A Semantic Argument Against the Existence of Universal Properties and Its Implications for the Likelihood of Theism

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Abstract

By conducting a semantic analysis of the reference and meaning of concepts that correspond to properties, and assessing its metaphysical implications, I develop a new argument for theism. Theism is understood here as the thesis that a personal being is the ultimate origin and ground of reality. More specifically, I argue that there are no universally held positive contingent properties and that this absence significantly increases the likelihood of theism. By integrating semantic inquiry with metaphysical reasoning, this paper offers a novel approach that contributes to ongoing debates in metaphysics and philosophy of religion.

Keywords

Semantic argument, Semantics, Metaphysics, Universal properties, God

1. Introduction

In Rutten (2021a), I develop what I call the semantic argument—an argument for the claim that universally held positive properties in the actual world are necessarily universally held, where the actual world is understood *de re* as *this* world. A property is universally held (i.e., universal) in some possible world if and only if all objects in that possible world possess it. A property is necessarily universally held—that is, a necessary property—if and only if it is universally held in all possible worlds. Thus, a property is necessary if and only if it is possessed by all objects in all possible worlds.

A contingent property is one that is not necessary. In other words, a property is contingent if and only if there exists at least one possible world in which at least one object lacks it. Throughout this paper, the term 'world', when used without qualification, refers to the actual world *de re* (i.e., *this* world) and is taken as synonymous with 'reality' and 'being'.

The semantic argument does not rely on any substantive theory of possible worlds. I adopt a minimal and widely used 'possible worlds' framework—common in analytic metaphysics and in contemporary modal arguments for theism—without committing to any particular ontology of possible worlds. Its role is merely to supply the standard modal apparatus needed to state the argument.

As I explain in Rutten (2021a, p. 139), I take properties to be anything that can be

attributed to something by a predicate. On this understanding, claiming that something is a property does not involve an ontological commitment. Moreover, I adopt a generic notion of positive properties (e.g., 'being red' as opposed to 'being not red') that is compatible with various accounts of positive properties in the literature (Rutten, 2021a, p. 140).

In this paper, I demonstrate that the absence of universally held positive contingent properties in the world has far-reaching metaphysical implications, including consequences for the nature of the ultimate origin of the world. I argue that this absence plausibly entails that the ultimate ground of reality is neither matter, as materialists maintain, nor information, as Platonists suggest, but rather a self-conscious or personal being. Moreover, a personal being that is the first cause of the world—a personal first cause—can reasonably be referred to as God.

Thus, if sound, my argumentation implies that the conclusion of my semantic argument not only increases the probability of God's existence, understood as a self-aware conscious being who constitutes the ultimate ground and origin of the world, but renders it likely. In doing so, this paper extends the semantic argument developed in Rutten (2021a) into an argument for the existence of God. Additionally, in this paper, I develop the semantic argument from Rutten (2021a) in a more concise and accessible manner, without compromising its rigor.

Let me briefly outline the broader publication history of the semantic argument to properly situate it. In addition to Rutten (2021a), the extended argument developed in this paper is primarily based on Rutten (2018, pp. 185-192), (2021b, pp. 181-186), and (2023, pp. 103-124)—all in Dutch—with significant revisions and major expansions, as well as on earlier versions of the argument posted on my site and blog, dating back to 2011. A similar but limited exposition of the extended argument in Dutch was published in Rutten (2022).

I presented the extended version of the argument as developed in the present paper at the *International Proofs of God's Existence Conference*, organized by the Science Philosophy Religion Foundation in Istanbul in the spring of 2023, during a lecture titled 'The Semantic Argument and Its Implications for the Likelihood of the Existence of God'.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In the next section, I begin with several important preliminaries. Subsequently, in Section 3, I introduce and argue for a specific identity criterion for the meaning of concepts expressed through language. This criterion is the core premise of the semantic argument. In Section 4, I derive the semantic argument's conclusion—namely, that no positive contingent property is universally held—and in section 5, I infer a broad and diverse range of metaphysical consequences from this conclusion, including the implication that it is likely true that God exists. In Section 6 I present a further improved version of the semantic argument's core premise and Section 7 concludes the paper.

2. Preliminaries

Since the core premise of the semantic argument is an identity criterion for semantic or linguistic meaning, the argument is premised on a claim concerning the semantic structure of language. It thus derives metaphysical conclusions from semantics. In doing so, it combines two philosophical fields in a way that is relatively rare. Can metaphysical implications reasonably be drawn from the structure of language? Does language mirror reality?

It is not unreasonable to assume that the general structure of language reflects the structure of the world, thereby offering valuable insights into the nature of reality. A careful analysis of language can illuminate the types of objects that populate the world. For instance, names (such as 'Aristotle') and definite descriptions (such as 'the author of *De Anima*') reflect the category of objects, whereas general terms (such as 'blue,' 'tree', or 'friend') reflect the categories of properties and relations.

Language thus teaches us that the world consists of objects, properties, and relations. It also reveals that objects have properties (e.g., Mark's car is blue) and that objects can stand in various relations to one another (e.g., Mark and Eva are friends). The fundamental structure of language, therefore, points us towards the structure of the world. It is precisely because it is reasonable to think that the structure of language corresponds to the structure of the world that linguistic analysis can serve as a meaningful tool for gaining insights into the nature of reality.

This is not to say, of course, that we can learn about the world exclusively through linguistic analysis. Nor do I claim that an analysis of language alone can establish the existence of objects, properties, and relations. Reflecting on the structure of the world encompasses much more than just linguistic analysis. Nonetheless, linguistic analysis can contribute fruitfully to this broader enquiry.

Until now I've assumed implicitly the perspective of metaphysical realism. Metaphysical realism holds that metaphysics enquires into the world as it is in itself. However, let me introduce an alternative perspective from which the use of language analysis for metaphysical enquiry is equally acceptable. In various publications, I have developed a *world-for-us epistemology* in dialogue with, but more importantly, in opposition to Kant (Rutten, 2018, 2020, 2021b, 2024). The central idea here is, in essence, a Heideggerian one: humans are thrown into the world. Being thrown, humans continually interpret the world in which they find themselves in order to seek firm ground. We are always already interpreting beings, and we cannot step outside of this hermeneutical condition.

All of our knowledge, therefore, is knowledge about the world *as it is for us*. Human knowledge is inevitably confined to the world as we experience and conceptualize it. Thus, from a world-for-us epistemological perspective, 'the world' always refers to the world as it is for us, or simply, the *world-for-us*. The world-for-us is the world in which we as human

beings are inescapably thrown and beyond which we can never reach.

Therefore, all of our projects, including our metaphysical projects, unfold wholly within and are solely about the world-for-us. According to the world-for-us epistemology, this is an inescapable condition of human existence. However, this does not imply—and here I oppose Kant—that metaphysics is impossible. Metaphysics is permissible. It is epistemically permissible, provided we continually recognize that it pertains to the world as it is for us instead of to the world as it is in itself. I refer to such metaphysics as metaphysics-*for-us* or 'world-for-us metaphysics'. There is nothing objectionable about such a metaphysics.

From the existential-hermeneutic standpoint provided by the world-for-us epistemology, one can attempt to reveal the most fundamental features, patterns, and structures of the world-for-us. One of the most salient characteristics of the world-for-us is its linguistic nature. The world-for-us is inherently linguistic, for we, as human beings, are linguistic creatures. As Aristotle puts it, humans are *zoon logon echon*, animals possessing logos. We are beings of language. We breathe language. Language is, therefore, a force that permeates everything given to us. We live constantly in and through language within the world-for-us. It is not simply the case that words matter because their choice opens a particular perspective on the given. Rather, givenness itself always already appears as something disclosed through language. And the being of givenness is for us precisely grounded in this linguistic disclosure.

Language thus constitutes a fundamental structure of the world-for-us. Through the analysis of language—by mapping its semantic structure—we can gain insights into the structure of the world-for-us. Language analysis, then, becomes an essential tool in the hands of the world-for-us metaphysician. By enriching the metaphysician's toolkit with this instrument, a fruitful and powerful 'metaphysics of language' emerges. It is thus language that guides us. Language shows us the way. From the viewpoint of the world-for-us epistemology, through revealing and laying bare the linguistic structure of language, we come to grasp the fundamental structure of the world as it is perceived and thought by human beings.

