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ANOTHER 'FATAL' OBJECTION
TO MEINONGIAN OBJECTS

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Professor Bernard Williams' arguments that "fatal difficulties beset the account of Meinongian 'pure objects'" ([1]), p. 55; my rearrangement) are, I try to show, simply invalid: the main argument effectively distributes a universal quantifier across a disjunction. Professor Williams considers these propositions (about the ideal or pure object, the Polygon);

- (2) The Polygon has either an even or an odd number of sides;
- (3) The Polygon has an even number of sides;
- (4) The Polygon has an odd number of sides;
- (6) The Polygon is not a polygon.

He applies the following principle, extracted from Kenny ([1]), p. 34ff., to determine truth-values of statements like the above:

- (P) "A pure object of type *F* possesses just those properties which are possessed necessarily by any *F*" ([1]), p. 55).

For the purpose of his argument Williams specifies 'F' as 'polygon' and 'a pure object of type polygon' as 'The Polygon'; and he applies the principle derived from (P):

- (Q) For any property *G*, it is true that the Polygon (more generally: the Universal the *n*) has *G* iff every polygon (every individual *n*) necessarily has *G*.

(The switch from 'any' to 'every' is made in order to resolve correctly scoping problems in complex sentences.)

Since it is true that

- (2') Necessarily any polygon has either an even or an odd number of sides,

(2) is true; but since

- (3') Necessarily any polygon has an even number of sides,

and

(4') Necessarily any polygon has an odd number of sides, are both false, neither of (3) and (4) is true. (In fact, by (P) and Williams' specifications they are false, in view of the sense of 'just'.) Professor Williams draws these conclusions: "If we can go directly from saying that (3) and (4) are not true to saying that they are false..., then we have a straight contradiction. Even if we cannot, we have a breakdown in inference; for one would suppose that from (2) it followed that one or other of (3) and (4) must be *true*.... Further... from the fact that neither (3) nor (4) is true, together with (3'), there follows... (6)" ([1], p. 56, my rearrangement). But none of these damaging conclusions follow. Firstly, the conjunction $\sim(3) \ \& \ \sim(4) \ \& \ (2)$ is not a contradiction any more than its mate $\sim(3') \ \& \ \sim(4') \ \& \ (2')$ is a contradiction. A contradiction would result only given the invalid move from (2) to

- (7) Either the Polygon has an even number of sides or the Polygon has an odd number of sides.

The move is invalid because (2) is true, but (7) is false, applying (Q), since

- (7') Necessarily either every (any arbitrarily selected) polygon has an even number of sides or every polygon has an odd number of sides,

is false. Indeed given (Q) the move from (2) to (7) is tantamount to the invalid distribution moves from (2') to (7'). Thus, too, one would not expect that (7) followed from (2), nor therefore that the truth of one or other of (3) or (4) followed from (2). Likewise given (Q), (6) does not follow from the cited premisses; for

- (6') It is not necessary that every polygon is a polygon

does not follow from the conjunction $(2') \ \& \ \sim(3') \ \& \ \sim(4')$. Since every polygon is necessarily a polygon (6') is false, but the premisses from which (6') is supposed to follow are true. To establish non-deducibility formally a quantificational model, with a two individual domain $\{a, b\}$ and with necessity interpreted as an identity functor, suffices, where, in obvious notation, $pa \ \& \ pb$, $ea \ \& \ \sim oa$ and $\sim eb \ \& \ ob$. Then (2'), $\sim(3')$ and $\sim(4')$ are all validated but (6') is not.

What goes wrong with the intuitive argument for (6) can be seen by

expanding the argument as follows: – Suppose, on the contrary, that the Polygon is a polygon. It follows from (2') – given some assumptions –

- (2'') For every object η , if η is a polygon then η has either an even or an odd number of sides,

whence

- (7'') For every object η , if η is a polygon then either η has an even number of sides or η has an odd number of sides.

Hence by instantiating ' η ' in (7'') by 'the Polygon' and detaching, (7) follows, contradicting (3) and (4). Thus the supposition that the Polygon is a polygon is false, and (6) follows. However the argument is flawed at two points. First, the inference from (2'') to (7'') simply generalizes the fallacious inference from (2) to (7), as instantiations of (2'') and (7'') with 'the Polygon' reveal. In short the argument for (6), with its distribution move from (2'') to (7''), involves the same sort of fallacy as that in getting from (2) to (7). Secondly, within the given framework of assumptions, the step from (2') to (2'') is fallacious. Principles (P) and (Q) are supposed to provide elimination schemes for statements about pure objects such as Universals in favor of statements about unpeculiar well-behaved objects, individual entities, say. But if so (2') is at best about every individual entity and not about every object, and only supports the inference to

- (2''') For every individual entity x , if x is a polygon then x has either an even or an odd number of sides,

and not to (2''). But the Polygon, being a pure object, is not an individual entity; so the needed instantiation of ' x ' in (2''') with 'the Polygon' is inadmissible, and the argument for (6) again breaks down.

Attempts to salvage Williams' argument will almost certainly appeal to the principle

- (R) For every object η , if η has F or G then either η has F or η has G .

But while this principle holds for such disjunctively complete objects as individual entities, it does not hold for incomplete objects such as Universals. For example, though it is true of the object, the Triangle, that it is

either isosceles or scalene, it is not true, as Meinong explained in detail ([2]), p. 170ff.), that either the Triangle is isosceles or the Triangle is scalene: as regards the equality of its sides the Triangle is incomplete.

Professor Williams' arguments fail, then, to suggest what he thinks is "wrong with the whole (Meinongian) enterprise: that it is utterly misguided to try to represent as singular and categorical and about peculiar objects, propositions which are indeed about what they seemed to be when we started: general and hypothetical, and not about peculiar objects" ([1], p. 56). The arguments, since invalid, do nothing to show that enterprises like Meinong's are misguided. Moreover ideal geometrical objects far from being peculiar are quite familiar to geometers and many of their properties are now known; their only 'deficiency' is that, unlike entities, they are incomplete in various respects. And unfortunately for Williams' final claim the assumptions (P) and (Q) from which we started are not generally true: they hold only for a restricted class of properties. For instance, the proposition that the Wheel has a long history is not truth-functionally equivalent to the proposition that necessarily any (every) wheel has a long history, that the Fox is four-footed is not equivalent to, what is false, that (necessarily) any fox is four-footed, that the Lion is tawny is not equivalent to the proposition that every lion is tawny, and similarly for such propositions as that the Bull is fierce, that Pythagoras was thinking about the properties of the Triangle, and (despite Ryle [3], pp. 49–51) that Punctuality is virtuous, since, even if it is, punctual murders and atrocities are not virtuous (as V. Routley pointed out to me).

Meinong's theory of incomplete objects is a going enterprise; but it has yet to be shown so far as I can see, if it can be shown at all, that statements about Universals can always be eliminated, preserving relevant properties, in favour of hypothetical statements about 'ordinary' objects. All we have been offered by those who would eliminate 'systematically misleading' statements about Universals (e.g. Ryle [3]) are sample eliminations, which however exemplify schemes such as (Q), which break down if applied generally. And it would appear to be an outcome of Ackermann's demonstration of the unsolvability of the elimination problem for second-order predicate logic (see [4], p. 304) that a general elimination of polyadic Universals in the proposed style is impossible.

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