Existence and reference

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Abstract Here, I suggest that words get their meaning first from what exists, and consider the impact the assumption has on indeterminacy theses \hat{a} la Quine, innateness views of concepts, and finally Jackson's famous Mary's room argument.

Keywords: Existence, Reference, Indeterminacy, Concepts, Mary's room

0. The core of language, I shall argue, highlights what exists. Hence, *prima facie* my paper has nothing to do with language and relativity, and up to a point that's true. An Inuit, an Indonesian and an Italian speak differently because they speak to different people of different things, and that makes them have different needs and wishes. If an Italian wants to speak to an Indonesian, he learns some Javanese. Because things have changed, many Indonesian and many Italians want to speak with more people, and with people living in far away places. That has turned into a *lingua* franca the language of the most powerful group, English, and the Indonesian and the Italian have a chance of understanding each other speaking English. Even if there are regularities in the environment and survival is fundamental for the Inuit, the Indonesian, the Italian and the American, there are huge variations through space and time - even in how to survive. Language is like food - we need water, vitamins, minerals, carbohydrates, proteins, fat, etc. How to get that depends from what is available where we live, how much of each ingredient depends on what we do and on our degree of fitness. If an Italian can assume his carbohydrates in Java eating pasta, it is because now they sell some Italian food even in some Indonesian supermarkets. That is, I would not deny relativity, but would oppose the idea that relativity begins with language.

If there were no words, no word would refer to a thing; and if there were no thing, there would be no reference to a thing – though, if there were no thing, there would be no words either. A related, and harder, claim has that language semantics too depends on what there is, or that there would be no words if there were not words anchored to what there is. Here, I want to articulate the claim and give some non-conclusive arguments to back it, discussing the grounding of language on things. Names distinguish things, independently from attributing them any property or relation. Predicates – which I use as a hypernym for verbs, nouns, adjectives – pick out groups of things by one feature of theirs, assimilating them and distinguishing

them from any other group. Sometimes, I will collectively call names and predicates 'terms'. If there were no thing, there would be no terms. That does not exclude that there are vacuous names and vacuous predicates, i.e. terms that match no thing. Indeed, there are plenty of fictional narratives (books, movies, tv serials) and fictional portraits (Hamlet and Aphrodite of Milos, for instance). Once we have names that name things, and predicates that group them, we can have names and predicates that *seem* to name, assimilate and distinguish things. Since there are terms that connect with things, there are terms that pretend to do so. I shall anyway not go into the fictional path as I shall not pick up any issue concerning fake things. Since there are not fake things, and a fictional story too is not. A fake Vermeer does not pretend to represent a real one.

My case is a vivid instance of *without existence nothing*, and I deem *exist* to be a fundamental property and not one applying an empty category, or a property parasitic on real properties as it is customary paraphrasing the predicate 'exist' by means of the existential quantifier. It is not that a thing exists because it has a name, or it has a property or satisfies a predicate; rather it has a property and satisfies a predicate because it exists. I shall apply the predicate 'exist' to particulars – individuals and objects – and use it also to draw a boundary between what is there and what is not there. There are indeed terms that seem to name or to assimilate and distinguish things, and pictures that seem to portrait too, and it is important to distinguish seeming to from being¹.

I shall point to three arguments for my claim. First, I shall consider the ontological, and ideological, debacle of interpretation. Secondly, I shall point out some of the problems we have if we take concepts to be what language expresses. Thirdly, I shall reanalyze a famous argument by Frank Jackson, Mary's room, an argument which he originally used against a physicalistic reduction of consciousness. I shall put the argument at a different use. Then, I shall indicate a model for how to anchor the representation of what there is to what there is.

1. A name does not attribute any feature to what it names - it calls out a particular. The practice wouldn't be possible if there were only vacuous names. For a vacuous name works pretending to refer to a thing there, a pretense dependent on the practice of naming something. Naming something and you claim there to be a thing. If yours is it a pretense, in the circumstance there is no thing.

1.1. With a predicate, the matter looks different². A predicate introduces ideology, concerning what ideas are expressible in a theory, i.e. the interpretation of predicates and the choice of the logical operators³. Writes Quine:

¹ The boundary is harder to tell when we come to those special forms of imagination that are designs. The design of a new building close to the river not yet built is the design of something that does not exist yet, and may never exist. The final design of a new engine is, to me, ambiguous. In a way, the creation of the new engine is all there in its design, yet there is yet no one instance of it. The same seems true of a piece of music of which exist only the score, but which has never been played.

² As names would if they were explained away and reduced to predicates, as QUINE 1960 suggests. (On Quine on Names see GRAFF FARA 2011 and LEONARDI & NAPOLI 1995.)

