
PHILOSOPHIA

PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY OF ISRAEL

VOLUME 28, NOS. 1-4

JUNE 2001

*THE ONTOLOGY OF THE ANALYTIC TRADITION
AND ITS ORIGIN: REALISM AND IDENTITY IN
FREGE, RUSSELL, WITTGENSTEIN, AND QUINE*

by Jan Dejnožka. Landam, Maryland: Littlefield Adams Books, 1996. 335 pgs.

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If one wishes to mark the beginning of the multifarious movement known as 'analytic philosophy,' one can do no better than Frege's *Foundations of Arithmetic* which contains the famous remark: "If we are to use the symbol *a* to signify an object, we must have a criterion for deciding in all cases whether *b* is the same as *a*" (p. 62). Quine distills this demand into parsimonious prose: "No entity without identity." According to Dejnožka, this principle unites the great analytic philosophers from Frege to Quine: "My thesis is that a single kind of ontology, 'no entity without identity' ontology, is fundamental to all of Russell's major works from 1900 to 1948, to the work of Frege, Wittgenstein, and Quine—and also to substance metaphysics, its origin over two thousand years ago" (p. xiii). What ties the four great analytic philosophers together binds them to Aristotelian metaphysics as well. ". . . [M]embers of the analytic tradition have often portrayed themselves as radically breaking from traditional philosophy" (p. 215), but they lack self-knowledge: ". . . the analysts, far from ending traditional ontology, at bottom continued and even developed it" (p. xiii). To be more specific, the four great analytic philosophers have in common with Aristotle an ontological theory Dejnožka calls "modified realism": ". . . the view that in some sense there are both real and rational (or linguistic) entities . . . More precisely, it is the view that there is at least one real being which is the basis for accommodating possibly huge amounts of conceptual relativity, or objectual identities 'shifting' as sortal concepts or sortal terms 'shift'" (p. xiii). One might suppose that the four analytic philosophers qualify as modified realist by embracing quantification

and Quine's slogan, "to be is to be the value of a bound variable." The objects one quantifies over one assumes to be real things, and for quantification to be well-defined one admits only names for objects which meet Frege's demand.

According to Dejnožka, this account is mistaken. The ontology of the four greats has little to do with quantification and everything to do with identity: "I think that if As are identifiable and talk of them cannot be paraphrased away, that alone constitutes their existence. Quantification is a useful but formalistic rubber stamp" (p. xv). The argument of this book attempts to establish the modified realism of Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Quine by illuminating their 'no entity without identity' theories. The result is a new, often bizarre, reading of the four greats for which Dejnožka boldly proclaims, "I cannot see how our understanding of the pluralistic, diverse analytic movement, not to mention the pluralistic, diverse history of Western philosophy, could be more deeply transformed or unified, if I am right" (p. xiii)!

On the face of it, making so much noise over modified realism is misplaced. The thesis is so broad and vague as to be trivial. Even Berkeley and Protagoras believe "... there is at least one real being which is the basis for accommodating possibly huge amounts of conceptual relativity. . ." (p. xiii). Berkeley has God, whereas Protagoras man. One would think that Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Quine are uncontroversial cases of such an uncontroversial classification. Can any of these four be construed as contending with Dejnožka's triviality: "This is just my point that for conceptual slicing of the world into objects, there must be something to be sliced" (pp. 30-1)? Dejnožka thinks they can because "radical relativism" apparently threatens their respective views, where radical relativism "... asserts that the ontological locus of identity is never in things, but only in our view of things" (p. 41). The threat of relativism arises supposedly with Frege's insight that number is not a property of objects but of concepts. Is this 'thing' one pair of boots or two boots? According to Dejnožka, with this question "... realism itself seems to be unraveling due to an internal conflict" (p. 38). The supposed conflict is that realism would require two senses of identity from Frege, "We may say with Frege, 'One pair of boots is not the same concrete object as two boots (individuating sense), but is the same physical phenomenon as two boots (unitative sense)'" (p. 37). Since for Frege "... it is inconceivable that various