The world-for-us epistemology, together with the 'metaphysics of language' outlined above, can be considered a methodological foundation for my semantic argument. Indeed, from the world-for-us point of view, I maintain that my semantic argument serves as a paradigmatic example of a 'metaphysis of language' world-for-us argument.

Thus, if one prefers, the semantic argument can also be evaluated from a world-for-us epistemological perspective, making it relevant and plausible from both the standpoint of metaphysical realism and the standpoint of the world-for-us epistemology. In the following sections, I will present the argument in a way that abstracts from the specific perspective adopted. The argument thus remains applicable whether considered from the standpoint of metaphysical realism or from that of my world-for-us epistemology.

To set the stage for the argument, I will first outline the ontological framework and define key terms. The world is a totality of objects. Everything that exists is an object. Examples of objects include my mobile phone, the chair I am sitting on, and the laptop on which I am now writing this text. Trees, plants, and animals are likewise objects. You and I, too, are objects.

Even God, if God exists, is an object. For in the most general sense, an object is nothing more and nothing less than something that exists. Molecules, electrons, protons, and neutrons are therefore also objects. In fact, that everything is an object is taken to be a necessary truth. It holds in all possible worlds.

As previously stated, objects possess properties. For instance, my phone has a particular color, and my chair has a certain weight. The tree in the front yard is a pine tree, and Sabrina is a woman. Note that for the semantic argument the quantifiers range over a domain of objects in the standard model-theoretic sense. Properties are not elements of this domain. The argument therefore does not presuppose that properties exist as objects.

I limit the scope of properties for the semantic argument to positive properties. This restriction has nothing to do with the feelings a property may evoke in us or the value we may ascribe to it. Rather, it is a decision to set aside negative properties, such as 'being not green', 'being not a tree,' and 'being not a woman'. It will become clear that the restriction to positive properties suffices for the purposes of the semantic argument, as explained in the introduction.

For the same reason, I limit the scope of properties to those that genuinely attach to an object. That is to say, I only consider properties that add something to the object (such as 'being blue' or 'wearing glasses'), reflect its nature (such as 'being a woman' or 'being material'), or pertain to a modification of it (such as 'being bent' or 'being old').

For example, to assert that an object is located north of Paris may be a true predication, but the corresponding relational property ('being located north of Paris') does not fall within the scope of the semantic argument, as it does not genuinely attach to the object itself. As another example, consider a blue-colored object. We can truthfully say of this object that it is either blue or red. However, 'being blue or red' is not a property within the scope of the argument. What genuinely attaches to the object is only 'being blue'. So, 'being blue' is a property that falls within the semantic argument's scope.

Merely conditional properties are not attaching properties either. Consider the property of being an object with at most three parts. This property specifies a condition—namely, not having more than three parts—that does not, as such, attach to the object. What genuinely attaches to an object are properties such as 'being made of iron', 'being material', or 'being red', not 'being an object whose number of parts is not greater than three'. Since the upper bound of three does not, in its role as an upper bound, attach to the object, the property is not an attaching property. Similar examples can be given: if an object weighs 10 kg, what attaches

to the object is the property of weighing 10 kg, not the merely conditional property of weighing less than 100 kg.

Vacuously formal properties—such as 'being an object such that 1+1=2'—are also not attaching properties. The truth of '1+1=2' does not attach to the object in any meaningful way. Or take the property of being an object that satisfies a given logically valid one-variable formula. A logically valid one-variable formula is a formula with a single free variable that is true in virtue of its logical form—modulo substitutions of definitions—and is thus logically necessarily true of every object in every possible world. Hence, any logically valid one-variable formula is trivially satisfied by all objects in all possible worlds, and does thus not result in anything being attached to those objects themselves. That property does therefore not genuinely attach to the objects that have it. It is vacuously formal, like the property of being an object such that there are infinitely many prime numbers.

From this point onwards, when I refer to properties, I refer to those properties that, in accordance with the preceding restrictions, fall within the scope of the semantic argument.

The conclusion to be established by the argument—that there are no universally held contingent properties—is a universal claim about contingent properties. Indeed, necessary properties, such as 'being an object' or 'being self-identical' are by definition universally held, and necessarily so. Properties such as 'being an object' and 'being self-identical' are necessary because, necessarily, everything is an object and self-identical—that is, there is no possible world in which something (some object) is not an object or not identical to itself. Therefore, for the purposes of the argument, I accept the Law of Non-Contradiction and the Law of Identity as necessary truths, valid in all possible worlds.

The argument's conclusion, which asserts that there are no universally held contingent properties, pertains, as mentioned previously, specifically to the actual world (i.e., *this* world). I thus do not claim that it holds for non-actual possible worlds. In fact, there are non-actual possible worlds in which the conclusion does not hold. For instance, consider a possible world that consists solely of a single atom. In this possible world, the contingent property 'being an atom' is in fact universally held.

With this qualification, the semantic argument's conclusion amounts to the following. If property *p* is such that some object in some possible world lacks *p*, then there is an object in the *actual world* that lacks *p*. With respect to the actual world, I thus claim modal collapse for 'lackings'—possible lackings are actual lackings. This is a substantial metaphysical claim. For why, for any contingent property *p*, would there be some object in the actual world that lacks *p*, merely because there exists some possible world in which some object lacks *p*? To derive the conclusion of the argument, I must introduce a number of additional terms.

Each property corresponds to a *concept*. For example, the property of being red corresponds to the concept 'red', the property of being a beech tree to the concept 'beech

tree', and the property of being a woman to the concept 'woman'. Every concept has a *reference*. The reference of a concept is the collection of all objects that fall under that concept. Thus, the reference of 'red' is the collection of all red objects in the world, and the reference of 'beech tree' is the collection of all beech trees. The meaning of a concept determines its reference. Note that the reference of a concept typically varies across possible worlds.

Two concepts are identical if they share the same meaning. For example, the concepts denoted by 'object' and 'thing' are identical—they have the same meaning. The same applies to the concepts denoted by 'car' and 'automobile', or the concepts denoted by 'bachelor' and 'single'. The concepts 'married spouse' and 'spouse' are also identical because a spouse, by definition, is someone who is married. Conversely, in certain contexts, it may be unclear which concept is meant. Consider the concept 'bank'. Does it apply to a bench, a sofa bed, or a financial institution? To avoid misunderstandings, we must always specify which concept is meant. Therefore, instead of merely saying 'bank', we clarify by specifying whether we mean a bench, a sofa bed or a financial institution, depending on the context.

To be able to present the semantic argument, a few more terms are necessary. It is well known that two different concepts can share the same reference. For example, every animal that has a kidney also has a heart, and vice versa. The reference of the concept 'animal with a kidney' is thus the same as that of 'animal with a heart'. Both refer to all vertebrates in the world. Nevertheless, these are different concepts, as having a kidney is not the same as having a heart. Thus, having the same reference does not guarantee that two concepts are identical in meaning. Even if two concepts share the same reference, they may still be distinct concepts.

In addition to a reference, concepts also have a *reference set*. This is a term I coin specifically for my semantic argument. To explain what a reference set is, I must first address the distinction between elementary and composite concepts. The vast majority of concepts can be broken down into component concepts. Take the concept 'unicorn'. We can define 'unicorn' in terms of 'horse', 'forehead', and 'horn'. Thus, the concepts 'horse', 'forehead', and 'horn' are the component concepts of 'unicorn'. Together, they form the concept 'unicorn'. Or consider the concept 'mare'. A mare can be defined as a female horse, and thus, the concept 'mare' consists of the component concepts 'female' and 'horse'. When combined, these concepts form the concept of 'mare'. Concepts made up of component concepts are what I call complex or *composite* concepts.

Some concepts are not composite. These I call simple or *elementary*. Elementary concepts cannot be broken down into further component concepts. Note that the distinction between elementary and composite concepts does not presuppose that every composite concept can be reduced to a set of elementary concepts. Hence, no commitment to semantic atomism is

assumed.

