

# Metaphysics 1

Noah Greenstein

Spring 2008

## 1 Ontology

### 1.1 My Cogito

“Something happened or something did not happen,”

This statement is always true and only presupposes that something has either happened or something has not happened. There are three things most should agree upon in light of this statement:

1. With regard to the above statement, it is not possible to deny that some agent has committed to doing something, namely making a statement.
2. With regard to the above statement, it is not possible to deny that something is being described.
3. With regard to the above statement, it is not possible to deny that it itself is something.

Simply put, there are three things which I will refer to as substance, because these are the three things that exist upon reflection, always. The first will be called commitment, the second description and the third is object.

### 1.2 Substance

“If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor yet false.”

- L.W.<sup>1</sup>

To analyze commitment, description and object the analysis must be done in terms at least as fundamental as commitment, object or description. The only things as fundamental as commitment, object or description are commitment, object or description: these three are the only things that cannot be denied.

One option remaining is to analyze commitment, object and description in terms of each other. If objects and descriptions are studied as functions of commitments, then commitments becomes neither describable nor indescribable and neither an object nor

---

<sup>1</sup>Wittgenstein, L. *On Certainty* #205

not an object. If objects and commitments are regarded as descriptions, then descriptions are neither the result of an agent nor not the result of an agent and are neither objects nor not objects. If commitments and descriptions are functions of objects, then objects are neither the result of an agent nor not the result of an agent and are neither describable nor indescribable. Therefore it is not possible to treat one of the three as more fundamental than the others without severe consequences.

In light of the results of the above discussion, all three are to be understood equally as substance. The three substances are commitments, objects and descriptions.

## 2 Explanation

With no one fundamental substance how is explanation possible?

### 2.1 Relativity

Relativity means there is no preferential perspective for the description of natural phenomena: each of us has a location as good as everyone else's when it comes to describing the physical world. Relativity is applicable to substance as well: there is no preferential ontological perspective for substance and hence any understanding of substance is a legitimate place to begin analysis of substance. Anyone may consider the arguments from the above section regardless of prior ontological commitments.

Though I believe substance relativity to be self evident, a few words of support may be given. Consider the case if it were not true, i.e. there were preferential ontological situations, access to certain substances, that enabled those with access to have special insight to the mysteries of the world. People without this special access would have no way to gain it unless they were somehow given access by someone who had it; it would be undiscoverable. However, since we are investigating that which is common to everyone, as stated in Section, this is not the case and hence substance is relative.

### 2.2 Perspective

Relativity also means that the onlooker's perspective has to be taken into account when describing natural phenomena: motion means motion relative to the agent describing the situation. When studying substance no one is free of ontological commitments and these need to be accounted for (just as any motion of the onlooker needs to be accounted for in physics). At any given point it is possible to be looking at a situation from the perspective of commitment, matter or description.

For example take the question, "Does the sun shine?" From the perspective of commitment, the answer is no: the sun is not conscious and hence it doesn't *do* anything. From the perspective of matter the answer is yes: the ball of matter called the sun radiates photons, and radiating photons is shining. From the perspective of description the answer is possibly sometimes: when the sun is described as shining, then it shines.

Whichever of the three ontological commitments is being appealed to will dictate the answer or explanation received. No one is beholden to any particular substance and can change ontological commitments in an instant, as long as the requirements

of Section 1.2 are met, which does mean that there may be more than one ‘correct’ answer for a given question. This does not mean that all the answers are equal: saying ‘If you say it does,’ may be technically correct from the descriptive perspective, but many times only an answer from the other perspectives is accepted (or advised).

### **3 Instances**

In physics, motions and locations are determined by perspective; what is determined by perspective in substance?

#### **3.1 Commitment**

As mentioned in the previous section ontological commitment determines what the explanation or answer that is given to a question. Making a commitment is an activity that only a conscious thing can do. Moreover:

- If something is put forward or conceived, then something committed to putting that thing forward or conceiving it.

If this is false, then something was put forward and nothing committed to putting that thing forward; it was put forward or conceived without some conscious thing committing to having done so. If this was done without the commitment of the conscious thing, then it was not put forward: only conscious things can put things forward or conceive of things. Therefore all conscious things that put forward or conceive of things make commitments.

Commitments and perspective are relative to each other: perspective depends upon what commitments are held, and perspective determines what those commitments are. For example if I am committed to one person then my perspective on other people will no longer include those people for a variety of activities. If my perspective is that monogamy is unrealistic, then a commitment to one person is likewise unrealistic.

#### **3.2 Objects**

The objects that exist are determined by perspective too. Depending upon available information and theory, different perspectives on what sort of things make up this world can be presented. Life, death, dogs, personality, atoms, words, food, pain, etc. Whatever can be put forth as a subject of the commitment is an object. No object is ‘wrong’ in the sense that it is the subject of a commitment.

Objects and perspective are relative to each other: perspective determines what sort of things populate the world, and the things that populate the world determine perspective. Until the discovery of the subatomic particle, many people believed that the atom was the smallest building block of the universe. The discovery of a new kind of thing forced people to change their perspective on what the universe was made of. Conversely, if I have had a few too many unexplainable experiences then my perspective might allow for things like ghosts without me ever having witnessed one.

### **3.3 Descriptions**

Our descriptions of the world are determined by perspective. Consider this example of how what is being described is determined by perspective, thanks to Rodney Dangerfield:

A girl phoned me the other day and said... Come on over, there's nobody home. I went over. Nobody was home.

Rodney's perspective caused him to believe the sentence to mean something other than the literal meaning, which was exactly what the girl intended. Conversely, if a rosy picture is painted, then this description is meant to determine the perspective taken on the situation.

Descriptions and perspective are relative to each other: perspective determines our descriptions of the world and our descriptions determine our perspectives.