
The Metaphysics of Abstract Objects

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THE METAPHYSICS OF ABSTRACT OBJECTS*

What is-or should be-meant by the expression 'abstract object', and what sort of reasons could we have for supposing that such objects exist? These are the questions that I want to address in this paper. My strategy will be first to examine the general notion of an "object," then to consider several different conceptions of abstractness, and finally to discuss how existence claims in metaphysics are to be adjudicated, with special reference to the existence of such paradigmatically abstract objects as universals, numbers, and sets.

I. OBJECTS

What, in general, is an "object"? Here I shall examine two rival answers to this question, the *semantic answer* and the *metaphysical answer*, coming down eventually in favor of the latter.

(...)

I turn, then, to the metaphysical answer to the question 'What is an object?'. The answer I have in mind is simply that to be an *object* is to be an entity possessing *determinate identity conditions* (though not necessarily a *criterion* of identity, for the reason just given). If x and y are objects, there must be a "fact of the matter" as to whether or not x is identical with y . That is to say, the identity statement ' $x = y$ ' must be of determinate truth value.

* I am grateful for comments received when an earlier version of this paper was read to an audience at Queen's University/Belfast, and am particularly indebted to Alan Weir for his remarks on that draft.

¹ The present discussion continues one begun in my "Objects and Criteria of Identity," in Bob Hale and Crispin Wright, eds., *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Blackwell, forthcoming).

² See, for example, Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1981, 2nd ed.), ch. 4; and Quine, "Speaking of Objects," in his *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia, 1969).

As an illustration of how the metaphysical answer may be applied, one reason why I am inclined to doubt whether so-called subatomic "particles" are properly to be thought of as objects is that it seems that in their case identity statements concerning them can genuinely be indeterminate.⁵ (Note here, with regard to the issue of "wave-particle" duality, that waves—even those of the ordinary seaside variety!—are indeed not "objects" according to the metaphysical answer, because they lack determinate identity.)

Now, it is an implication of the metaphysical answer that there can be *entities* that are not objects. (Waves provide an example.) As we might put it, 'Not everything is a thing'---understanding 'thing' here to mean 'object'. Of course, according to the Quinean version of the semantic answer, this statement must necessarily be false: on that view, it is just trivially true that everything is a thing, since what the quantifier 'everything' ranges over is precisely *things*---which it does because "things" themselves, by this account, are precisely to be understood as what the quantifier ranges over. But the first version of the semantic answer seems to imply a different response---witness Frege's distinction between objects and *concepts*, the latter precisely not being things or objects. Be that as it may, I myself am certainly happy to countenance the existence of many entities that are not objects or things---much as P. F. Strawson⁶ distinguishes between "particulars" and "nonparticulars." Some of these entities can be described as "ways things are," recalling to mind the scholastic distinction between *substance* and *mode*. For example, an object's individual shape and color can be thought of as "ways it is"---namely, as how it is colored and how it is shaped, respectively. But its color, say, is not "itself" an object, somehow related to the object of which it is the color. If it were an object, it would have determinate identity conditions, and yet it does not appear that it can have these. Supposing the colored object to be uniformly colored, it makes doubtful sense

⁵ See, for example, his *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1991), introduction.

⁶ See my "Vague Objects and Quantum Indeterminacy," *Analysis*, LIV (1994): 110-14.

⁷ *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (New York: Methuen, 1959), pp. 226ff.

to ask whether "the color" of its top half is *numerically identical* with "the color" of its bottom half, or whether either or both of these is identical with "the color" of the whole object. Certainly, these questions cannot apparently be answered in a nonarbitrary and principled way. (Of course, the questions do make sense and trivially receive the answer 'Yes' if 'the color of *x*' is construed as referring to a universal: but here I am supposing it to refer to what used to be called an "individual accident.")

(...)

II. ABSTRACT ENTITIES

In contemporary discussions of abstract entities, we can find at least three different conceptions of abstractness at work. On the first conception, the term 'abstract' is used in opposition to the term 'concrete', with concrete entities being thought of as existing in space and time (or at least in time), while abstract entities are correspondingly thought of as being nonspatiotemporal in nature. Let us call abstract entities in this first sense *abstract₁* entities. They would standardly be taken to include such items as numbers and universals.

On the second conception, an abstract entity is conceived as one logically incapable of enjoying a "separate" existence—separate, that is, from some other entity or entities—even though it may be separated "in thought" from that entity or those entities. (Such separation "in thought"—a psychological process—seems to be what philosophers like John Locke understood by "abstraction"; but in calling the entities thus separated "abstract," we are now invoking a *metaphysical* distinction, defined in terms of the impossibility of their separate existence.) For example, *modes--like* the individual shape and color of a particular apple—come into this category. One can separate "in thought" the apple's color from its other features, but an apple's color cannot *exist* independently of the existence of other features of it, nor, indeed, independently of the existence of the apple as a whole. I shall call abstract entities in this sense *abstract₂* entities.

⁷ *Material Beings* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1990), ch. 13.

⁸ See also my «Die Möglichkeit der Metaphysik," in J. Brandl, A. Hieke, and P. Simons, eds., *Metaphysik: Beiträge zum 3. Kongress der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Philosophie* (Bonn: Academia, forthcoming).

⁹ See, for example, Reinhardt Grossmann, *The Existence of the World* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 7.

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Finally, we have the third conception, according to which *abstract₃* entities are, as I shall explain more fully in due course, entities that are conceived of as being introduced by way of *abstraction from concepts*, according to Fregean abstraction principles.¹² A paradigm example would be Fregean extensions (of concepts), purportedly introduced by Frege's fatal "basic law V" of the *Grundgesetze*. The three different conceptions of abstract entities cut across each other in various ways, and each has its own problems, as we shall see.

So far, I have deliberately spoken only of abstract entities rather than of abstract objects. On my view of what constitutes an "object," an abstract object-in any of the three senses of "abstract" just mentioned-will have to be an entity possessed of determinate identity conditions. Thus, by my account, modes are not *abstract₂* objects, because they lack such conditions. [Hence waves, which are considered modes here, are could be considered as *abstract₂* entities]

Let us, however, return to the first conception of abstractness, which contrasts it with concreteness. As I have indicated, this contrast is normally drawn in spatiotemporal terms, with *abstract₁* entities being characterized as not existing "in" space and time.¹⁴ But what does it mean to characterize them so? How could an object exist "outside" space and time? ('Outside' is a spatial preposition, so this way of talking can at best be metaphorical.) I do not think there is any very deep problem here, however. To exist *in* space and time is not to have a special kind of existence-for the notion of existence, like that of identity, is univocal. Rather, it is just to have certain sorts of properties and relations-spatiotemporal ones. Numbers do not have shapes (a "square" number is not square shaped!), nor do they undergo change, and it is facts like these, if any, which justify our description of them as not existing "in" space and time. Thus, one

might be tempted to say that an object is abstract₁ if it necessarily lacks spatiotemporal properties and relations. [Waves, therefore, can be considered as concrete entities given the first criterion of abstraction.]

¹ See Campbell, *Abstract Particulars*. He himself is sensitive to the identity problem (see pp. 135ff.) and as a result moves to a "field" theory conception of tropes.

¹⁴ Difficulties for this way of drawing the contrast between abstract and concrete entities are raised in Gary S. Rosenkrantz, *Haecceity: An Ontological Essay* (Boston: Kluwer, 1993), pp. 56ff-but, as I imply below, I think these difficulties are not insuperable.

¹⁵ On "mere Cambridge" properties, see H.W. Noonan, *Personal Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 162ff.

ir. See further my "Objects and Criteria of Identity."