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"Vague Objects and Existence" [1]

How are vague objects relevant to one's thinking about the truth-conditions for assertions of existence (e.g. 'God exists')? According to the standard account today, any assertion of existence 'x exists' is true just in case x is self-identical. But I have become dissatisfied with this account, and not merely because it seeks to pin the existence of a thing onto one of its other features, or because it seeks to identify existence as something else, something other than existence. Still, it is one thing to be intuitively dissatisfied with some view, and quite another to refute its essential conjecture. But that is why vague objects are important. For if there are vague objects, then something exists that is not identical to anything whatsoever.

The plan of the paper is as follow. In the first section, I examine Gareth Evans' influential argument against vague objects[2]. In section II, I show why his argument is unsound. In section III, I argue that the relation of indeterminate identity is reflexive for the domain of all and only vague objects. In section IV, I argue that if there are vague objects, then there is something that is not identical to anything whatsoever. And, lastly, in section V, I will argue that if there are vague objects, then vague objects exist. (In fact I will argue that anything that is, exists.)

I.

Gareth Evans was an early and influential proponent of the view that vague objects are in some sense impossible. He argued that if we assume that there are vague objects, then that assumption will eventually have to be

[1] I would like to thank the reader for *Metaphysica*, Andrew Scott Buchan, Derek Hyatte, Corey Maley, Andrew Newman, and Jackie Wilwerding for talking with me about these ideas.

[2] See his paper "Can There Be Vague Objects?" (1978, p. 208). Since this paper is a mere one page in length, this one page will serve as the citation for any reference I make to any one of Evans' views or claims.

discharged as false, because it is incompatible with the claim that all objects are self-identical, which he took to be obviously true.

His argument is as follows. Assume that there are some x and y that are vague objects in that x is indeterminately identical to y. If x is indeterminately identical to y, then y has the property of being indeterminately identical to x. At the same time, it is not the case that x is indeterminately identical to x. If x is not indeterminately identical to x, however, then x lacks the property of being indeterminately identical to y. But if x lacks a property y has, then (by the indiscerniblity of identicals) x and y are distinct from each other. And if they are distinct from each other in fact, then they are not indeterminately identical to each other after all.

In his argument, Evans assumed that 'is indeterminately identical to', 'is identical to' and 'is distinct from' are incompatible binary predicates. That is to say, he assumed that for any x and y, they satisfy exactly one of those predicates. I agree with Evans on this point, and I will assume as much throughout the course of this paper, though I will expand on it a bit in section IV.

II.

Gareth Evans begged the question when he assumed that it is not the case that x is indeterminately identical to x. Why not say, instead, that indeterminate identity is the relation any vague object bears to itself in virtue of which it counts as a vague object in the first place? We would then be able to speak of indeterminate identity as being a reflexive relation insofar as it is understood that the relation is defined only for the domain containing all and only vague objects. This interpretation of indeterminate identity as a reflexive relation implies that if any x is indeterminately identical to anything whatsoever, then x is indeterminately identical to x. In the remainder of this section, I will argue that if indeterminate identity is reflexive for the domain of all and only vague objects, then Evans' argument is unsound.

My argument is as follows. Evans assumed that x and y are indeterminately identical to each other. If x is indeterminately identical to y, then y has the property of being indeterminately identical to x. Now if indeterminate identity is reflexive, then since x is indeterminately identical to y, x is indeterminately identical to x. If x is indeterminately identical to x, however, then x also has the property of being indeterminately identical to

x.[3] Now any additional assumption would have to be rejected as false, if it implied that x lacks that property. In that case, Evans' additional assumption (i.e. that it is not the case that x is indeterminately identical to x) must be rejected as false, because, as we've seen, it implies just that.[4] Hence his argument is not sound.

III.

In this section I will argue that indeterminate identity is reflexive in the sense that if there are vague objects, then any one of them is indeterminately identical to itself.

