

Positive Universally Held Properties Are *Necessarily* Universally Held

Annual OZSW Conference 2015
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

12 December

Emanuel Rutten

*“Language may be a distorting mirror,
but it is the only mirror we have.”*

(Michael Dummett)

Preliminaries

- A **property** is whatever can be attributed to something by a predicate that uses no or one leading noun and zero or more adjectives
being Aristotle --- being red --- being a table --- being a red table
- A property is **universally held** if and only if everything that exists in the actual world has it
- A property is **necessarily universally held** if and only if it is universally held in all possible worlds
- A **positive property** is a property that is attributed by predicates such as ‘being triangular’, ‘being red’ and ‘being a red table’
- A **positive predicate** is a predicate that attributes a positive property to something

Preliminaries

- A **positive predictable expression** is an expression that can be used as a predicate and if so, yields a positive predicate
'Aristotle' --- 'red' --- 'table' --- 'red table' --- 'large red table'
- A **generic expression** is an expression that does not include singular expressions, e.g. 'red', 'table', 'red table' and 'large red table'
- A **positive predictable generic expression** is an expression that is both a positive predictable expression and a generic expression

Premise 1

- The first premise states that it is necessarily true that there are no things that do not exist (*Frege-Russell-Quine view of existence*)
- What exists is what there is and vice versa. To say ‘everything’ is just to say ‘everything that exists’ and the other way around

“If you think there are things that do not exist, give me an example of one. The right response to your example will be either, ‘That does too exist,’ or ‘There is no such thing as that.’” (Van Inwagen)

Premise 2

- The second premise of the argument is a statement of a Fregean theory of meaning. It consists of the following four theses:
 1. An expression occurring in a sentence has a **reference**
 - ‘Barack Obama’ refers to Barack Obama
 - ‘red’ refers to the set of all red things
 - ‘is part of’ refers to the set of pairs of objects such that for each pair of objects the first object is part of the second object
 2. Next to having a reference, an expression has a **meaning** (sense). It is the mode of presentation or the way of thinking of the reference

Sameness of reference does not entail sameness of meaning ('Phosphorus' and 'Hesperus' both refer to the planet Venus, but they differ in meaning)

Premise 2

3. The meaning of an expression determines its reference
4. A meaning can have **meaning elements**. An *elementary meaning* lacks meaning elements. A *complex meaning* is a meaning that is not elementary

Elementary meanings are expressed only by expressions that do not contain subexpressions, such as ‘Plato’, ‘red’, ‘being’ and ‘one’

Complex meanings can be expressed by expressions that contain subexpressions, such as ‘large red table’ or ‘the king of France’

Complex meanings can also be expressed by expressions that lack subexpressions. The meaning elements of the meaning expressed by ‘unicorn’ are the meanings expressed by ‘horn’, ‘forehead’ and ‘horse’

Or as another example: The meaning expressed by ‘vixen’ has the meanings expressed by ‘female’ and ‘fox’ as meaning elements

Premise 3

- The third premise is an *identity criterion* for meanings expressed by positive predictable generic expressions
- To state the premise I need one further notion, namely the **reference set** of a meaning. I define this notion recursively

The reference set of an *elementary meaning* is defined as the reference of that meaning. So, the reference set of the meaning expressed by ‘red’ is the set of all red things. The reference set of the meaning expressed by ‘Barack Obama’ is Barack Obama.

The reference set of a *complex meaning* is the union of the reference sets of the meaning elements of that complex meaning. So, the reference set of the meaning expressed by ‘unicorn’ is the set of all horns, all foreheads and all horses. The reference set of the meaning expressed by ‘writer of Ilias’ is the set of all writers and the Ilias

Premise 3

- Although we know that sameness of *reference* does not entail sameness of meaning, the third premise states that for positive predictable generic expressions sameness of *reference sets* in the actual world does in fact entail sameness of meaning
- M_1 and M_2 are meanings expressed by positive predictable generic expressions. If $RS(M_1) = RS(M_2)$ in the actual world, then $M_1 = M_2$

Let M_1 be the meaning expressed by ‘cordate’ and let M_2 be the meaning expressed by ‘renate’. The *reference* of M_1 is the same as the *reference* of M_2 (for every creature with a heart has a kidney and vice versa), while their meanings differ. This confirms premise 3 since the *reference set* of M_1 differs from the *reference set* of M_2 (for the meanings expressed by ‘pump’ and ‘chamber’ belong to the meaning elements of M_1 but not to those of M_2)

Many confirming examples are available and not a single counter example has been identified. Premise 3 is thus warranted by *inductive generalization* to the whole collection of positive predictable generic expressions

The argument stated

- Suppose for *reductio ad absurdum* that there is at least one positive universally held property *P* that is not *necessarily* universally held
- *P* is positive. But then ‘being *P*’ is a positive predicate and ‘*P*’ is a positive predictable expression. Further, since *P* is universally held, ‘*P*’ is in fact a *positive predictable generic expression*
- Let *M* be the meaning expressed by ‘*P*’. Since *P* is universally held, the *reference* of *M* is everything that exists
- *M* is either simple or complex. If *M* is simple, the *reference set* of *M* is the reference of *M* and therefore everything that exists
- If *M* is complex, we can recursively unfold *M*’s meaning elements to find at some stage an *elementary* meaning element *M** whose reference (and thus reference set) is everything that exists. But then again the *reference set* of *M* (being the *union* of the reference sets of *M** and all other meaning elements) is everything that exists

The argument stated

- Therefore, the reference set of M is everything that exists
- Now, the reference set of the meaning expressed by the positive predictable generic expression ‘exists’ is also everything that exists
- So, it follows that $\text{RS}(M) = \text{RS}(\text{meaning of ‘exists’})$
- Hence premise 3 entails that $M = \text{meaning of ‘exists’}$
- But then the meaning of ‘exists’ *is* the meaning of a predictable expression that, when used as a predicate, attributes a property, namely P , that is not necessarily universally held (*reductio ass.*)
- From this it follows that there is a possible world in which there are things that do not exist, which contradicts the first premise
- So we must reject the *reductio assumption*. The conclusion follows: *all* positive universally held properties are *necessarily* universally held

Corollaries

- Consider the positive property *being material*. This property is plausibly not *necessarily* universally held. For the existence of a thing that is not material seems at least possible
- But then the property of *being material* is not universally held either. After all, if everything would be material, everything would be necessarily material – which seems false
- Thus *materialism* fails. Analogously *physicalism* and *naturalism* fail as well
- Similarly one can show, contra *Berkeleyan idealism*, that not everything is mental. For, if that would be so, it would follow that everything is necessarily mental – which is again implausible
- *Solipsism* fails as well, since the property of *being the only thing in the world* is plausibly not necessarily universally held either

Corollaries

- We can go on: the property of *being contingent* is plausibly not necessarily universally held either. For a necessarily existing thing seems at least possible. But then it follows that this property is not universally held. So there is at least one necessary existing thing
- Or take the property of *being caused*. It certainly seems possible that not everything is caused. So this property is not necessarily universally held. But then it is not universally held. There must be at least one uncaused thing
- Similarly it follows that not everything is mereologically composite. Hence there are mereological atoms. For the same reason there are mereological composites as well, contra mereological nihilism
- By now the recipe for deriving further corollaries of interest to long-standing debates in metaphysics (and beyond) will be clear enough