Consider the concepts ‘blue’ and ‘object’. These are elementary because they cannot be defined in terms of component concepts. Now, the component concepts of a composite concept can themselves consist of component concepts. Take the concept ‘blue car’. This concept consists of the component concepts ‘blue’ and ‘car’. The concept ‘blue’ is elementary and cannot be further decomposed, but this is not the case with the concept ‘car’. We can define ‘car’ in terms of component concepts, and therefore, this concept consists of component concepts. It is a composite concept.

Or consider the concept ‘human’. Humans can be defined as rational animals, as Aristotle proposed. Therefore, the concept ‘human’ consists of the component concepts ‘rational’ and ‘animal’. The concept ‘rational’ is elementary, but ‘animal’ is composite. An animal can be defined as a sentient life form. Thus, the concept ‘animal’ consists of the component concepts ‘sentient’ and ‘life form’. The concept ‘sentient’ is elementary, but ‘life form’ is composite. The concept ‘sentient’ signifies a specific, indefinable quality of feeling or perceiving that we all experience. The meaning of ‘life form’, on the other hand, is tied to chemical and physical processes and can be further analyzed as metabolizing matter. Therefore, ‘life form’ is not an elementary concept but a composite one. It consists of the component concepts ‘metabolizing’ and ‘matter’. We can continue breaking down concepts in this way as long as we do not arrive at concepts that cannot be further broken down, such as the previously mentioned concepts ‘blue’ and ‘object’. These are elementary concepts, since they cannot be analyzed in terms of component concepts.

The fundamental presupposition here is that there is a natural way in which each composite concept can be divided into component concepts. This is precisely the breakdown that ‘cuts nature at its joints’, as Plato puts it in his *Phaedrus*, and which David Lewis (1986) echoes. Each concept corresponds to a meaning, and precisely because complex meanings break down into meaning parts or meaning elements, composite concepts break down into component concepts. The presumption that reality has a categorical structure that is reflected by language accords with the fundamental principle that the structure of language mirrors the structure of the world.

While concepts can be characterized in various ways, a concept is uniquely defined by the characterization that best aligns with the categorical structure of reality. Moreover, while there may be a debate about the correct definition of a concept in specific cases, this does not undermine the assumption that reality has a categorical structure. The idea that language reflects a ‘categorical structure’ of reality is meant in a semantic sense: certain ways of decomposing complex meanings into meaning elements fit better with how the world is structured, without presupposing any one-to-one correspondence between concepts and properties, or between concepts and referents.

Identical concepts, such as ‘married spouse’ and ‘spouse’, or ‘car’ and ‘automobile’, share the same component concepts. Conversely, concepts that share the same component concepts are identical. Furthermore, the concept ‘object’ is never a component concept of another concept. For everything that exists is by definition an object. It thus does not add anything to assert that, for example, a tree is an object. Therefore, ‘object’ is not part of the component concepts that together form the concept ‘tree’. And the same applies to any other concept. Moreover, any concept other than ‘object’ that overlaps with ‘object’ by logical necessity—such as ‘being a part’ (if, by definition, each object is a part of itself) or ‘being one’ (since each object is numerically one)—is never a component concept either. Since every object falls under such concepts by logical necessity, it adds nothing to the definition or meaning of, for example, a tree to assert that it is a part of itself, or that it is one tree.

Now, let me explain what I mean by the reference set of a concept. I begin with the reference set of elementary concepts, as this is straightforward. The reference set of an elementary concept simply is the reference of that concept. For example, the reference set of the elementary concept ‘red’ is the reference of ‘red’ and thus the collection of all red objects in the world. The reference set of ‘object’ is the collection of all objects in the world—that is, everything that exists. What about the reference set of a composite concept? By definition, we obtain the reference set of a composite concept by determining the references of the component concepts of that concept and then combining those collections into a single collection. Take the concept ‘blue car’. The reference of this concept is the collection of all blue cars in the world. Its reference set, however, is the collection of all blue objects and all cars in the world. This includes, for example, blue tables and chairs, as well as yellow and red cars. Or consider the concept of ‘unicorn’. Its reference is the collection of all unicorns in the world. However, since unicorns do not exist, this collection is empty. The reference set of the concept ‘unicorn’, however, is not empty. Since the concept ‘unicorn’ consists of the component concepts ‘horse’, ‘horn’, and ‘forehead’, the reference set of ‘unicorn’ is the collection of all horses, foreheads, and horns in the world. This collection includes, for example, your forehead and mine. Thus, the reference set of a composite concept differs from its reference. Two composite concepts with the same reference need not have the same reference set.

Finally, although the semantic argument employs the terminology of predication, it does not assume a universal syntax nor depend on grammatical structures characteristic of Indo-European languages. The framework is conceptual rather than syntactic: it employs simple and complex concepts, their references, and their reference sets, which are semantic posits rather than features of natural language grammar. After these preliminaries, I will now, in the next section, discuss the core premise of the semantic argument, namely a specific identity criterion for the meaning of concepts.

3. The core premise

In the previous section we observed that identity of *reference* does not guarantee identity of meaning. As illustrated, the concepts ‘animal with a kidney’ and ‘animal with a heart’ share the same reference—i.e., the set of all vertebrate animals—yet they are distinct concepts. Having a kidney is not the same as having a heart. While the references of both concepts coincide, their meanings diverge. Hence, two concepts that have the same reference need not have the same meaning.

I now present the semantic argument’s core premise. The core premise states that two concepts with the same *reference set* are identical. If the reference sets of two concepts are the same, then the concepts themselves must be the same as well. Moreover, since their meanings are the same, the references of both concepts must also coincide. Thus, whereas identity of reference does not ensure identity of meaning, identity of reference set does guarantee identity of meaning and, consequently, identity of reference. As will become clear in the next section, in order to derive the conclusion of the semantic argument, it suffices to limit the scope of the core premise to concepts corresponding to a property. Therefore, I henceforth understand the core premise as limited in this way.

Consider again the concepts ‘animal with a kidney’ and ‘animal with a heart’. Their meanings differ. The core premise thus implies that their reference sets also differ. Indeed, if their reference sets were identical, then—according to the core premise—their meanings would have to be identical as well, which they clearly are not. The reference set of ‘animal with a kidney’ consists of all animals and all kidneys, whereas the reference set of ‘animal with a heart’ consists of all animals and all hearts. These sets indeed differ: my heart, for example, belongs to the latter but not to the former. This example thus confirms the core premise.

Conversely, identity of meaning guarantees identity of reference set. If two concepts are identical, their reference sets must also be identical. The core premise, therefore, amounts to an *identity criterion for meanings*: two concepts are identical if and only if their reference sets are identical. Now, why should we accept the core premise?

In Rutten (2021a), I present a comprehensive defense of the core premise. While I will not reiterate the entire defense here, I will provide a concise overview of the main considerations. Additionally, I examine and refute two recent counterexamples that have been raised against the core premise in personal communication.

First, the core premise is intuitively plausible. Two concepts with the same reference set cannot be distinguished by examining the references of their component concepts. In both cases, we encounter precisely the same set of objects in the world. Both concepts thus relate to the objects in the world in the same manner, when considered in terms of their constituent components. Given that meaning and reference must, in any case, be related, this provides a

reasonable indication that the meanings of both concepts are the same, and thus that both concepts are identical.

This consideration implicitly assumes, of course, that both concepts do in fact relate to the world. The scope of the semantic argument is thus reasonably confined to concepts that refer to at least one object in the world. Therefore, I will limit the core premise to concepts having existential import. Concepts whose extension is empty are excluded from the scope of the semantic argument. This scope limitation rules out certain alleged counterexamples. Consider, for example, the concepts 'humans with golden eyes' and 'humans with silver eyes'. Reasonably assuming that eyes made of gold and eyes made of silver do not exist in the actual world, the reference sets of both concepts—on the one hand, the set of all humans and all eyes made of gold in the actual world, and on the other hand, the set of all humans and all eyes made of silver in the actual world—are the same, while both concepts clearly differ in meaning. Indeed, alleged counterexamples such as these do not undermine my semantic argument, as both concepts—'humans with golden eyes' and 'humans with silver eyes'—have an empty reference and thus fall outside the scope of the semantic argument's core premise.

