

Are All Kinds Created Equal?

Considerations toward a Complex Theory
of Concrete Particulars

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I. Leibniz's Law, Object-Fixation, and Jubien's Solution

In the article, *Thinking About Things*, Michael Jubien briefly prefaces his theory of concrete particulars with a discussion of the different manners in which we, well, *think about things*. As he writes, “We are capable of thinking of things either as objects of familiar kinds or merely as brute physical objects, and both the importance of the parts and the importance of their arrangement vary dramatically depending on which way we think.”¹

He notes, also, that these disparate manners in which we talk about particular objects can yield incoherent analyses of those objects when we fail to properly distinguish between them. As he explains:

“We tend to think that since a boat or a statue (etc.) is a physical object, any truth *about the boat* is just a truth about the *physical object* (and vice-verse). In somewhat different terms, we tend to think that a truth about an object *qua* boat is perforce a truth about the object *simpliciter* (and vice versa).”²

This tendency of ours to conflate statements about an object *qua* kind and that same object *qua* matter is what Jubien refers to as *object fixation*. When someone succumbs to object fixation, statements such as when a sculptor says of one of his creations, ‘Well, I sure like the statue, but I really hate that piece of clay; it’s too hard to work,’ might seem troubling.

In such statements, it appears as though we’re ascribing two incompatible properties (both being *liked*, and *disliked* by the sculptor) to a single object.^a Jubien’s solution to this problem involves the recognition that the two attitude reports concerning the particular object are not *just* about the physical thing, but in each case about a property as well. As he explains, “Since the properties are different - *being a statue*

¹ *Thinking About Things*, 4.

versus *being a piece of clay* - the *thing* doesn't really threaten to be both liked and disliked by the sculptor."^{3b}

Jubien goes on later to define the more *fundamental object* of which the variously manifestable properties - *being the statue*, or *being the piece of clay* - are merely predicated, as Q-objects. Q-objects, so named in relation to their original positer, W.V. Quine, can be defined simply as "the content, however heterogeneous, of some portion of space-time, however disconnected and gerrymandered."^{4c} Such objects, for Jubien, apparently represent the single unambiguous class of subject references, and thus defy object fixation.

II. Are All Kinds Created Equal?

In chapter 1, sect. 1 of *Possibility*, Jubien poses the question about the ontological status of common objects - that is, aggregate objects such as pieces of clay or piles of stone; manufactured objects such as statues and ships; and animate objects such as dogs and human beings. As the question goes, "Are the objects already there, or are they somehow our own conceptual imposition on what's already there?"⁵ The answer he provides, relying on a reference to a two-piece suit, he presumably intends to encompass all possible classes of object. As he explains,

"Some matter gets to be a *suit*, roughly, if part of it is an appropriate pair of pants, and the rest of it is an appropriate jacket, *and we treat their mereological sum in certain characteristic ways*. In [all] cases, some matter comes to enjoy a certain status - *object* or *suit* - partly but crucially as a result of having a certain intentional (and relational) property...This is how I believe Q should be understood. It is a conventional decision - adopted for use in metaphysics and

² *Thinking About Things*, 5.

³ *Thinking About Things*, 5.

⁴ *Possibility*, 2.

⁵ *Possibility*, 2.

semantics - to use objectual quantifiers so that their range exactly matches the already established range of our mass quantifiers...When we see Q in this way as a technical convention about quantifier management, we are in a position to answer the question about whether the world's objects were 'already there', or whether they are a 'conceptual imposition' upon what's already there...The answer is: *both!*...To be an object (or 'thing'), with respect to a given convention, is then simply to be thought of and spoken of, under that convention, in a certain *grammatical* way...Any such convention settles *what object there are*, but only as a function of *what there is*. *What there is* stands as an objective, mind-independent feature of reality. *What objects there are* is the outcome of a convention for speaking about this given reality."⁶

According to Jubien's theory, then, the only objects are Q-objects, and every other *thing* (that is, every other *familiar kind*) is just some possible predicate of a *particular* Q-object.^d For Jubien, therefore, - and this is a bit confusing - even a thing considered merely in terms of its material constitution (for instance, *a piece of clay*) is still a reference to some *familiar kind*. And *all kinds are created equal*, it would seem, whether we are speaking of aggregations of material such as clay and stone; manufactured objects such as statues and tables; or even animate objects such as dogs and human beings.^e

Any theory of concrete particulars that posits a single ontological account for all possible classes of objects I will term a *simple* theory; and all simple theories, on account of this very feature, seem to me untenable. The trouble with Jubien's view is, in trying to preserve simplicity in his ontological account, he overextends what was otherwise a very satisfying explanation of certain *discrete set(s)* of concrete particulars - namely, *aggregate* and *manufactured objects*.^f It is almost certain that Jubien is right in claiming *certain* common objects - for instance, the two-piece suit from the prior example - to be merely conventional designations of some 'objectually quantified matter.'⁷ But I think it

⁶ *Possibility*, 7-9.

⁷ *Possibility*, 7.

was the unfortunate result of choosing this particular starting point, and then *building up*, that gave him the false confidence that his proposed ontology could prove as effective in its furthest extensions (that is, in explanation of animate objects) as it did among additional members of that initial set.

It seems doubtful that we can get out of a simple theory of concrete particulars all the work that we require from it. The Aristotelian theory, however, recognizes common objects to be divisible into at least two fundamentally distinct categories: substances^g (restricted to animate objects) and second-order existents (aggregate and manufactured objects).^h While both Jubien as well as Aristotelians are realists about attributes, the Aristotelian account imposes restrictions on what particular universals constitute basic *kinds*, and therefore accommodate multiple instantiation.ⁱ Where in the former view, we are forced to conceive of, for instance, *being Michael Jubien* as a repeatable property, instantiated by a virtually infinite series of *different* Q-objects throughout its duration (conceived in conventional terms, of course), the Aristotelian view merely posits the *infima species* (or lowest-level kind) as the repeatable entity.⁸ The Jubien ontology, therefore, has to accommodate potentially infinite *Michael Jubiens*, whereas an Aristotelian ontology has only to accommodate every discrete instance of, say, a *human being*.