³ See BURGESS 2008, especially § 2.3.

The ideology of a theory is a question of what the symbols mean; the ontology of a theory is a question of what the assertions say or imply that there is. (QUINE 1951: 14)

In Quine's nominalistic proclivities the ontology, i.e. what there is, is individuated, as everybody knows, as follows:

The ontology to which an (interpreted) theory is committed comprises all and only the objects over which the bound variables of the theory have to be construed as ranging in order that the statements affirmed in the theory be true. (QUINE 1951: 11)

His ontology, that is, provides only for objects, and views properties and relations as linguistic constructs produced by the interpretation of predicates, which groups objects.

In Quine, interpretation, which he prefers to investigate under the rubric of translation, is under only two constraints – the truth-value of observation sentences has to be invariant and the logical relations have to be respected. The logical relations are those of classical predicate logic with identity, and hence its understanding of connectives (in English, 'not', 'and', 'or', 'if..., then __'), quantifiers ('Some' and 'all') and the predicate of identity. With only these two constraints, however, there are too many interpretations as good. Quine himself emphasizes the fact applying proxy functions to indeterminacy⁴. A proxy function assigns to a predicate that has a set of objects as extension, a different set of objects as extension. There is a constraint though: the function has to be one-to-one, i.e. the two sets have to be of the same cardinality and different items of the first set have to be projected into different items of the second set.

The lesson Quine draws from this is that it does not matter whether the initial interpretation or one of its myriad reinterpretations is countenanced. The reference of the language or theory goes inscrutable. (DECOCK 2010: 89)

In other words, there are no reasons either for choosing the first interpretation. The one-to-one constraint is undermined by the fact that the two constraints on interpretation do not allow to fix the number of objects in the extension of a predicate. This is an ontological debacle, but in an extensionalist program like Quine's there it involves, as Decock remarks, an ideological debacle too. As inscrutable is what we are speaking of, inscrutable is what we are saying of what we are speaking of.

Above, I made a claim that might look similar to Quine's, namely that a predicate groups things. My claim has anyway a fundamental difference with Quine's. I maintain that a predicate groups things by one *feature* of theirs, whereas Quine, as we saw, does not have properties and relations in his ontology⁵.

The indeterminacy issue seems not solvable, looking at it as a problem of interpretation, i.e. as having an uninterpreted lexicon to link with what is there, and having only a linguistic grasp of what is there. The issue dissolves going in the other direction, and having a cognitive but not exclusively linguistic grasp of what is there. There are things that we endow with a proper name or a predicative one. Then, there

⁴ On Quine on proxy functions see, for instance, QUINE (1990: 31-33).

⁵ On Quine and indeterminacy, besides the works cited, see: LEONARDI 2003, 2013.

is no indeterminacy because we move from particulars to the words for speaking of them.

1.2. Some views have predicates express concepts. An extreme position would have concepts as an a priori system for categorizing things⁶. Moderate views –which philosophers and psychologists have articulated in the last fifty years – have rather experience play a role in concept formation. If moderate views provide a direct connection between what exists and the concept we form of it, extreme ones allow yet for an indirect link. In the first case, innate ideas are endowed on us by God, who made us fit for the world we live in. In the second case, innate ideas as the outcome of evolution, assuming that the hominids who came to master these concepts or their ancestors were apter for survival. Third world views⁷, which differ from either of the previous ones, have a person directly grasp the third world ontology of properties and relations that make the first world things be what they are. In this third case it is problematic both how we relate to a concept and how it relates to what it is a concept of.

Whatever is the format of a concept, which is exactly, say, our concept of rabbit? Is it that of a burrowing, gregarious, plant-eating mammalian animal with long ears, long hind legs, and a short tail, of the family of Leporidae? (More or less the definition of the Oxford Dictionary of American English.) This is between a common sense, an ethological and a zoological concept of the little animal, and perhaps if one instance had shorter ears but not if it were not a mammalian, we might keep to the idea that it is a rabbit. Instead, our concept of rabbit could be the common sense description of a rabbit, as a plant-eating animal with long ears and a short tail. Or, it can be that of a rabbit, period, and the other features be rather part of our conception, of our theory of a rabbit, a common sense or a more sophisticated conception, or a blend of the two⁸. A special way of looking at the issue is that of conceptual change through time. Indeed, some views change through the years. For instance, Octavianus' view of whales was different from ours - he believed whales to be fish. Did he not have a concept of whale, since he deemed a whale a fish rather than a mammal? Besides, whatever is the format of a concept, is it always propositional or name like? A common sense concept may perhaps be entirely dependent only on perception and memory. I distinguish the rabbit, and I recognize a rabbit when I see one - couldn't a baby and a primate just have that concept of rabbit? Perhaps, only persons able to speak a language entertain concepts in a propositional format, and most likely some but not all the concepts they master.