Furthermore, numerous examples of distinct concepts with different reference sets can readily be given (e.g., 'tree' and 'flower', 'red' and 'blue', and so on). This indicates that the core premise enjoys considerable empirical support. That is, it has a solid degree of *confirmation*. No known counterexample exists of distinct concepts that share the same reference set. The absence of known counterexamples to the core premise, together with the aforementioned empirical support, provides an *inductive* argument in its favor: All the pairs of concepts that we know to differ in meaning also differ in reference sets. So, probably, all pairs of concepts that differ in meaning differ in reference sets. As long as no counterexample emerges after extensive searching and attempting, the core premise can be regarded as also having a robust and increasing degree of *corroboration*. Given these considerations, until a convincing counterexample is presented, it remains reasonable to hold that two concepts with identical reference sets are identical.

Let me now provide a brief summary of alleged counterexamples to the core premise as discussed in Rutten (2021a), along with a concise explanation of why each fails. Consider the concepts 'sand beach' and 'beach sand'. Their meanings clearly differ. But do their reference sets differ as well? The component concepts of 'sand beach' are 'sand', 'beach', and 'landform'. In contrast, the component concepts of 'beach sand' are 'beach', 'sand', and 'material'. Therefore, the reference set of 'sand beach' differs from that of 'beach sand', as, for example, the former includes landforms, whereas the latter does not.

Or consider the concepts 'three-sided' and 'three-angled'. The reference of both concepts is identical, as everything with three sides also has three angles, and vice versa. Yet they are distinct concepts. 'Three-sided' means something different from 'tree-angled'. Let us examine

their reference sets. Unlike the reference set of ‘three-angled’, the reference set of ‘three-sided’ includes all sides in the world. Thus, these reference sets differ, as the core premise implies—which demonstrates that this case does not constitute a counterexample.

Next, consider the concepts ‘water’ and ‘H_2O’. Even if it is necessarily true that water is H_2O, these concepts differ in meaning. The concept ‘water’ includes ‘liquid’, ‘colorless’, and ‘drinkable’ as component concepts, while ‘H_2O’ has ‘oxygen’ and ‘hydrogen’ as component concepts. Thus, in accordance with the core premise, their reference sets differ. For example, contrary to the reference set of ‘H_2O’, the reference set of ‘water’ does contain mercury.

Or consider the concepts ‘round square’ and ‘married bachelor’. Clearly, there are no round squares or married bachelors. Hence, both concepts share the same reference, namely the empty set. Yet, their meanings differ. According to the core premise, their reference sets must thus also differ, which is indeed the case. For example, the reference set of ‘round square’ contains all square objects in the world, while that of ‘married bachelor’ does not.

Now, consider the concepts ‘object’ and ‘self-identical’. Since everything must logically be both an object and self-identical, both concepts refer to everything that exists. Therefore, they share the same reference. Moreover, given that both concepts are elementary, their reference sets are by definition their references. As a result, both reference sets are identical. According to the core premise, this implies that their meanings must also be identical. This is indeed the case, as being an object logically equates with being self-identical. Everything that exists is by definition equal to itself on the aforementioned Law of Identity. The fact that each object is self-identical is thus constitutive of the logical framework employed. Similarly, the elementary concepts ‘object’ and ‘one object’ are logically identical, as being an object logically equates with being one object. Every object is by logical immediacy one object. Here, ‘one’ is numerical rather than mereological; a composite object (i.e., an object having proper parts) is therefore just as much one object as a simple object. To say that each object is one object is simply to say that each object is numerically one. As in the previous case, the fact that each object is numerically one is constitutive of the underlying logical framework —a logical condition built into it and standing on a par with the fundamental laws of logic. Thus, the concepts ‘object’ and ‘one object’ share the same meaning, and because they also share the same reference set, this accords with the core premise.

What about the concepts ‘human’ and ‘person’? They are not identical, as humans are human persons and thus persons, but a person need not be human. Their meanings, therefore, differ. Do their reference sets coincide? This is not the case. While their references might overlap—that is, all persons in the world might be human—their reference sets differ. The reference set of ‘human’, defined as ‘rational animal’, includes all animals and every being that possesses the ability to reason. In contrast, the reference set of ‘person’, defined as ‘rational being’, includes only those beings that possess the ability to reason. Therefore, the

reference sets are not identical, as there are animals that lack reasoning abilities. Thus, no counterexample to the core premise is obtained here.

Finally, consider the concepts ‘all-good’ and ‘all-knowing’. Their meanings differ. But what about their reference sets? The concept ‘all-good’ has ‘good’ as a component concept, whereas ‘all-knowing’ has ‘knowing’ as a constituent component. The reference set of ‘all-good’ thus contains everything that is good, while the reference set of ‘all-knowing’ contains everything that knows something. Not everything that knows something is good, and not everything that is good knows something. Thus, the reference sets of both concepts differ. Therefore, as with the aforementioned examples, this case does not constitute a counterexample to the core premise either.

In what follows, I assess two additional alleged counterexamples that were proposed recently during personal conversation. The first concerns dice and dots. Consider the concepts ‘black die with white dots’ and ‘white die with black dots’. These are evidently distinct concepts. Therefore, their reference sets should also be different according to the core premise. But is this indeed the case? Let us examine the component concepts of the concept ‘black die with white dots’. One might be inclined to think that this concept has ‘black’, ‘die’, ‘white’, and ‘dot’ as component concepts, so that its reference set corresponds to the collection of all black objects, all dice, all white objects, and all dots. The concept ‘white die with black dots’ would then have the same component concepts and, consequently, the same reference set, leading to a counterexample to the core premise.

However, this reasoning is premature. The conceptual breakdown here goes one step too far. The component concepts of the concept ‘black die with white dots’ are, in fact, the concepts that emerge from the first step in a stepwise conceptual decomposition of this concept. The component concepts of ‘black die with white dots’ thus are the concepts ‘black die’ and ‘white dots’. Similarly, the component concepts of the concept ‘white die with black dots’ are the concepts ‘white die’ and ‘black dots’.

Therefore, the reference set of the concept ‘black die with white dots’ is the collection of all black dice and all white dots. This reference set indeed differs from the reference set of the concept ‘white die with black dots’, which is the collection of all white dice and all black dots. This confirms the core premise, as the concepts ‘black die with white dots’ and ‘white die with black dots’ clearly differ in meaning. Thus, no successful counterexample is obtained, and the core premise is further corroborated.

The second alleged counterexample concerns gravitational attraction. Consider the concepts 'attracted by planet Earth' and 'attracting planet Earth’. The meanings of these concepts differ. Being attracted by planet Earth is, after all, different from attracting planet Earth. The reference set of the first concept is the collection consisting of planet Earth and all (other) objects that are gravitationally attracted by something. The reference set of the

second concept is the collection consisting of planet Earth and all (other) objects that gravitationally attract something else. While the reference sets of both concepts may appear identical, as one might assume that something is gravitationally attracted by something if and only if it gravitationally attracts something else, the meanings of both concepts are not identical. Therefore, a successful counterexample to the core premise seems to emerge.

Yet, this is too quick. For consider virtual particles with such a short lifespan that they are unable to manifest attraction in any real sense, while, despite their brief existence, they are still influenced by the gravitational field within which they exist. These virtual particles thus belong to the first, and not the second, reference set. Hence, in this case, both the meanings and the reference sets of the two concepts are distinct, and thus no counterexample is obtained. Moreover, since the properties 'being attracted by planet Earth' and 'attracting planet Earth' fall outside the scope of properties as defined in the previous section—as they do not attach to their objects—the concepts 'attracted by planet Earth' and 'attracting planet Earth' fall outside the scope of the core premise. The example thus cannot refute the core premise.

This concludes the summarized and extended defense of the semantic argument's core premise. Now, there exists a logically weaker and thus more likely true version of the core premise that—as will become clear in the next section—is already sufficient to establish the conclusion of the semantic argument. Since this version is more likely true than the original core premise and also sufficient to derive the argument's conclusion, it is epistemically stronger than the original core premise—preventing the need to invoke the original core premise to derive the conclusion of the semantic argument. I conclude this section by presenting this epistemically stronger version.

