

Objectivity in Metaphysics April 30, 2001

1. Lewis on *de re* modality

Lewis's view about debates about *de re* modal questions: typically, the debaters are talking past one another; they mean different things by their words, so both are right.

It's a good model for what it might be to not to regard a certain question as an *objective* one. Someone might think, for example, that ethics is like this. One lot of people says that abortion is wrong; another lot says that it isn't wrong---they seem to be disagreeing, but really 'wrong' means different things for them. All that's left is a divergence in their *attitudes*: the first lot of people care a lot about wrongness₁, the second lot care a lot about wrongness₂.

Question: might some or all other debates in metaphysics be like this?

2. Sider on temporal properties

Sider suggests a resolution of the temporal paradoxes of material constitution which works just like Lewis's resolution of the modal paradoxes.

Sider's view is that ordinary objects like people, tables, computers are all *time-slices*: they are of zero temporal "thickness". If I am of zero temporal thickness, shouldn't that mean that it's false to say 'I will exist tomorrow'? Not according to Sider: his claim is that 'will exist tomorrow' expresses the property of having a *temporal counterpart* who does exist tomorrow---that is, something that is connected to you by the right sort of causal chain, in which the right sort of similarity is preserved.

The temporal counterpart relation is 'inconstant' in the same way as the modal one is (for Lewis). So even though Clem is Jupiter, you can have 'Clem existed yesterday' being true in the context it's likely to evoke, and 'Jupiter didn't exist yesterday' being true in the context *it's* likely to evoke. In those contexts, the former sentence means 'Clem has a lump-of-matter-counterpart who exists yesterday', and the latter sentence means 'Jupiter has no statue-counterpart who exists yesterday'.

Someone who held Sider's view *could* hold that *all* material objects are of zero temporal thickness---this would allow one to hold that there is never more than one material object in any place at any time. Sider actually believes in spacetime worms, although he doesn't think we generally talk about them, so he doesn't hold this.

A problem for Sider's view: doesn't it make 'infinitely many people have lived in Washington Square Village' come out true? To avoid this, he has to back down and say that our words for ordinary material things *sometimes* refer to spacetime worms.

3. Are questions about personal identity objective?

Of the questions we've considered in class, the one that's most amenable to being regarded as non-objective is the question whether people can survive such-and-such sorts of change. We have come across three different ways to hold that the question 'Will this person survive the upcoming teletransportation?' isn't objective:

— a worm theorist might say that the person₁ will survive the teletransportation, while the person₂ won't.

— a stage theorist (Sider) might say that the person will₁ survive the teletransportation, but won't₂ survive the teletransportation.

— a mereological nihilist might say that according to fiction 1 about composite things, the person will survive the teletransportation, while according to fiction 2 she won't.

4. Could the answer to the question 'Do these things compose something?' not be objective?

You could try saying that the disputing parties mean different things by mereological words like 'part' and 'compose'; 'there is something they compose₁' is true; 'there is nothing they compose₂' is also true.

But what is this thing which they compose₁ but don't compose₂. What is it like, where is it located? If you say 'it is of such-and-such shape, in such-and-such place' you will have found something objective that the disputing parties really do disagree about---so you had better say that those predicates are all equivocal as well. But how could there be nothing more to say about this thing than that it has parts₁ but no parts₂, a location₁ but no location₂, etc.? What is it about it that makes these descriptions apt? If I say, for example, 'There's nothing that isn't itself a particle which has a special relation to these particles and to no other particles', haven't I found something that I and the believer in composition genuinely disagree about?

In any case, people who disagree about composition will typically disagree about the question 'How many things are there, unrestrictedly speaking?' And it's very hard to see how *this* could fail to be objective. Which of the words used in stating it could be understood in different ways?

So even though a lot of people when they hear about the special composition question react by doubting that anything objective could be at issue, this view is very hard to make sense of---much harder than anti-objectivism about personal identity!

The same is true of a lot of the most *metaphysical* bits of metaphysics. EG the debate about temporal parts---this is also liable to involve extreme disagreement about the number of things. Also, the debate about whether there are mathematical entities, properties, propositions, events, facts.... not to mention the debate about whether there is a God, immortal souls, and so forth.