A fourth, more radical view, would not have concepts, holding that perception, memory and language do the work attributed them⁹.

Take the core of a concept to be what remains invariant through time and space, cultures and ages of people. If the core of the concept of rabbit is the rabbit, period, the core of a concept is what it is a concept of, that is the thing itself if there is one,

⁶ Among the classical thinkers, for instance, Leibniz; among contemporary ones, Jackendoff (see JACKENDOFF 1983,1987).

⁷ Plato's or Frege's are best instances of third world views.

⁸ MAZZONE & LALUMERA 2010 claim that the less we have contractions and expansion the more we face a concept. This is why pragmaticist's pet examples like FRESH are not good candidates for concepts. This is still compatible with the concept vs conception distinction mentioned above.

⁹ I have pursued something the idea discussing predicates. See LEONARDI 2011. The idea implies that there isn't an independent level of concepts.

or better some of its representative instances. Some rabbits, and most likely not the same rabbits for two of us, are for some of us the representative instances of the rabbit. The thing itself is what is invariant in concept and conception change. By being categorized by a concept a thing endows a concept its content. If there is no thing, the concept is fictional, or factitious, dependent on non-fictional non factitious concepts because built out of these, as would be that of the second moon of our planet, or that of a moon made of blue cheese¹⁰.

1.3. Frank Jackson, in 1982, developed an argument against physicalism, called Mary's room¹¹. Writes Jackson:

Mary is a brilliant scientist who is, for whatever reason, forced to investigate the world from a black and white room via a black and white television monitor. She specializes in the neurophysiology of vision and acquires, let us suppose, all the physical information there is to obtain about what goes on when we see ripe tomatoes, or the sky, and use terms like 'red', 'blue', and so on. She discovers, for example, just which wave-length combinations from the sky stimulate the retina, and exactly how this produces via the central nervous system the contraction of the vocal chords and expulsion of air from the lungs that results in the uttering of the sentence 'The sky is blue'. [...] What will happen when Mary is released from her black and white room or is given a colour television monitor? Will she learn anything or not? It seems just obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience

of it. (JACKSON 1982: 130)

Jackson uses the argument against physicalism, holding that knowing the physics is not knowing all what there is. When Mary exits her black and white room, or when she connects with a color television, she learns something she did not know yet – for instance, she learns what red looks like. Jackson later revised his argument, dropping the idea that it proved the physicalism false because in our world

the redness of our reds can be deduced in principle from enough about the physical nature of our world despite the manifest appearance to the contrary that the knowledge argument trades on. (JACKSON 1998b: 76-77)

I am not interested in the relation between the argument and physicalism. My concern is with Mary's going from a wholly linguistic description of a phenomenon to the phenomenon itself.

Now, a linguistic description fails to individuate what it is about at many levels. For instance, as David Kaplan writes, «given an utterance, semantics cannot tell us what expression was uttered or what language it was uttered in.» (KAPLAN 1989: 559). A description cannot even tell what circumstance it is about – it may describe the circumstance, but the description may fit indefinitely many different ones. Even the so called «pure individuating descriptions» (STRAWSON 1959: 26) such as 'the first dog to be born at sea' can fail to individuate.

¹⁰ On concepts there are many good general introductions: MARGOLIS & LAURENCE 1999, 2012, COLIVA 2006, Lalumera 2009.

¹¹ RUSSELL ([1918] 1972: 19).

- (a) There may be no dog born at sea (this is even more likely if we consider a description such as 'the only dog to be born at sea which subsequently saved a monarch's life').
- (b) There may be two or more dogs, and it may be impossible to establish a priority between their births, and all of them may be born at sea, with no dog born at sea before them.
- (c) Identical descriptions 'the first dog to be born at sea' may be incomplete and from occasion to occasion individuate different animals 'the first dog to be born at sea belonging to a German lady', 'the first dog to be born at sea who saved a monarch's life', etc. That is, the form of a description does not tell whether the description is a complete or an incomplete one. Finally, no sentence tells what is the world that it describes¹².

Then, a linguistic description seems defective at individuation, even if by hypothesis it is a *perfect* description of the case¹³.