Let C_1 and C_2 be concepts, and consider the following three claims: *(a)* C_1 and C_2 are identical, *(b)* It is a conceptual truth that the references of C_1 and C_2 coincide, and *(c)* Necessarily, the references of C_1 and C_2 coincide.

Now, *(a)* entails *(b)*. If C_1 and C_2 are identical in meaning, then, by virtue of their meanings, objects falling under C_1 also fall under C_2 and vice versa. However, *(b)* does not entail *(a)*. There are cases where *(b)* is true, but *(a)* is false. For example, 'bachelor' and 'unmarried man' can be considered distinct concepts, even though it is true by virtue of the meaning of these concepts that an unmarried man is a bachelor and vice versa.

Moreover, *(b)* entails *(c)*. If it is conceptually true that C_1 and C_2 have the same reference, then they must have the same reference in every possible world. However, *(c)* may not entail *(b)*. For there may be cases where C_1 and C_2 share the same reference in every possible world without it being a conceptual truth that their references coincide. This could occur if the necessary overlap of the references of both concepts is based on something beyond their meanings, such as their essential characteristics. Given the entailment relations between the

three claims, *(a)* is the logically strongest claim, whereas *(c)* can be considered logically the weakest.

The core premise—that I denote by P_1—states that if concepts C_1 and C_2 have the same reference set, then C_1 and C_2 are identical. Since *(b)* is logically weaker than *(a)*, a logically weaker version of the core premise—denoted by P_2—is that if C_1 and C_2 have the same reference set, then it is a conceptual truth that the references of C_1 and C_2 coincide. Now, P_2 is more likely true than P_1 because a counterexample against the logically stronger P_1 might not be a counterexample against the logically weaker P_2.

Since *(c)* is logically weaker than *(b)*, a version of the core premise that is logically weaker than P_2—denoted by P_3—is that if C_1 and C_2 have the same reference set, then, necessarily, the references of C_1 and C_2 coincide. Since P_3 is logically weaker than P_2, and P_2 is logically weaker than P_1, it follows that P_3 is also logically weaker than P_1. That is, P_3 is the logically weakest of the three versions of the core premise.

Premise P_3 is more likely true than P_2 because a counterexample against the logically stronger P_2 might not be a counterexample against the logically weaker P_3. Since P_3 is more likely true than P_2, and P_2 is more likely true than P_1, it follows that P_3 is also more likely true than P_1. That is, P_3 is the most likely true of the three versions of the core premise. As will become clear in the next section, P_3 is already sufficient to establish the conclusion of the semantic argument. Thus, we do not need the logically stronger, and therefore less likely true, premises P_1 or P_2 for the argument to go through. Hence, premising the semantic argument on P_3 renders the argument epistemically stronger than if it were premised on P_1 or P_2. I will therefore premise the semantic argument on P_3.

All three versions of the core premise pertain exclusively to the actual or *this* world, just as does the conclusion of the semantic argument according to which there are no universally held contingent properties. Indeed, consider a non-actual possible world, w, with only one object, which has consciousness. In w, the elementary concepts ‘consciousness’ and ‘object’ share the same reference and thus the same reference set. Yet, they do not share the same reference across all possible worlds, as there exists a possible world where an object has no consciousness—such as a possible world that contains an electron. Therefore, premise P_3 does not hold in w, and thus neither do the logically stronger premises P_2 and P_1.

Finally, I note that P_3 is not intended to apply to all concepts without qualification. Its scope is limited to concepts with existential import that correspond to properties that are both positive and attaching. These limitations, already discussed in Section 2 and earlier in this section, define the intended scope of application of P_3. The same qualification, of course, applies to the other two versions of the core premise.

4. The absence of universal contingent properties

As previously stated, a property is universally held (or, briefly, universal) in some possible

world if and only if all objects in it possess the property. Clearly, necessary properties are universally held in all possible worlds. But what about contingent properties? As noted, a property is contingent if and only if some object in *some possible world* does not possess it. In this section, I will derive the conclusion of the semantic argument, namely that no contingent property is universally held in the *actual world* (or, briefly, the world).

Wittgenstein states in *Tractatus* 6.1231 that 'to be general is only to be accidentally valid for all things'. However, the semantic argument's conclusion asserts precisely the opposite: if some property holds universally in the world, it must be a necessary property and thus hold in all possible worlds, as there are no universal contingent properties in the world. Before presenting my deductive core argument for this conclusion from premise P_3, I first offer two forms of supporting evidence for the conclusion: inductive reasoning and the weight of tradition. I will start with the former.

Consider the contingent property of being red. This property is not universal because not everything in the world is red. There exist blue, green, and yellow objects as well. Or take the contingent property of being an animal. This property, too, is not universal. My laptop, for instance, is not an animal, nor are the chair I am sitting on and the table at which I am working. We can continue in this manner: whenever we evaluate a familiar contingent property—such as being human, being square, being a tree, or being blue—it turns out not to be universal. These observations, reflecting the rich diversity of the world around us, when generalized, provide us with an inductive argument for the claim that there are no universal contingent properties in the world. For every contingent property, there exists at least one object in the world that does not possess it, which is the conclusion to be established. In light of this inductive evidence, one could even argue that the immense qualitative richness and heterogeneity of the world is, in fact, the 'first known'—to borrow a term from Duns Scotus—or that which we come to know prior to anything else.

Apart from inductive support, we may also appeal to the weight of tradition. Many philosophers from diverse intellectual backgrounds have held metaphysical principles that align with or imply the conclusion of the semantic argument.

As Heraclitus teaches, nature is a dynamic harmony or unity of opposites. For everything that exists, there exists its opposite, so that universal contingent properties do not exist. Of course, 'having an opposite' is not a property that falls under the scope set in section 2, since it doesn't attach to the object that has it. Aristotle (1989, p. 51), in his *On the Cosmos*, speaks of nature's love for opposites. Nature, he asserts, loves opposites. There is no light without darkness, no warmth without cold, no love without hate, no black without white, and so on. This also points to the absence of universal contingent properties.

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle (2009, p. 147) further states that if one of two opposites can exist, the other is also possible. In other words, if something is possible, its opposite is also

possible. This principle could be seen as a weaker modal version of the principle that everything that exists has its opposite. Additionally, Cicero (2018, pp. 38-39; p. 60), in his *On the Gods*, asserts that nature is structured in such a way that everything has its opposite. Since mortality exists, immortality must also exist. Cicero also notes that this was the view of Epicurus, who referred to this principle as the principle of *isonomia* or equal distribution. Both Cicero and Epicurus thus accept a principle that closely resembles the principle that there are no universal contingent properties.

Many centuries later, Spinoza affirms this principle. In a letter to his friend Jarig Jelles dated June 2, 1674, Spinoza writes: 'Determinatio negatio est' (Spinozaweb, 2022). Determination is negation. To exist, to be determined, is to negate. For something to exist, it is necessary that its negation also exists. Negations are inevitable. Therefore, there are no universal contingent properties.

Spinoza's statement foreshadows Hegel's dialectic, in which reality necessarily develops through negations. Everything that exists necessarily leads to its negation in the development of reality. Thus, according to Hegel's dialectic not only human thought but also the world itself develops and actualizes through negations, so that negation is intrinsic to the world—negation is inscribed in reality—and universal contingent properties do not exist.

Hegel teaches that there is a reconciliation (*Aufhebung*) of contradictions. However, each reconciliation is itself negated, so that a new contradiction arises and universality is broken again. This continues until the absolute origin of being is actualized, wherein all negations are ultimately grounded.

In contemporary thought, several speculative continental philosophers, such as Levi Bryant (2011), maintain that the world is based on differences. Many postmodern thinkers, who cannot resist the temptation to engage in metaphysics, are also of the opinion that everything ultimately derives from differences. But if reality does indeed stem from differences, then universal contingent properties are absent. Additionally, some metaphysicians, inclined to base their metaphysics on generalized speculative ideas from theoretical cosmology, conceive of the world as grounded in symmetry breakings. According to this view, the world consists of a bundle of bifurcations, indicating that universal contingent properties are absent.

