Can there be a Foundationalist or a Coherentist Account of Predication?
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Abstract

The problem of characterizing the relation between an object and an attribute in predication is inseparable from two fundamental problems – the problem of how an object is appropriately described by a predicate, and the problem of how one predicate can apply to more than one distinct object at the same time. One response to these two problems which has been defended by philosophers is the One Over Many Argument. However, the One Over Many Argument leads to a problem of infinite regress, which is usually referred to as the Chinese Boxes Absurdity. In an attempt to respond to the Chinese Boxes Absurdity, this paper draws a parallel between the problem of predication and how it relates objects and attributes, on the one hand, and the problem of the epistemic justification of empirical beliefs, on the other hand, and explores the possibility of employing either a foundationalist or a coherentist account of predication to terminate the problem of infinite regress.

Introduction: Metaphysical Roots

The epistemological and linguistic problem that this paper attempts to investigate has more fundamental metaphysical roots. Thus, a brief though somewhat crude discussion of the inextricable link between the problem of how predication applies to an object, on the one hand, and the problem of what sorts of things exist in the world, on the other hand, is necessary in order to appropriately formulate the problem about predication that is considered here. As a starting point, a basic metaphysical view can be invoked – that the things that exist in the world can be generally classified into two types, which are particulars and universals. This view itself is quite problematic but for the sole purpose of more clearly explicating the problem about predication that is considered in this paper, this view can be initially adapted.

The obvious next step in this methodological explication is to propose some basic definitions of and distinctions between particulars and universals. It is important to note that even in this next fundamental aim, there could be at least a few different possible and defensible conceptions and characterizations of particulars and universals, but for the purposes of the present juncture the Aristotelian view of particulars and the Platonic or Socratic view of universals are adapted. The Aristotelian view is that particulars are generally concrete things that exist in the world which could have either fundamental or derivative existence. Particulars with fundamental existence are called primary substances. A primary substance is a concrete particular which can be a fundamental object of predication, or in other words, to which predicates can apply but which cannot be predicated to things apart from itself. In this Aristotelian view, the link between

metaphysical notions about things that exist in the world and the epistemological and linguistic conceptions of predication is already somewhat evident. The Socratic view on universals, on the other hand, is based on the Socratic theory of Forms. In one version of the reductionist ontology of Bertrand Russell, wherein it is ultimately asserted that the two types of things that fundamentally exist in the world are universals and particulars, universals are generally conceived of in terms of attributes that can be predicated to particulars. The Socratic view posits that the predication of attributes to particulars obtains in the particulars' participation in or partaking of the ideal Forms, which is merely an imperfect approximation of the perfect Forms or universals. Given the brief explications that have been presented thus far, the consequent problem is in characterizing how the relation between a particular (or an object) and a universal (or an attribute) in predication obtains.

The One Over Many Argument and the Chinese Boxes Absurdity

One notable thing about predication is that it is closely linked to description, in the sense that when it is asserted that a predicate appropriately applies to an object, it can also be said that the object is being described by the predicate and the description appropriately applies. Another notable thing about predication is that it is also closely linked to classification, in the sense that one predicate can apply to many distinct particulars or objects at the same time. Therefore, the problem of characterizing how the relation between an object and an attribute in predication obtains is related to two problems – the problem of how an object is appropriately described by a predicate as well as the problem of how one predicate can apply to more than one distinct object. One response to these problems which has been defended by philosophers is the One Over Many Argument, which Bruce Aune, after attempting to address concerns in conventional formulations, reformulates as such:

 "if several things fall under a common description, they must possess some absolute determinate features by virtue of which the description is correctly applied to them."[1]

It is important to note that the absolute determinate features pertained to in Aune's reformulation could refer to various notions. Among others, it may pertain to a Socratic idea of an object's imperfect approximation of the ideal Forms, or to an empirical account of a certain quality of the object, or a Wittgensteinian notion of family resemblance, or anything that is present in or possessed by an object or by many objects in a group by virtue of which the description is appropriately applied to it or to them. In other words, it could be anything present in or possessed by the object or objects which in a way justifies the applicability of the predicate to each of the objects where the predication can be said to be correct.