forms of identity should occur” (ibid.) realism unravels revealing radical relativism. Assuming Frege’s basic analysis of number, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Quine seem to slip easily into radical relativism. This reading of a *reductio* of Frege’s realism is absurd. That realism requires two senses of identity here is dubious. Frege actually says, “While looking at the same external phenomenon, I can say with equal truth both ‘It is a copse’ and ‘It is five trees’” (*Foundations* p. 46) and the same holds for “There’s a pair” and “There are two boots” precisely because number is a property of concepts not things—unspecified external phenomena. Nonetheless, the pair of boots is a distinct object in Frege’s sense from the two boots because the pair is one while the boots are two. The pair of boots ‘is’ the two distinct boots only in the sense that, at a given time, a pair of boots is constituted of two boots. Countenancing this distinction is no more difficult than allowing that a class is determined by its members, though the class is one thing distinct from its particular members. “Determined by” and “constituted of” are not senses of identity. Of course, one may abjure talk of classes and pairs for that matter, opting only to countenance physical objects, boots, or the distribution of microphysical states. The desire to do so, however, will be based on what our best theory tells us is real. There is no threat of relativism here. Moreover, radical relativism, “. . . the theory that there is no more to our objectual identity than our choice to apply one concept . . . as opposed to another” (p. 41), in no way follows from Frege’s insight that a statement about number is a statement about a concept. Whether the statement “There were 1,678,569 dinosaurs exactly 60,000,000 years ago” is true or false on Frege’s analysis has nothing to do with our choices. That it was true or false before there were any people to choose anything is explicit in Frege’s view of concepts as objective and mind-independent. How one could find any interesting relativism here is baffling. Dejnožka admits, “A colleague criticizes the problem of radical relativity I raise as unreal, and my solution of it as therefore of no interest” (p. 33). The misfortune that befalls this book comes from not heeding this warning.

Chapter 1 is the long “Introduction” that tries to establish the importance of identity and the problem of radical relativity. Dejnožka’s goal to connect the four great analytic philosophers with the tradition of substance metaphysics via modified realism has a strange philosophical motivation. He says, “. . . we philosophers are in the business of finding resemblances” (p. 219). But as

Quine and Ullian say in *The Web of Belief*, “Everything is similar to everything in some respect,” and one cannot help but wonder whether Dejnožka’s connections stretch across a wide range of disanalogies. This desire to find resemblances may in part account for the bizarre ‘style’ of this book. In order to advance his thesis, Dejnožka draws manifold distinctions and compiles dozens of lists. For example, he lists ten senses of “identifiable,” his word for identity. Frege has at least twelve private-language arguments. Aristotle emphasized seven themes concerning substance. Most of these lists, however, are, say, eight reasons why so-and-so is wrong, or ten reasons why such-and-such’s objection to his objection to what-cha-ma-call-it’s objection to his thesis number four concerning Russell’s three sense of reality is false or silly. This ‘style’ makes the book no pleasure to read, and it is more than philosophical overkill to establish the trivial resemblance of modified realism between Aristotle and the four greats of analytic philosophy.

Chapter 2 “Is Frege a Radical Relativist?” concerns Frege’s conception of identity and identity statements. Dejnožka explains the connection: “. . . the most important issue of all concerning Frege’s realism is a fourth one that has so far been ignored. Namely, for Frege objects shift as concepts shift. Identity is predicated not of objects, but of names expressing senses. Existence itself is predicated not of objects but of concepts” (p. 39). Dejnožka spends most of this long chapter defending an interpretation of Frege called the name theory: “. . . the theory that identity is a relation between names that they denote the same denotation, where names are signs expressing senses” (p. 44). Though Frege in *Begriffsschrift* sec. 8 says, “Identity of content differs from conditionality and negation in that it applies to names and not to contents . . . Hence the introduction of a sign for identity of content necessarily produces a bifurcation in the meaning of all signs: they stand at times for their content, at times for themselves,” Frege’s own logic betrays this theory. If one took these remarks seriously, Frege’s logic would be tangled in ugly use-mention mistakes. For example, proposition 52 of *Begriffsschrift* is the conditional

$$c=d \rightarrow (Fc \rightarrow Fd).$$

On Dejnožka’s interpretation, the antecedent is about the names “c” and “d”, while the consequent is about the objects c and d. It should be obvious that Frege does not endorse this interpretation of 52. Identity can only be

construed as a relation between objects for Frege. Dejnožka is aware of this difficulty but he dismisses it, apparently unaware of its force. Dummett is one of his targets; he says, “Dummett’s objection [to the name interpretation] is a total misreading of the text of ‘On Sense and Reference’” (p. 54). Concerning contextual definition, he presents Dummett as so naive that “Some historical study might have helped Dummett grasp all this” (p. 96)! Possibly, but one should be skeptical of gleaning any insights about identity from someone with the following requirement for an adequate theory of identity: “Any theory of true informative identity statements on which the ostensibly identical object(s) are only apparently distinct object(s), cannot account for the informativeness of such statements. To account for that, the identical object(s) must be, in some sense, genuinely different objects as well” (p. 47)! Identity has to be expressed as a relation between genuinely distinct objects—the mangle of use-mention is here hopelessly incoherent.