While the principle that there are no universally held contingent properties may not have been explicitly stated by the aforementioned philosophers—similar to how Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason took a rather long incubation period before explicitly being articulated as a metaphysical principle—it nevertheless has, at least implicitly, been accepted by them. The conclusion of the semantic argument thus has been endorsed throughout history by many philosophers from a wide range of diverse backgrounds. This strengthens the claim that it constitutes a fundamental insight into the nature of reality.

Moreover, if the structure of thought or language reflects the structure of reality, which is a

compelling thesis within the earlier discussed world-for-us epistemology (where reality is always already understood as reality *perceived and thought by us* or reality-*for-us*), then possible contrasts in thought or language (e.g., between 'red' and 'not-red'—where 'red' and 'not-red' are metaphysically possible) must have their counterparts in reality, which again leads to the conclusion that there are no universal contingent properties.

Having presented inductive evidence and appealed to the weight of tradition in support of this conclusion, I now turn to my core argument, which deductively derives the conclusion from the epistemically strongest version of the core premise as outlined in the previous section—namely premise P_3. This deductive core argument is more straightforward than the one presented in Rutten (2021a). In light of the core argument below, the above inductive evidence and appeal to tradition serve merely as auxiliary grounds for the conclusion that there are no universally held contingent properties.

Everything that exists (e.g., a vehicle) has properties (e.g., 'being red'), and each property corresponds to a concept (e.g., 'red'). Now, suppose, for *reductio ad absurdum*, that there exists a contingent property *p* that is universally held in the actual world. Let *P* be the concept corresponding to *p*. Since *p* is universal in the actual world, the reference of *P* in the actual world is the collection of all objects—that is, everything that exists. Concept *P* is either elementary or composite.

If *P* is elementary, then the reference set of *P* is by definition identical to the reference of *P*. Therefore, if *P* is elementary, the reference set of *P* in the actual world is the collection of all objects.

If *P* is composite, then—since the reference of *P* in the actual world is the collection of all objects and *P* is the conjunction of its component concepts—the reference of each of its component concepts in the actual world must also be the collection of all objects. The reference set of *P* is by definition the union of the references of its component concepts. Thus, if *P* is composite, the reference set of *P* in the actual world is also the collection of all objects.

Hence, regardless of whether *P* is elementary or composite, the reference set of *P* in the actual world is the collection of all objects. Now, consider the concept 'object'. Its reference in all possible worlds is the collection of all objects. Since 'object' is an elementary concept, its reference set is identical to its reference. Thus, the reference set of 'object' in all possible worlds is the collection of all objects. This includes, of course, the actual world.

Since the concepts *P* and 'object' have the same reference set in the actual world, the epistemically strongest version of the core premise—that is, P_3—entails that, necessarily, the references of *P* and 'object' coincide. This implies that, in every possible world, the reference of *P* is the collection of all objects. Since concept *P* corresponds to property *p*, all objects in all possible worlds possess *p*. It follows that *p* is a necessary property, which contradicts the assumption for reductio that *p* is contingent. We have arrived at a contradiction, so that we

must reject the reductio assumption. Hence, there are no universal contingent properties in the actual world. The conclusion of the semantic argument has thus been established: For each contingent property, there exists an object in the actual world that does not possess it. This concludes the deductive core argument.

Alternatively, the conclusion of the semantic argument can be deductively derived in a more compact form. I demonstrate how. An elementary concept lacks conceptual structure and thus admits of no conceptual analysis. It is thus wholly unanalyzable. This indicates that the meaning of an elementary concept can be nothing over and above its reference, so that two elementary concepts with the same reference must be identical in meaning—which is precisely what premise P_1 holds if P_1 is restricted to elementary concepts. A logically weaker, and thus more likely true, premise is obtained by restricting P_3, rather than P_1, to elementary concepts: Two elementary concepts with the same reference have references that necessarily coincide—that is, coincide in all possible worlds. For the compact derivation of the conclusion of the semantic argument, I adopt this more likely true restricted premise.

Now, suppose, for reductio, that there exists a universal contingent property *p*. The reference of its corresponding concept *P* is the collection of all objects. Upon recursive decomposition into constituent concepts, concept *P* ultimately reduces to a conjunction of elementary concepts (i.e., consisting solely of *P* in case *P* is itself elementary), each of which has the same reference as *P*—and therefore the same reference as the elementary concept 'object'. Hence, according to the adopted premise, each of these elementary concepts necessarily has the same reference as the reference of 'object'. It follows that their conjunction, i.e. *P*, necessarily has the same reference as 'object' as well, which implies that *p* is a necessary property. This contradicts the reductio assumption that *p* is contingent. Therefore, there are no universal contingent properties: for every contingent property, there exists at least one object that lacks it. This concludes the compact deductive derivation of the semantic argument's conclusion.

We can state this alternative compact derivation even more concisely as follows: There are no universal contingent properties, for if there were one, say *p*, its concept *P* would reduce to a conjunction of elementary concepts, each sharing the same reference as the elementary concept 'object'—and thus (according to the adopted premise) necessarily sharing the same reference—implying that the reference of *P* necessarily coincides with that of 'object', so that *p* would be necessary and a contradiction occurs.

The alternative compact deductive derivation differs from the deductive core argument in two ways. First, contrary to the core argument, the compact argument relies upon what I refer to as *semantic atomism*: Every composite concept can be recursively unpacked as a conjunction of elementary concepts. This might make the compact argument less compelling for those who have reservations about semantic atomism. Instead of semantic atomism, the

core argument relies upon a logically weaker claim, namely that every composite concept has two or more component concepts (each being either composite or elementary) and is the conjunction of them.

Second, a dialectical advantage of the compact argument, compared to the core argument, is that the compact argument relies on premise P_3 restricted to elementary concepts, while the core argument relies on P_3 itself—which is dialectically more demanding than merely requiring the restricted version of P_3. Indeed, as a logically weaker version, the restricted version of P_3 is more likely true than P_3 itself.

The auxiliary grounds discussed earlier—namely, the inductive argument and appeal to tradition—of course also provide supplementary support for the conclusion of the semantic argument, when one adopts the compact deductive argument rather than the core deductive argument.

Before establishing, in the next section, a broad and diverse range of metaphysical implications of the semantic argument's conclusion—including the implication that it is likely true that God exists—I conclude this section by situating the obtained conclusion within a broader context of related metaphysical principles.

The conclusion of the semantic argument holds that there are no universally held contingent properties. This entails a collapse of the distinction between universality and necessity: a property is universal in the actual world if and only if it is necessary. The semantic argument thus is akin to Fitch's (1963) famous proof, which establishes that if all actual truths are knowable, then all actual truths are known, thereby leading to the collapse of the distinction between possible and actual knowledge.

Similarly, the conclusion of the semantic argument is akin to the principle that every possibility is actualized at some point in time, across past, present, and future, thereby collapsing the distinction between possibility and temporality.

This principle is a temporal version of the principle of plenitude, which holds that all possibilities are actualized. According to the principle of plenitude, the actual world is so full and diverse that there are no unactualized possibilities. It was Arthur Lovejoy (1936) who traced this principle to Plato's *Timaeus*. Since Plato a wide range of philosophers endorsed it. The principle of plenitude entails the conclusion of the semantic argument. Let me show this.

Assume, for reductio, that there is a contingent property p that is universally held in the actual world. Since p is contingent, there exists a possible world in which an object does not possess p. Thus, since lacking p is possible, the principle of plenitude entails that there exists an object in the actual world that lacks p, which contradicts the assumption that p is universally held. Therefore, the reductio assumption must be rejected, and the conclusion of the semantic argument follows.

The conclusion of the semantic argument is logically weaker than the principle of

plentitude. For this conclusion does not assert that all possibilities are actualized. Instead, since it only holds that contingent properties are not universally held, it merely entails that possible omissions are actual omissions. The conclusion of the semantic argument is thus a restricted version of the principle of plenitude. It amounts to a modal collapse of omissions.