Be that as it may. From my point of view, it is more interesting a step Jackson disregards. Jackson discusses the conclusion: when Mary exits her room does she learn some more things about the world or not? And Jackson's change of mind is from arguing that she does to maintaining that she does not - from arguing that she learns how the world looks to maintaining that she can understand already in her room how the world looks. The issue is, I believe, somehow blurred by the conjecture of a perfect theory. What happens, then, when she exits her room? Exiting her room, Mary faces reality. She has to project what the theory tells on what there is and hence check the theory. She learns what the theory is about, and how good the theory is. The physicalist scientists have built their description starting from what there is, both in fixing the language and in articulating their description of reality. For instance, in the case of the color red, they moved from the appearance of red, distinguished the color and called it red, and tried to account for it analyzing light and our visual sensory system, etc. Independently from what is there the whole theory makes no sense, first; and when a sense is attributed to it, the theory may distort what there is.

In the case of Mary, there is not to invert priorities because throughout the priorities are on the side of what there is. Jackson has only to realize that it is so.

2. Quine's indeterminacy of interpretation, the problems about the nature of a concept – what is the concept of rabbit, for instance –, Mary's room are all cases in which the problems originate in going from words, or concepts, to things. My whole point is that what starts language and thought, and keeps it going, goes the other way – it goes from things to words and concepts. There is a thing, people mark it, and the mark develops into a proxy for the thing, or a category apt to it. This practice grounds fiction. Notice that fiction pretends a subject almost exclusively by indexicals, names and composed expressions (descriptions, composed predicates) and that its primitive vacuous expressions are names, like 'Emma Woodhouse'. A

¹² Moreover, as Strawson suggests, even if the description we used were logically or purely individuating, we wouldn't check. A further argument, $\dot{a} \, la$ Twin Earth, is the following. The world could have a perfect symmetry, and any thing in the first half of the world could be indistinguishable from its correspondent in the symmetrical second half. Any description could then be incomplete, and only a demonstrative would *complete* the description.

¹³ The issue has been debated at length in STRAWSON 1959, ch. 1.

composition may be vacuous, but we master it by its components and the rules of compositions. We master indexicals anyway, even when they are misapplied. Names are ambiguous. There are indefinitely many Emmas, and indefinitely many Woodhouse families. Pretend there to be one more Emma and one more Woodhouse family – on the surface there is no clue of pretense. Instead, a new simple predicate is detectable. The distinction between what exists and what doesn't is a historical one, and that expands what exists to what existed.

Quine is very suspicious of properties, as it is well known, and his choice for first order logic together with his criterion of ontological commitment – to be is to be the value of a variable – excludes properties, and relations, from ontology. His ontological debacle is therefore consequential¹⁴. There would be no individuation if things had no properties and relations, though their individuation does not depend on being able to tell what their properties and relations are, but on being able to set different things apart because they differ. Besides, though it is true that we do not catch a property in isolation, we catch some properties in individual things. We see the white in the milk, in the snow, in the marble; we touch the liquidity of the milk, the softness of snow, the hardness of the marble; etc. This requires recognizing something of what there is – which is what we shall investigate and about what we shall articulate philosophical and scientific theories. Recognizing, and having terms for things, is not having a theory about them yet, but having words anchored¹⁵. Referring to a property requires having individuated it, in one of its instances, not having understood its nature.

Now I would sketch a way we achieve the anchoring and develop the semantics of language. Take a name, 'Paul', what does it mean? There are two replies to this question, and I am interested only in one. We could reply that 'Paul' comes from the Latin *paulus*, which means small. Or, we may answer «The man close to the French window is Paul.» This second reply is the one I am concerned with, and it is the reply that anchors the name to an individual (to a thing)¹⁶. How to anchor a predicate like 'run'? A preliminary question to yield an answer is: to what do we anchor a predicate¹⁷? Linking back to what I remarked above, predicates, at least some predicates, are anchored to objects. The objects that anchor a predicate act as a standard in deciding whether other objects can, or cannot, be so categorized. This idea resembles one Schlick 1918-1925 suggested and Reichenbach 1928 [1958] resumed introducing coordinative definitions. Writes Reichenbach:

In principle, a unit of length can be defined in terms of an observation that does not include any metrical relations, such as "that wave-length which occurs when light has a certain redness." In this case a sample of this red color would have to be keptin Paris in piace of the standard meter. The characteristic feature of this method is the coordination of a concept to a physical object.(REICHENBACH 1928 [1958]: 15)

¹⁴ See DECOCK 2002.

¹⁵ See MOORE 1925. On Moore see COLIVA 2010, LEONARDI 2013.

¹⁶ I have not spoken of baptism as how a name is introduced because a baptism has a civil or religious ritual value. However, most names and nicknames are not introduced by means of a rite, and things that have a name and are not persons (or ships) are not named via a ritual.