Chapter 3 “Frege: Existence Defined as Identifiability” defends thesis (T) “. . . that in Frege’s philosophy existence may be and is best defined as identifiability, where an object is identifiable if every identity statement about it has a determinate truth value” (p. 103). The very statement of (T) is a non-starter. The existence of the object is already assumed in order for “every statement about it” to have a truth value! The flip side of this circular coin is that Frege’s logic requires that all names denote objects, so of course it will be necessary and sufficient for a thing to exist that every identity statement about it has a truth value. But this connection hardly counts as a definition of existence in terms of identity. Moreover, Dejnožka ignores Wittgenstein’s claim in the *Tractatus* that “The identity sign . . . is not an essential constituent of conceptual notation” (5.533). In the *Tractatus*, the identity relation collapses into quantification, so an identity relation is not even necessary for existence to be well-defined in a language.

Chapter 4 “Russell’s Robust Sense of Reality” argues that Russell used three senses of “real”. The first sense “. . . is that to be real is not to be nothing” (p. 124). “The secondary sense is that to be real is to be correlated with (other) particulars (by which Russell means sense-data) in certain ordinary ways” (Ibid.). The third sense is “. . . that ‘Existence is essentially a property of a propositional function’” (p. 125). The brunt of this chapter seems to be that Russell connected what is real with what is identifiable and not with the

value of a variable, though the thread connecting this chapter with the previous ones is so thin as to be indiscernible.

Chapter 5 "Russell's Forty-Four 'No Entity Without Identity' Theories" is a misnomer. Given the title, one expects to find that Russell held incredibly subtle views concerning identity and ontology. What one finds instead is forty-four sometimes vague examples from sense-data theory to quantum mechanics in which Russell employs a 'no entity without identity' demand. This long chapter is especially exasperating because it begins with an opaque list of the forty-four theses which one is supposed to remember by number for over sixty pages.

Chapter 6 "The Ancient Realist Basis of Conceptual Relativity" argues, "Most Western philosophers adopted the ontology of modified realism to allow conceptual relativity to have something real to slice into conceptual beings" (p. 216). This trivial ontology is then extended to the philosophies of Quine and Wittgenstein in Chapter 7 "The Ontology of the Analytic Tradition." Here one finds that Wittgenstein and Quine are "metaphysical modified realists" because they attribute ". . . some or all of the characteristics of substance to some but not all things" (p.233), where these characteristics include "Being mind-independent" (p. 234)! One wonders how substance was ever contentiously debated in philosophy. Quine is a modified realist because he believes in mind-independent distributions of microphysical states and Wittgenstein because he believes in facts about language games, ". . . Wittgenstein says, 'The fundamental fact is that we lay down rules, a technique, for a game, and when we follow the rules, things do not turn out as we assumed' (PI # 125). Thus he admits a 'fundamental fact.' He admits 'things' which do not correspond to our conceptions" (p. 253). If that is all it takes to be a modified realist, then most of the pages of this book were written in vain.

This book stumbles over many interesting issues concerning analytic philosophy, and Dejnožka obviously has read the works of the four greats. Unfortunately, there is little to learn here. Putting aside what sometimes seems like philosophical incompetence, this reader found especially unbearable the style and tone of this book which often wavered between arrogant and acerbic. Consider a typical example of this tone: "It is hard to develop any adequate theory about the nature of change without discussing the views of Parmenides and Zeno. But Davidson does not even mention Parmenides and Zeno in his

book *Essays on Actions and Events* . . . Whether or not Davison is right, *Essays on Actions and Events* is shallow for its ignoring of Zeno” (p. 205). What a pity, *Essays on Actions and Events* has duped a whole generation of analytic philosophers into believing there is depth in Davidson. One wonders who Parmenides and Zeno failed to footnote! That the book had a philosophically competent editor is unimaginable. In the “Introduction,” there are three passages like the following: “Perhaps the argument is strictly a *non-sequitur* . . . But the argument seems more convincing the more you think about it” (p. 14). With no advice on how to think about it, these passages give one the impression that just by thinking about a *non-sequitur* it becomes more convincing not less. One should be grateful for not giving *non-sequiturs* so much thought!

Some may suspect my comments are unjustly *ad hoc*. I would advise reading it yourself but that is like recommending you try thumbscrews to assure you they are really torture—which is more convincing the more you think about it.

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