5. Metaphysical consequences

In this section, I examine the implications of the conclusion derived from P_3—namely, the absence of universal contingent properties—for the plausibility of a wide range of metaphysical worldviews. In particular, as will become clear, the burden of proof shifts towards materialism and other non-theistic worldviews. A materialist, for example, cannot simply assert that, plausibly, every object is material and infer that P_3 must therefore be false, since this begs the question by presuming the very metaphysical thesis whose plausibility is at issue. Materialism can be sustained by aiming to refute my independent defense of P_3 or by arguing that on P_3 materialism is not merely contingently but in fact necessarily true—thereby shifting the dialectical burden significantly to the materialist.

The absence of universal contingent properties has profound metaphysical implications. From this point onwards, when I refer to properties without further qualification, unless otherwise specified, I refer not only exclusively to those properties that fall within the scope of properties as defined in section 2, but also to those that are contingent.

The following corollaries illustrate the wide-ranging implications of the conclusion of the semantic argument. Note that if it turns out that there are reasons to think that one of the presented claims below is in fact not a corollary, this does not, of course, affect the validity of the semantic argument's conclusion itself, nor the claim that it has a wide range of diverse corollaries.

There being no universal properties, for example, implies that 'being material' is not a universal property. Not everything that exists is material. There thus exist non-material or immaterial objects. This refutes materialism. One might object that 'being material' is a necessary property, but this is implausible. It is reasonable to maintain that—leaving aside the question of whether materialism is true in the actual world—there is at least one possible world in which at least one object is immaterial. Similar modal considerations apply to all subsequent corollaries.

Furthermore, since 'being physical' is not a universally held property either, not everything that exists is physical. There exist non-physical objects, which leads to the rejection of physicalism. As 'being mental' is likewise not a universal property, it follows that not everything that exists is mental. Matter, therefore, is not an illusion of the mind; matter truly exists. Consequently, metaphysical idealism is untenable.

Panpsychism posits that everything that exists has a mental component. However, this is also untenable, for there are no universal properties. Consider, then, the property of being

contingent. This, too, is not a universal property. Thus, there must exist at least one non-contingent or necessary object. Here we obtain an argument for the existence of a necessarily existing object. Since 'being caused' is not a universal property either, there must exist at least one object in the world that is uncaused. Furthermore, since the property of being determined is not universal, it follows that not all objects are determined. Thus, there exist undetermined objects, and, therefore—on the further presumption that randomness is not an objective feature of the world (as I argue in Rutten, 2012, pp. 65-67)—there exist free objects. This supports the existence of free will.

Next, consider the property of being perishable. Since this property is not universal, there exist imperishable or everlasting objects. There are many other corollaries. Because the property of being immanent is not universal either, there exist non-immanent, or transcendent, objects. Hence, the transcendent opens up. Likewise, if there are no universal properties, then 'being profane' is not universal either, which implies the existence of objects that are not profane—that is, sacred or numinous objects. Indeed, on naturalism, all objects in the world are natural. But since there are no universal properties, there must be objects that are non- or supernatural.

Our world, then, appears populated by non-material, non-physical, necessarily existing, uncaused, free, imperishable, transcendent, numinous, and supernatural objects. This is incompatible with many prominent atheistic worldviews. In contrast, these types of objects naturally fit into a worldview diametrically opposed to atheism: theism. The absence of universal properties thus renders theism more likely true.

The absence of universal properties also implies that simple objects or mereological atoms must exist. Since the property of being composite is not universal, there must be objects that are not composite and, therefore, indivisible. So, mereological atoms do exist. However, not everything is a mereological atom. Since the property of being an atom is likewise not universal, there must also exist composite objects, thereby refuting *mereological nihilism* according to which mereological composition never occurs.

Moreover, because there are no universal properties, not everything is water (contra Thales), fire (contra Heraclitus), earth, air, a monad (contra Leibniz), will to power (contra Nietzsche), will to life (contra Schopenhauer), language (contra Derrida), or a machine (contra Arjen Kleinherenbrink, 2017).

Furthermore, since 'being actualized' is not universal, neo-Aristotelians are perfectly justified in positing 'non-actualized' or 'potential' objects in addition to 'actualized' objects. Since the property 'being a compound of form and matter' is not universal either, not every object is a combination of form and matter, which points, within a neo-Aristotelian framework, to the existence of 'prime matter' and 'pure form'—as Aristotle argues on independent grounds. Additionally, from a Heideggerian perspective, not everything is

'ontic'. Beyond the ontic, there must be something 'ontological'. This is indeed another corollary of the conclusion of the semantic argument, as the property 'being ontic' is not universal either—pointing to an ontological disclosure of openness beyond the ontic realm.

Consider pantheism. The property of being divine is not universal. Therefore, there must exist at least one object that is not divine, rendering pantheism untenable.

Moreover, since the property of being good is not universal, there are things in the world that are not good, which explains the existence of injustice. Not everything in the world is good. This opens up the possibility of a new type of theodicy. Now consider the property of being the only object in the world. Precisely because this property is also not universal, it follows that solipsism—the claim that one is the only object in the world—must be rejected. For if solipsism were true, this property would be universally held. But there are no universal properties. The long-standing skeptical question of whether the external world exists can thus be answered affirmatively: you are not alone.

There are skeptics who doubt whether anything exists at all. We may answer as follows: something does exist. For if there were no object, then, due to the laws of logic, all universal propositions—such as 'Everything is blue' or 'Everything is round'—would be vacuously true. But then all properties would be universal, contradicting the fact that there are no universal properties. Therefore, something exists. This also provides a new response to Leibniz's famous subsequent question: *Why* is there something rather than nothing? There is something rather than nothing because there are no universal properties.

We can also infer that Platonists are justified in asserting the existence of abstract objects. Since there are no universal properties, the property of being concrete is not universal. Hence, there exist non-concrete or abstract objects. Platonists, therefore, reasonably commit to the existence of abstract objects. Similarly, since the property of being abstract is not universally held either, there must also exist concrete objects in the world.

Many more corollaries can be inferred from the conclusion of the semantic argument. As noted, rejecting a particular corollary does not undermine this conclusion. In any case, given the breadth and diversity of these corollaries, the principle that there are no universal properties increasingly takes on the character of a theory of everything. By systematically tracing the implications of this principle, we effectively recover the world as it has been traditionally conceived.

In the 2014 film *The Theory of Everything*, cosmologist Stephen Hawking envisions a single formula that is not ad hoc and that adequately describes and explains the entirety of reality. He has spent his life searching for it in vain. This is because the ultimate formula he seeks appears to be of an entirely different nature than he assumes. The sought-after ultimate formula is not a formula within cosmology or physics but rather a fundamental principle within metaphysics—namely the principle that there are no universal properties.

Any worldview that entails a claim of the form 'Everything is X', where X is a concept that corresponds to a property, collapses under this principle. No monistic worldview, therefore, survives the conclusion that there are no universal properties. Only dualistic worldviews remain epistemically viable. The absence of universal properties thus functions as an effective *epistemic filter* for worldviews: any worldview entailing the existence of a universal property fails to pass through this filter and is thereby epistemically untenable. This applies not only to paradigmatic atheistic worldviews such as materialism (i.e., the view that everything is material), physicalism (i.e., the view that everything is physical), and naturalism (i.e., the view that everything is natural) but also, as noted earlier in this section, to less paradigmatic atheistic positions such as panpsychism, vitalism, pantheism, and solipsism.

By contrast, theism—understood as the worldview according to which God, defined as a personal being who is the origin and ground of reality, exists—and Platonism—understood as the worldview according to which the realm of concrete objects is complemented by a realm of abstract objects—are prominent examples of dualistic worldviews that do pass through the filter. Neither entails a claim of the form 'Everything is X', where X corresponds to a property. Consequently, the epistemic filter significantly increases the likelihood of theism being true. Moreover, in Rutten (2021b, p. 284), I argue that Platonism entails theism, which further raises the likelihood of theism.

Finally, I argue that the principle of the absence of universal properties also directly points to a conscious ground of reality. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1969) famously asserts that man is a 'nothingness'—that is, he cannot be reduced to a fixed identity. Human beings evade all rigid determinations. For example, a waiter could, at any moment, choose to cease being a waiter, rejecting the constraints of his role. Humans possess the capacity to negate their given conditions; we can always say 'No' to what we are at any given moment. This highlights the freedom of the human mind to transcend any given identity. The human mind is free because it cannot be compelled into a fixed determination. It can always 'break out'. Moreover, human freedom is fundamental to authentic human existence.