Jubien claims early on in his article, *Thinking About Things*, that his account of concrete particulars solves such problems as that of the statue and the clay while involving “no exotic metaphysics at all;”^{9j} but when one tries to conceive, for instance, of *human beings* in terms of objectually quantified matter, or as some multiply instantiable

⁸ *Metaphysics*, 115.

⁹ *Thinking About Things*, 7.

property of virtually infinite possible Q-objects, the resultant representation is far from intuitive. In examining how the Aristotelian ontology better accommodates our intuitions regarding differences among common objects, we have discovered at least one advantage of a complex theory over a simple one.

Endnotes

^a Our trouble with this class of statements derives from that simple principle of logic which provides the foundation for Leibniz's law concerning the identity of indiscernibles. According to this law, some object A is identical to B if, and only if, whatever is true of A is also true of B, and conversely. It would seem, therefore, in such instances as that presented above, that we are compelled to posit two distinct objects to account for the disparate properties ascribed to it (one object to bear the property of *being liked*; another to bear the property of *being disliked* by the sculptor).

^b A more appropriate analysis of such things as *statues*, therefore, would go something like this: "[When] we say that [a] statue couldn't have been cubical, I believe we're saying that some physical thing has the property of *being the statue*, and that *that* property is incompatible with *being cubical*. And when we say that the piece of clay could have been cubical, we're saying that some physical thing has the property of *being the piece of clay*, and that *that* property is compatible with *being cubical*. So there's just one thing. It has the property of being a certain statue and the property of being a certain piece of clay" (*Thinking About Things*, 7).

^c Jubien's commitment to mereological essentialism follows from this interpretation of concrete particulars: "[Since] any physical thing is just some physical stuff, it follows that we can't imagine a thing not having some of the parts it actually has" (*Thinking About Things*, 9).

^d I don't mean to diminish the substantiality of properties in Jubien's system. As a Platonist, Jubien is a realist about properties. *Familiar kinds*, then, as such, are just as real as the objects of which they're predicated. Nonetheless, our intuitions would like to claim at least certain sets of familiar kinds (namely, animate objects), as existent *objects*, not merely instantiable (and thus, *repeatable*) properties of some particular Q-object.

^e *More or less* equal. Jubien indeed affirms that different objects are variably tolerant of changes to their material constitution or the arrangement of their parts. As he writes, "[When] we think of something merely as a physical object, its parts are definitive and their arrangement is irrelevant. Roughly the reverse happens, though to varying degrees, when we think of something as an object of a familiar kind. The parts are more or less irrelevant but their arrangement is more or less essential. This side of the divide tolerates real variation depending on just what familiar kind is in play. For example suppose we have a clay statue. Intuitively, it's a physical object that also falls under two prominent familiar kinds: *piece of clay* and *statue*. But the arrangement of its parts is more important when we think of it as a statue than when we think of it as a piece of clay. A typical statue can survive only so much distortion and retain its status as the statue, but the very same object can survive arbitrary (intact) distortion while remaining the piece of clay" (*Possibility*, 17).

^f Whether the distinction between the two is categorical or merely conventional I will not here discuss.

^g "What a concrete particular is, on [the Aristotelian view,] is simply an instance of its proper kind; and Aristotelians argue that to be an instance of a kind is simply to exhibit the form of being that is the kind. Since that form of being is irreducibly unified, the things that exhibit it are themselves irreducibly unified entities, things that cannot be construed as constructions out of more basic entities." (*Metaphysics*, 111)

^h "Aristotelians deny that every item we are prepared to call a concrete particular counts as a substance; but, then, they owe us an account of 'things' like mountains, automobiles, and carpenters. If they are not full-fledged realities, then what are they?...To accommodate [our intuitions that there are such things as

mountains, clocks, and carpenters, Aristotle] introduces the view that verb ‘exist’ has a variety of senses of meanings. It has a primary or core sense and a variety of secondary or derivative meanings. In the primary or core sense, the term applies exclusively to the things Aristotle calls substances; but Aristotle insists that this restrictive use of the term is fully compatible with the use of the term in one of its secondary senses to characterize the ontological status of lower-grade particulars. Things like mountains, clocks, and carpenters exist all right, but they do so only in a secondary sense of the term ‘exist.’” (*Metaphysics*, 115-116)

ⁱ “Concrete particulars [are, for Aristotle,] substances; *or at least some are*...As Aristotle saw things, the only universals that furnish us with genuinely unified forms of being are the biological kinds under which living beings fall and the kinds posited by our best theories of the material constitution of the universe. He believed that the universals under which artifacts fall (universals like *automobile*, *clock*, and *computer*), the universal that express the roles things can play or the stages they go through (universals like *carpenter*, *president*, *larva*, and *seedling*), and the universals that express aggregations of physical objects (universals like *mountain*, *lake*, and *bouquet*) can all be analyzed in terms of the underlying biological/physical kinds and the accidental properties their members exhibit, so they are not to count as basic universals and the things that instantiate them are not to count as substances.” (*Metaphysics*, 114)

^j “I think [my account] solves the puzzle of the statue and the clay and does so with no exotic metaphysics at all. It just requires taking *properties* as seriously as *things*, and recognizing that when we speak of a thing under the presumption that it is of a certain kind, we’re not just speaking of the thing, but of the kind as well” (*Thinking About Things*, 7).