My argument is as follows. Assume that there are vague objects, and let x and y be any such objects, such that x is indeterminately identical to y. If x is indeterminately identical to y, then y has the property of being indeterminately identical to x. Now, for the purpose of reduction, assume that it is not the case that x is indeterminately identical to x. If it is not the case that x is indeterminately identical to x, then either x is identical to x, or else x is distinct from x.[5] Let's take the first disjunct first. Assume that x is identical to x. If x is identical to x, then x lacks the property of being indeterminately identical to x. But if x lacks this property, which y has, then x and y would be distinct from each other. But x can't be distinct from y, simply in the sense that they have already been assumed to be indeterminately identical to each other. Hence the first disjunct is rejected as false. Now let's take the second disjunct. Assume that x is distinct from x. If x is distinct from x, then x lacks the property of being indeterminately identical to x. But if x lacks this property, which y has, then x and y would be distinct from each other. But, again, x can't be distinct from y, simply in the sense that they have already been assumed to be indeterminately identical to each other. Hence the second disjunct is rejected as false, too. Hence x is indeterminately identical to x.

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[3] I assume that if anything is indeterminately identical to anything at all, then it has the property of being indeterminately identical to it.

[4] See his argument in section I of this paper.

[5] See the last paragraph of section I of this paper.

In this section[6], I have appealed to the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals whenever I claimed that x and y can't be discernible and, therefore, distinct from each other, if they have already been assumed to be indeterminately identical to each other. [7] This appeal is in line with the assumption I made in section I, according to which 'is identical to,' 'is indeterminately identical to' and 'is distinct from' are incompatible binary predicates. Now I would like to say something a bit more about this assumption, but I would like to put off doing so until section IV, where the picture will be more clear.

IV.

In this section, I will argue that if there are such things as vague objects, then there is something that is not identical to anything whatsoever.

My argument is as follows. Assume that x is a vague object indeterminately identical to some y. If x is indeterminately identical to y, then x is indeterminately identical to x.[8] If x is indeterminately identical to x, then it is not the case that x is identical to x.[9] And if it is not the case that x is identical to x, then it is not the case that x is identical to anything whatsoever. Hence, if there are vague objects, then there is something that is not identical to anything whatsoever.

To support the claim that for any x, if it is not identical to itself, then it is not identical to anything, one might appeal to Kripke's principle of the necessity of difference.[10] But I don't think we need to go that far. Again[11], it seems as if 'is identical to', 'is indeterminately identical to' and 'is distinct from' are incompatible binary predicates, just as 'is red all over', 'is white all over' and 'is blue all over' are incompatible monadic predicates.

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[6] I would like to thank the reader for *Metaphysica* for flagging this point and expressing concern.

[7] That is to say, I have assumed that if x and y are discernible from each other, then they are distinct from each other, and that if they are distinct from each other, then it is not the case either that x and y are identical to each other, or that x and y are indeterminately identical to each other.

[8] See section III.

[9] See section III.

[10] See his (1980, p. 114).

[11] See the last paragraph of section I of this paper.

Why think that these relevant predicates are incompatible? To sketch out one possible answer, I will say the following.[12] Objects that are identical to themselves possess clear identity and difference conditions. That is to say, we can clearly specify what makes, for example, a set the same set or what makes two sets distinct from each other. On the other hand, any vague object possesses clear difference conditions, on the one hand, but lacks clear identity conditions, on the other. That is to say, we can clearly specify what makes any two vague objects distinct from each other (e.g. not being at the same place at the same time, not sharing all properties, etc.). But a vague object is any object for which we have no clear criteria by which to determine its identity in the way that we can determine the identity of the set.

V.

Thus far it has been shown that if there are vague objects, then there are some things that are not identical to anything whatsoever. In this section I will argue that if there are such things as vague objects, then vague objects exist. More generally, I will argue that anything that is, exists.

Over the years a number of philosophers have thought that there are things that nevertheless do not exist.[13] The following passage from the writings of R.M. Sainsbury is typical. He wrote:

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[12] My interest in this paper has been with the relationship between vague objects, or objects that are not identical to anything whatsoever, and truth-conditions for assertions of existence. I'm not terribly concerned with the issue of what makes vague objects vague. I provide this sketch for the benefit of the reader who is not familiar with the literature. One might also look at Michael Morreau's paper "What Vague Objects are Like."