The conclusion of the semantic argument—that for each property, there exists some object that does not possess it—indicates, analogously, that being cannot be constrained by any fixed identity. Being eludes all universal determinations. Thus, the absence of universal properties demonstrates that reality resists any attempt to squeeze it into a rigid 'Everything is X'-mold. Reality cannot be forced into any universalist straitjacket.

Indeed, the absence of universal properties reveals that 'negation' is inscribed in reality or being itself. Reality negates all determinations and thus cannot be universally bound. Reality thus resists each and every 'Everything is X'-reductionism. What does this indicate? First, reality reveals itself as rooted in mind in its intrinsic capacity to negate. Second, if reality negates any attempt to coerce it into a rigid universalist determination, if being doesn't allow

itself to be subjugated by any universalistic frame, then, being is radically free. The ultimate ontological ground of being is freedom. Freedom constitutes being's final truth. *Free at last*. This metaphysical insight resonates with Heidegger's ontological consideration in *On the Essence of Truth* that freedom is the essence of the truth of being (Heidegger, 1998).

Now, aside from Heidegger's ontological reflections on the nature of freedom, freedom can reasonably be understood metaphysically as being rooted in subjectivity. Freedom is paradigmatically a feature of mind. The mind is free because it can always negate and thus transcend any fixed formalism. Only a mind can resist reduction to a rigid structure. Mind always retains the capacity for negation and thereby withstands any attempt to be confined within a fixed frame. Only reality rooted in mind can avoid coercion into a rigid 'Everything is X'-universalism. Thus, the absence of universal properties provides a reasonable ground for concluding that the ultimate ground of reality is a mind and thus a personal being. Such an ultimate mental foundation, the subject of reality, can reasonably be called God.

The semantic argument thus not only considerably increases, through the earlier discussed epistemic filter, the probability of theism being true, but it also more directly points to a mental or conscious ground of reality. Accordingly, given its foundation in a core premise about the nature of language, the semantic argument reveals an intimate connection between language and the ground of being—perhaps bringing to mind the opening verse of the Gospel of John. As an argument for theism, the semantic argument can be considered a 'linguistic turn' within the tradition of arguments for God's existence. For on the semantic argument, as developed in this paper, it is ultimately language itself that leads us the way to the origin of being. At any rate, language may be a distorting mirror, but it is the only mirror we have, as Dummitt (1993, p. 6) states and as has been recently reinforced by a new argument for linguistic determinants of human thought (Hinzen, Martin, & Wiltschko, 2024).

6. The core premise further improved

In Section 3, I progressively increased the plausibility of the core premise by logically weakening it—moving from P_1, via P_2, to P_3. As discussed, in all cases the scope of the core premise is restricted to concepts with existential import that correspond to positive and attaching properties. The logical weakening of the core premise was achieved by logically weakening its consequent. A way of further logically weakening the core premise—and thus further increasing its plausibility— is to logically strengthen its antecedent. Instead of merely requiring, as the antecedent of P_3 does, that the two concepts have the same reference set in the actual world, a logically significantly stronger antecedent condition can be introduced. This stronger condition renders the core premise logically weaker and hence more likely to be true.

In what follows, I formulate this condition. Let S be a set of concepts. Define $D(S)$ as the set obtained by replacing each complex concept in S with its component concepts. For example,

D({object, blue car}) = {object, blue, car} and *D({sandbeach, blue}) = {sand, beach, landform, blue}*. Moreover, define *R(S)* as the union of the references in the actual world of the concepts in *S*. Core premise P_3 can then be stated as follows: for any two concepts S_1 and S_2, if $R(D(\{S_1\})) = R(D(\{S_2\}))$, then the references of S_1 and S_2 necessarily coincide. A version of the core premise that is logically weaker than P_3—denoted by P_4—is obtained by replacing the antecedent of P_3 with the following recursively defined infinite conjunction of propositions:

$R(\{S_1\}) = R(\{S_2\})$, and
$R(D(\{S_1\})) = R(D(\{S_2\}))$, and
$R(D(D(\{S_1\}))) = R(D(D(\{S_2\})))$, and
$R(D(D(D(\{S_1\})))) = R(D(D(D(\{S_2\}))))$,
and so on *ad infinitum*.

P_4 thus states that if this recursive conjunctive condition obtains, then the references of S_1 and S_2 necessarily coincide. The antecedent of P_4 can be stated more concisely as follows:

$R(D^n(\{S_1\})) = R(D^n(\{S_2\}))$ *for all natural numbers n*, where $D^0(S) = S$ and $D^{n+1}(S) = D(D^n(S))$.

Since the antecedent of P_4 contains the antecedent of P_3 as its second conjunct, the antecedent of P_4 is logically stronger than the antecedent of P_3. Core premise P_4 is thus indeed logically weaker than P_3. P_4 amounts to the claim that if two concepts are recursively decomposed at every level and the unions of the references of their decomposed concepts coincide at each level, then the references of the concepts necessarily coincide. P_4 thus states that recursive decomposition with total referential agreement at every level of conceptual analysis entails necessary co-reference. Two concepts in full recursive referential agreement do not diverge in their references across possible worlds.

As can be verified by examining the deductive core argument presented in Section 4 for the semantic argument's conclusion, P_4 still entails that conclusion. For in the core argument's *reductio ad absurdum*, the concepts *P* and *'object'* not only have the same reference and the same reference set in the actual world—thereby satisfying the first and second conjunct of P_4's antecedent—but in fact also satisfy *all* further conjuncts of that antecedent *ad infinitum*. P_4 thus entails that the references of both concepts necessarily coincide, so that the *reductio* can be completed and the deductive core argument for the semantic argument's conclusion remains valid. Moreover, the auxiliary inductive evidence and the appeal to tradition presented in Section 4 in support of the semantic argument's conclusion remain fully intact if P_4 rather than P_3 is adopted. The logically weaker—and thus more likely true—core premise P_4 therefore constitutes a further improvement of the semantic argument.

I now show that the defense of the semantic argument's core premise is strengthened significantly by shifting from P_3 to P_4. First, the empirical support enjoyed by P_3, as discussed in Section 3, carries over to P_4. Since P_3 entails P_4, every example of two concepts that confirms P_3 also confirms P_4. Second, since P_4 is logically weaker than P_3, all alleged counterexamples discussed in Section 3 that fail against P_3 also fail against P_4. The degree of corroboration of P_3 thus carries over to P_4 as well.

Third, the intuitive motivation for P_4 is stronger than the intuitive motivation for P_3 as presented in Section 3. Consider two concepts that are not merely compared at the level of their component concepts, but are recursively decomposed *ad infinitum* into constituent concepts at every level of conceptual decomposition. Suppose that, at each such level, the unions of the references associated with the corresponding decomposed concepts of both concepts coincide exactly. Under these conditions, it is significantly more plausible that the two concepts in question are identical, or at least necessarily have the same reference, than in a case in which it is given only that their reference sets coincide. Shifting from a single-level comparison of reference sets (as in the case of P_1, P_2 and P_3) to a fully recursive decomposition of constituent concepts at every level of decomposition (as in the case of P_4) substantially reduces the space for potential counterexamples. Exhaustive referential coincidence at every level of conceptual analysis appears to leave much less room for conceptual divergence—or at least much less room for modal divergence of reference—thereby significantly strengthening the intuitive support for P_4.

Since, as noted, the empirical confirmation and corroboration of P_3 carry over to P_4, the overall defense of the semantic argument's core premise is significantly strengthened by adopting P_4 rather than P_3 as the semantic argument's core premise. The same therefore holds for the semantic argument itself.

7. Closing remarks

In conclusion, I maintain that the semantic argument developed offers a robust philosophical case for the existence of a personal first cause. By arguing for and exploring the implications of the absence of universally held properties in the actual world, I argued that the likelihood of there being a mental or conscious origin to reality is significantly increased. The semantic argument bridges semantic theory and metaphysical inquiry, offering a new perspective in the philosophy of religion and contributing to broader debates about the origin of being.

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