However, this broad reformulation of the One Over Many Argument, as well as its narrower conventional formulations, leads to a problem of infinite regress, which is usually referred to as the

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[1] Bruce Aune, *Metaphysics: The Elements* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 41

Chinese Boxes Absurdity.   The terminology used makes an allusion of the aim of finding the absolute determinate feature in an object by virtue of which a predicate correctly applies to it to the metaphorical image of an endless Chinese box, which when opened exposes a smaller box inside, which when opened again shows another smaller box inside, and so on infinitely. In more formal language, the Chinese Boxes absurdity can be expressed as follows. Let an absolute determinate feature F be possessed by or be present in object x, and by virtue of F the predicate P correctly applies to x. Because F is the absolute determinate feature by virtue of which P (which is both descriptive and classificatory) correctly applies to x, then F itself must also be distinct and have some positive character, and thus it must be correctly described and classified by a higher order predicate P*, which would distinguish it from other absolute determinate features possessed by or present in x. But for P* to correctly apply to F, there must be an absolute determinate feature F* possessed by or present in F by virtue of which P* correctly applies to F. Moving on, F* must also be describable and classifiable by a higher order predicate P**, and a higher order absolute determinate feature F** must be present in or possessed by F* by virtue of which P** correctly applies to F*. This series based on the One Over Many Argument can then go on infinitely.[2]

In order to further explicate the Chinese Boxes Absurdity, in a hopefully clearer manner, an illustrative example is now attempted. The following attempt starts with a simple statement with predication, drawn from Aune's own discussions on universals and particulars.

Box 1: Take the following simple statement with predication – "This piece of paper is white." The predicate "is white" correctly applies to the object "this piece of paper" by virtue of the absolute determinate feature of "whiteness" possessed by or present in "this piece of paper," which is also possessed by or present in other objects to which the predicate "is white" correctly applies.

Box 2: "Whiteness," being an absolute determinate feature of "this piece of paper," must be distinguished from other features, such as "solidity," "rectangularity," or "blackness," that can also be possessed by "this piece of paper" or other objects to which the predicate "is white" may or may not correctly apply. Thus, it must be described and classified by a higher order predicate, say "is the general visual appearance of the color white to human observers," which correctly applies to "whiteness," by virtue of a higher order feature, say "the predominant conception of whiteness with regards to human visual perception," which can be said to be possessed by or present in the lower order feature of "whiteness."

Box 3: Similarly, "the predominant conception of whiteness with regards to human visual perception," must be distinguished from other features, such as "the predominant conception of whiteness with regards to poetic use," or "the predominant conception of blackness with regards to human visual perception," or "the predominant idea of purity," that can be said to also be possessed by or present in "whiteness" or other lower order features to which the predicate "is the general visual appearance of the color white to human observers" may or may not apply. Thus, it must be

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[2] Ibid., 43

described and classified by a higher order predicate, say "can be characterized empirically as the reflection of at least 95% of the white light that hits a physical surface," which correctly applies to "the predominant conception of whiteness with regards to human visual perception," by virtue of a higher order feature, say "the demonstrated empirical origin of whiteness as perceived by humans," which can be said to be possessed by or present in the lower order feature of "the predominant conception of whiteness with regards to human visual perception."

Box 4 onwards to infinity: The exercise can be carried out in an infinite sequential manner and thus results in a problem of infinite regress. It can be noticed that at least a part of the propensity to proceed towards infinite regress is brought about by the breadth of how absolute determinate features or the relation "by virtue of" are conceived in the reformulation of the One Over Many Arguments.

Can there be a Foundationalist or a Coherentist Account of Predication?

The relation between objects and predicates is often called a relation of exemplification. This is understandable given what predication does when applied to a particular. It has been pointed out earlier that a predicate usually pertains to an attribute and a predicate somehow both describes and classifies an object. When a predicate is applied to an object, the object is somewhat linked to an exemplar of the description being evoked by the predicate. Moreover, the object becomes an example among things which can be correctly described or classified by the predicate applied. Thus, at this superficial level, exemplification seems to be an appropriate term to use.