[13] Notoriously, Meinong thought that even impossible objects have some kind of being, namely, Aussersein. For a much more sympathetic treatment of Meinong's views that he tends to get, see Reinhard Grossman's (1974, pp. 106-121). But other, much more mainstream, philosophers than Meinong also have thought that there are some things that nevertheless do not exist. Rene Descartes thought that some things, namely, finite substances, have less reality than other things, namely, infinite substance. See his (1996, pp. 24-36). Even Bertrand Russell in *The Problems of Philosophy* wrote of some things as having mere being and not full-fledged existence. See his (1988, p. 57). I argue against all of these views at once. There are no degrees of being. There are no kinds of reality. Everything that is, exists.

> One attempt to meet [difficulties encountered if one treats existence as a first-level predicate or property] involves distinguishing between being and existence. The category of being is wider, embracing plenty of non-existing thing, like Pegasus, The Golden Mountain, round squares, as well as the existing things like Ronald Reagan and Italy. The existential quantifier, expressed in English by 'There is', relates to the category of being, 'exists' to the narrower category of existence.[14]

Such a philosopher, then, might accept that there are vague objects in some sense, while denying that such objects exist. Vague objects, they might say, have not existence, or full-fledged existence, but vague existence. In my opinion, however, everything that is, at all, exists.

My argument is as follows. My uncontroversial first premise is that there are some things that exist. Let x be any one of them. Now, for the purpose of reduction, let us assume that there is some y that does not exist. So x exists and y does not. Let that be all that is meant when it is said that x and y are ontologically distinguishable from each other. Now if there are such things as x and y, then there is such a thing as the mereological sum of x and y (call it S). If S is the mereological sum of x and y, then there are the following four options to choose from. Either S is ontologically indistinguishable from x and y, which is absurd, for then S would be ontologically distinguishable from itself. Or S is ontologically distinguishable from both x and y, which leaves us on the slippery slope down to where everything is ontologically distinguishable from everything else. Or S is ontologically distinguishable from x alone. Or else S is ontologically distinguishable from y alone. But I submit that for anything that can be said in favor of either one of these latter two options, there is something equally valid that can be said in favor of the other one.[15] Thus, we face the following intractable situation. If we admit that there are such things as y that nevertheless do not exist, then we face four options, none of which are appealing, the two most plausible of which are impossible to chose between. Not surprisingly, in my opinion, the best option is simply to reject the original assumption that led us to the quandary in the first place, namely,

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[14] See his (2001, p. 197).

[15] For instance, one might say that S is ontologically distinct from x but not y, because mereological sums are precisely the kinds of things that are ontologically distinguishable from existing things. But if that were so, then the world, that is, the mereological sum of everything would not exist.

the assumption according to which there is such a thing as y that nevertheless does not exist. Accordingly, I reject that assumption and conclude that everything that is, exists.

(One potential objection to my argument is that we cannot form mereological sums out of some things that are ontologically distinguishable from each other. But I can't imagine why this argument is not simply ad hoc. That is to say, if we admit things that nevertheless do not exist into our ontology, then we will want to refer to them, reason about them, etc. But mereology is just a logic for reasoning about things and their parts. Whose to say that non-existent things can't have parts, or can't be reasoned about using mereology? It seems that to open the door to such things, allows that they may be reasoned about in the same way we reason about other things.)

Everything that is, exists, then. So if there are vague objects, then vague objects exist. Similarly, if there are chairs, tables, people, quarks, numbers, possible worlds, winged horses, golden mountains, and round squares, then they exist, too. They may not exist around here, or they may be fictional or abstract. But, then again, location is a relation, being fictional or abstract are properties, whereas existence is a thing. Existence is everything and to exist is to bear a relation to it: to exist to is be a part of everything.[16]

[16] For more on the account of existence as the mereological everything, according to which to exist is to be a part of everything, see my unpublished paper "The Real Thing: an account of existence and the truth-conditions for assertions of existence." A copy can be made available upon request.

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