¹⁷ See LEONARDI 2011.

A coordinative definition chooses transforms an instance in a standard, linking the level of objects with the linguistic level. It gives no information, but makes up a tool to collect some.

A predicate introduced coordinating it with an instance is, by definition, true of it, and at the same time, as it is the case with coordinative definition, it adds no content, the content itself being the object with which the predicate is coordinated¹⁸. With natural language, the coordination is between word and object and not between concepts and physical objects. As a coordinative definition fixes a unit of measurement by choosing an object as standard, understanding a predicate my way, an object acts as a standard in our description of reality by means of that predicate.

A standard fixed this way is not kept at the museum, in a special environment, to get sure that its properties keep stable. (Yet, museums of aircraft and beaux-arts ones show many of them.) One such standard is subject to dynamics, evolving in time as knowledge evolves, with special tensions because of the plurality of its relatively dishomogeneous instances. The outcome of these dynamics is language change. The dynamics acts at once on a series of predicates in a semantic space, with occasional tensions. One same object may be a standard for more than one predicate – an object may be a standard, for instance, for 'animal', 'fish', 'whale'. When, in his *Systemanaturae*, in the 1758 edition, Carl Linnaeus broke up the standard set of fishes, changing the relations among the terms for what had before been deemed terms for fishes, and classifying cetaceans under mammals changed the relations among the terms for mammals too.

Language semantics depends on what there is. If the environment changes, andit does the more and more quickly concerning technical devices, as quickly language changes. The standard telephone only thirty years ago was a cable one, at home, in your office, in the telephone box, and now it is a mobile one, and it is less and less just a phone. A phone, a smart tool to send written messages, to take and send pictures, to listen the radio, a smarter and smarter tool, but not a smarter telephone¹⁹. Modifying Otto Neurath's famous metaphor²⁰, much liked by W.v.O. Quine, we are afloat and can understand how to float only floating.

Here is a more sophisticated example of language change depending on changes in the standard for a term. The ancients classified the sun, Venus, Mars, etc, all as planets, that is as wandering stars, i.e. not fixed stars. When Copernicus put the sun at the center of the solar system, Venus and what else we now call planets were distinct as celestial bodies from the sun. The sun kept being a star, and the planets

¹⁸ Here is how Parrini describes coordinative definitions «[...] conventional stipulations – though not arbitrary ones, [...] – of definitory-linguistic nature, without empirical content and genuine cognitive value.» (PARRINI 2002: 162).

¹⁹ KRIPKE 1972 discusses what we refer to speaking of the standard meter bar and its length – an issue closely related to coordinative definitions. That the Sévres meter bar was long one meter when it was chosen as the standard is an a priori contingent truth. It fixes the referent of the expression 'one meter'. WITTGENSTEIN 1953 too discusses of the standard meter, at § 50, asserting that it is not possible to say that the standard meter is one meter long because it is a thing with a grammatical and not an empirical role. Instead, I think it is an empirical element endowed with a grammatical role. Wittgenstein deals in many other places with the standard meter issue – in the *Tractatus*, in some meetings with the Wiener Kreis people, in some remarks on the foundation of mathematics – ascribing it a grammatical or logical role. Here and there, anyway, Wittgenstein hesitates about his distinction between grammatical and empirical (see, for instance, §§ 309, 319, 321, 519). On Kripke and Wittgenstein on this issue see SALMON 1988, DIAMOND 2001, POLLOCK 2004, MÁCHA 2012. By the way, Wittgenstein writes that «Not only rules but also examples are needed for establishing a practice» (1969: 139). In an example, object and word meet. ²⁰ NEURATH ([1932-33] 1983: 92).

ceased to be stars at all, though for at least one hundred years more the fixed stars kept being fixed. When the sun was acknowledged as a star among indefinitely many ones, and not a star at a special location, it kept being a star as those others. In the meanwhile, in the years that separate Tycho Brahe from Edmund Halley, that is between the XVI and the XVIII centuries, no star was fixed anymore. The plurality of standard and the evolution of knowledge, in this case, determined a dynamic whose output changed the semantics of many common nouns, being that common noun ascribe common features.

A third simple example. Once, in English the generic name for dog was 'hound' and 'dogge' meant some specific kinds of dog. Later, when the most common kind of dog changed, 'dog' became the hypernym, and 'hound' was "downgraded" to be the name of some specific kind of dog. ('Dogge' meant mastiff, basset(t), ..., a special breed of hounds. 'Hound' today groups greyhound, bloodhound, ...). These language shifts, which seem well motivated, depend on factual changes. Language goes on the trail of the states of affair.

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