This paper now proceeds to its main thesis. The intuition that is invoked as a starting point is that there seems to be a close similarity between the problem of predication and how it relates particulars and universals (or objects and attributes), on the one hand, and the problem of the epistemic justification of empirical beliefs, on the other hand. For one thing, the use of "by virtue of" to articulate how a predicate could correctly apply to an object, a particular, or a feature, seems to evoke some notion of justification in the sense that a predicate's applicability to an object needs to somehow be justified by the presence of an absolute determinate feature in an object. In the same way, an empirical belief, in order to be considered as knowledge, must be justified. Another thing to note is that in the same way that the justifications of empirical beliefs need to be justified by other beliefs, the justification of the applicability of a predicate to an object seems to also necessarily involve other statements of predication, as illustrated in the earlier explications of the One Over Many Argument and the Chinese Boxes Absurdity.   Given this parallelism, both justificatory empirical beliefs as well as justificatory statements of predication need to be further justified and thus in both cases, the result is a problem of an infinite regress of justifications.

Two of the most defended theories in attempts to terminate the problem of infinite regress in the discourse of the epistemic justification of empirical knowledge are foundationalism and

coherentism.[3] Foundationalism has its roots in Descartes' universal method of doubt. Descartes famously posited that both synthetic and analytic empirical beliefs can be doubted and thus they need to be further justified before being considered as knowledge. What one can ultimately not doubt is the belief that one is doubting or thinking and therefore that one exists, hence the popular articulation *Cogito ergo sum*. Consequently, since this belief cannot be doubted, it needs no further justification and thus can be considered a foundational belief where the problem of infinite regress in epistemic justification can be terminated. Descartes added another foundational belief, which is the belief that god exists and is no deceiver. These two beliefs, taken together, compose the set of foundational beliefs, from which higher order empirical beliefs can be derived and by which all other higher order empirical beliefs can be ultimately justified.

This paper thus raises the question of whether or not a similar foundationalist account of the exemplification relation in predication can be plausibly conceived. Since the problematic consequence of the One Over Many Argument as an account of predication is that for it to be justifiably said that a predicate correctly applies to an object of predication, a higher order statement of predication needs to be invoked, and this series seems to go on infinitely, is it possible to reach a point in the series wherein the statement of predication can already be reasonably or rationally accepted to obtain (i.e. it can be justifiably said that the predicate correctly applies to the object of predication) without identifying a higher order absolute determinate feature present in or possessed by the object of predication by virtue of which the predicate correctly applies, and thus leading to another predication statement? If a plausible affirmative response is found, this last predication statement in the series where the Chinese Boxes Absurdity terminates can probably be called a foundational predication statement.

What sorts of predication statements could be plausibly considered as foundational predication statements? One candidate that can be proposed could be predication statements of identity.   When something is predicated to itself in a statement of predication, or in other words when the predicate is in a substantial sense identical to the object of predication (either in the form $a=a$ or in the form $a=b$), then it can be said that the predicate correctly applies to the object of predication without a justification based on invoking an absolute determinate feature in the object of predication by virtue of which the predicate correctly applies. Of course at this point this hypothesis is heavily conjectural and is likely to be problematic, but in this juncture the initial aim is precisely to speculate on what sorts of predication statements could be plausibly considered as foundational predication statements. One problem about considering predication statements of identity as foundational predication statements is that the termination of the infinite regress in the problem of the Chinese Boxes Absurdity would then seem to become purely arbitrary. At any stage in the series of Chinese boxes, a predication statement of identity (e.g. F^{**} is F^{**} or F^{**} is P^{***} where $P^{***}=F^{**}$) can simply be invoked and the infinite regress would then terminate. Nonetheless, at least intuitively, a predication statement of identity also seems to serve the same purposes that any other

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[3] The discussion of foundationalism and coherentism in this section draws mostly from Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985).

non-identical predicate would serve with regards to the requirements stipulated by the formulation of the problem of the Chinese Boxes Absurdity pertaining to the One Over Many Argument in the sense that a predication statement of identity also asserts the positive character of the object of predication and also distinguishes the object of predication from other objects of predication. Also, it can be said that an object of predication is identical to itself by virtue of itself, which could be considered an absolute determinate feature that is present in or possessed by itself, and itself is also identical with itself. Perhaps it is in this circular mechanism that the problem of infinite regress terminates.

