be paraphrased away by some transformation-rules. Hence, these antirealists in effect argue that property discourse as it appears in actual English is, taken as a whole, nothing but virtual. Earlier in this paper, it was surmised that whether someone should endorse the *Synonymy Thesis* or not may depend upon whether she is a realist about properties. Now it can be seen why

this is indeed the case. While it is perfectly reasonable for an antirealist to hold the thesis, it is the realist who should deny it – or, as it was argued, he should distinguish between two readings of property-attributions, one of which (the virtual reading) is subject to the thesis while the other (the genuine reading) is not. Thus, though realism was the working hypothesis of this paper, there is in one respect a deeper disagreement with Strawson than with Quine. While the latter's endorsement of the *Synonymy Thesis* is in agreement with his antirealist view on properties, the former (as well as other realists) should think differently about it.

#### 4. Conclusion

The main stages of the inquiry were the following: first, an argument against the *Synonymy Thesis* was presented. Simple predications and property-attributions have different conditions of understanding; therefore, they are not synonymous.

The discussion of this argument then led to the question about how one acquires the conceptual framework of properties. This question should be faced by any realist concerning ordinary property discourse, who does not want to declare concepts of properties as innate concepts. And the latter is unattractive; there are no reasons to attribute to anyone the concept of a property who has not mastered certain linguistic forms and who has no clue about there being anything in addition to the ordinary things he talks about.

It was argued that the most important steps in the acquisition of this conceptual framework are the following: one learns how to systematically derive from general terms other terms that have the look of singular terms, but that may be learned as components of unbreakable predicates (which is why the *Synonymy Thesis* has a true reading and its proponents can meet me halfway). However, one also starts using them *as* singular terms (which is why the *Synonymy Thesis* also has a false reading). This linguistic behaviour may be described as our (implicitly) adopting the premise that apart from those things of which general terms are true *there are things of another sort*, systematically related to general terms; put metaphorically, one lets predication curdle to obtain properties. But metaphors easily lead us astray; it should not be suggested that properties are *dependent* on language. The claim is only that the *acquisition* of the conception of properties is mediated by the acquisition of certain linguistic practises (which may or may not distinguish

properties from other entities, e.g. spatio-temporal things; in any event, the kinds of linguistic forms relevant to both cases will differ significantly).<sup>22</sup>

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