

What if 7 literally ate 9?

What if the metaphysical Oracle came down, and spoke in the Oracle's voice, which is heard and understood everywhere. Everybody knows that the Oracle only ever states literal truths.

Whatever the Oracle says is said in such a way that every last person knows that they know that the Oracle's statement is true, and is indubitably certain of this fact, and knows that it is the result of a process that is 100% metaphysically and epistemically sure to be perfectly reliable, namely, the Oracle.

The Oracle decides to state just one thing before leaving:

“7 ATE 9.”

The Oracle's statement has some shocking implications for the metaphysics of numbers. Evidently our '9' is not the '9' of metaphysical yesterday. Although researchers continue to debate the exact interpretation of 'ate', the Oracle left a printed receipt of Their statement, on which is written 'ATE' and not '8'. The Oracle's written statement disambiguated the ambiguity that is exhibited in a familiar joke:

“Why was 6 afraid of 7? Because 7 8(ate) 9!”

The metaphysicians, and even the general public, are all in agreement on the following basic details:

The number we call ‘9’ is not essentially the ninth number, before 8 and after 10. As far as the Peano axioms are concerned, it used to be just like the number we now call ‘10’. However, 7 ate the old so-called ‘9’, which no longer exists. Consequently, the number we used to call ‘10’ is now the successor of 8, the new occupant of the nine-role.¹ So, the new so-called ‘9’ occupies the nine-role contingently, not necessarily.

Everyone who understands the metaphysicians' arguments knows all this to be true, because it can easily be deduced from the Oracle's unimpeachable testimony that "7 ATE 9". Unfortunately, all this has distracted the mathematicians for quite a long time at this point, and so we all hope that 7 doesn't prove to be a repeat offender, since the mathematicians are just finally starting to get back to their normal research.

Debates rage on as to whether the similarity between the Oracle's statement, and the subject matter of that familiar joke, is coincidental. Did our joke just happen to match up with this bizarre and unexpected detail about the metaphysics of numbers? Maybe 7, inspired by our joke, ate (the old) 9 quite recently? Or did the Oracle arrange this just to mess with us, and if so, might they not be more than just an Oracle, and what exactly can we expect from all this given Their bizarre preference about what to discuss with us? Or maybe the Oracle just stated an arbitrary and obscure fact (perhaps Their nature is just to intermittently state random truths), a fact which coincidentally corresponded to our silly and parochial homophone joke?

Jacob Lettie
November 2023

[illegible]