Another sort of predication statement that can be speculatively considered as foundational could be predication statements that involve a Cartesian foundational belief. The termination of the problem of infinite regress could take the following forms:

[1] x is P by virtue of F.
[2] F is P* by virtue of the foundational belief that I think therefore I exist.
[3] The foundational belief that I think therefore I exist cannot be doubted.
[4] The predicate "cannot be doubted" correctly applies to "the foundational belief that I think therefore I exist" only by virtue of the absolute determinate feature of "cannot be doubted" present in or possessed by "the foundational belief that I think therefore I exist."
[5] Therefore, it is only by virtue of the predicate itself that the predicate correctly applies to the object of predication, and thus the infinite regress terminates.

[1] x is P by virtue of F.
[2] F is P* by virtue of the foundational belief that god exists and is no deceiver.
[3] The foundational belief that god exists and is no deceiver cannot be doubted.
[4] The predicate "cannot be doubted" correctly applies to "the foundational belief that god exists and is no deceiver" only by virtue of the absolute determinate feature of "cannot be doubted" present in or possessed by "the foundational belief that god exists and is no deceiver."
[5] Therefore, it is only by virtue of the predicate itself that the predicate correctly applies to the object of predication, and thus the infinite regress terminates.

In both cases, the only absolute determinate feature present in or possessed by the object of predication, which appropriately asserts the positive character of the object of predication and which appropriately distinguishes it from other objects of predication, and thus which warrants the correct application of the predicate, is the predicate itself, and thus the infinite regress terminates. The obvious problem here is in determining at which stage in the series can the Cartesian foundational beliefs be justifiably invoked as the absolute determinate features in an object of predication by virtue of which the predicate correctly applies.

Coherentism, on the other hand, is the alternative view of epistemic justification, which asserts that the epistemic justification of empirical beliefs does not rely on foundational beliefs, but

rather on coherence within a system of beliefs. Thus, another question raised in this paper is whether or not a coherentist account of predication could be a plausible response to the Chinese Boxes Absurdity. In such a coherentist account, a predicate can be justifiably said to correctly apply to an object of predication only by virtue of the coherence of the predication with other justifiably correct applications of the same predicate. The consequent problem from such an account in relation to the formulation of the One Over Many Argument is whether or not the coherence of the predication with other justifiably correct applications of the same predicate can be said to be an absolute determinate feature present in or possessed by the object of predication. To further illustrate this problem, the following example is considered.

[1] x is P.
[2] P correctly applies to x by virtue of the coherence of the predication "x is P" with other correct applications of the predicate P.
[3] The coherence of the predication "x is P" with other correct applications of the predicate P is an absolute determinate feature present in or possessed by x.

The problem with the above example is that the coherence of the predication "x is P" with other correct applications of the predicate P seems to be a feature of x alone and not of other objects y and z to which the predicate P can also correctly apply in the predication statements "y is P" and "z is P." Following the One Over Many Argument, it is by virtue of the absolute determinate feature of the coherence of the predication "x is P" with other correct applications of the predicate P that P also correctly applies to y and z in the predication statements "y is P" and "z is P." This is intuitively not the case because it seems that the coherence of the predication "x is P" with other correct applications of the predicate P is not an absolute determinate feature that is present in or possessed by either y or z. One possible solution to this contradiction is to generalize the absolute determinate feature invoked as the coherence of this sort of application of predicate P with other correct applications of the predicate P. Such an absolute and determinate feature can then be plausibly said to be present in or possessed by all objects of predication to which the predicate P justifiably correctly applies, some of which are x, y, and z. This sort of absolute determinate feature can then be said to not have any further positive character and thus can only be correctly described or distinguished by itself. Thus, the infinite regress is terminated and the number of Chinese Boxes involved is reduced to only two.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, a parallelism is drawn between the problem of predication and how it relates particulars and universals (or objects and attributes), on the one hand, and the problem of the epistemic justification of empirical beliefs, on the other hand. Afterwards, some speculative proposals on how either a foundationalist or a coherentist account of predication can terminate the problem of infinite regress (called the Chinese Boxes Absurdity) resulting from the One Over Many

Argument are presented. The hope is that these speculative proposals could be the starting points of further philosophical inquiry towards a defense of the One Over Many Argument as a plausible philosophical view on predication and how universals and particulars (or attributes and objects) are related.

References

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