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Paper 1 – Prompt 1

Analyze an argument for or against the existence of abstracta. Does it succeed? If not, object to it. If so, defend the argument against an objection

I have very strong reasons to believe that the chair I am sitting in, the computer I am typing on, and the record player I am using to listen to jazz on are all real and exist. I believe this because I can see these objects, I can touch them, and I can hear the sounds they make. The situation changes when we think of things like numbers or the property of being comfortable. I cannot touch the number 4, nor can I see comfiness, so do these things exist? Realism says yes! All abstract entities, like numbers and properties, exist. Anti-realism says no, abstracta does not exist. This paper will argue that the realist's argument for the existence of abstracta does not succeed.

Abstracta are things that do not occupy space and time and have no causal effect (i.e., numbers cannot cause things to happen, nor can I make things happen in the realm of numbers). When the realist says numbers exist, they mean that numbers do not depend on anything or anyone, numbers exist independently. Numbers do not exist because humans made them up (this would be the conceptualist view) nor are numbers just the name we give to different groups of things (this is similar to the nominalist view).

I will now argue that the realist argument for the existence of abstracta does not succeed because the realist does not provide a way for us to know about abstracta. By definition of

abstracta, we cannot have any causal interactions with abstracta, however, we still know things about abstracta. There is a separation between the world of abstracta and the human realm, and this separation is because abstracta are independent, non-spatiotemporal, and have no cause or effect. The features of the world of abstracta can in no way interact with the human world. The abstracta are independent, always exist, and are unchanged. A question that the realist has yet to give a successful answer to is, how do I come to know truths about this independent world of abstracta?

Take the number 3. Three does not exist anywhere in spacetime and does not cause an effect. So how can we know of its existence? The realist would say that the number 3 holds certain relational properties; 3 is less than 4, 3 is one more than 2, 3 is half of 6. I would agree that all these statements are true, but I cannot see how we come to know this truth in the realist framework. I can agree that there is this thing three and another thing four, and I can take it to be true that the thing three is less than the thing four, but what is the thing three? Realism's answer is three is an abstract object, but that answer does not tell me how three interacts with my world or how I come to know truths about three. If numbers are independent, non-spatiotemporal, and have no cause or effect, then the realist needs to explain how we become knowledgeable about numbers.

Note that the argument that realism is not successful because it does not give an account for how we come to know about numbers, rests on fact that we must have casual interactions, indirectly or directly, with things to know about them. But maybe we could come to know about things without causality. If this were true, then the realist would not have to worry about how we come to know truths about abstracta.

But what if we do in fact need casual interaction to gain knowledge. At first this seems like a very bold statement; I am sure there are other ways to gain knowledge outside of casual interaction. But the more I think about it, the less I am convinced. To know something, I must have some relation between me and the subject. To know about the number 3, there needs to be something that connects me to three. I could say that I have three fingers and I can see that I have three fingers so then the number three must exist. But this is different from the realist view because it does not assert that three is independent. In this example, I depend on the fact that I have three fingers and eyes that allow me to see my three fingers.

Even though the number 3 does not have a causal relation to the physical world, instances of the number three do. If I am hungry, eating one egg might not cause my hunger to go away but eating three eggs probably will. However, the cause-and-effect relationship that the instance of three holds is not consistent nor independent. Eating one piece of spinach will not cause my hunger to go away, just as eating three pieces of spinach will not cause my hunger to go away. So, we cannot rely on the instances of numbers to gain truths about numbers.

Another way that realism does not succeed is in its explanation of properties. Properties describe “a way something can be” (Jubien, 1997, p. 36). Warm, blue, fast, quiet, comfortable, sad, nice, are all ways something can be, and thus, all properties. Being a realist about properties means that you claim properties exist. Not only does red stuff exist in the world, but the property redness also exists. The redness property is separate and independent from the stuff that is red. The set of red stuff can change, and does change, but the property redness never changes (i.e., redness is independent of the red stuff). The way a thing can come to have a property is if it holds a relation between itself and the property. A blue shirt instantiates the property of blueness. Instantiation is the relation between the thing – shirt – and the property – blueness.

The question here is, what exactly is the instantiation relation. We know that when a thing has a property that is equivalent to saying a thing instantiates a property. But since the property is an abstract object, the property exists independently of the things that instantiates it. However, it seems that the things are needed for the property to be in existence. I need to have a blue shirt for that shirt to instantiate blueness. Imagine a world without the color blue, then it seems like the property blueness would also not exist. If the property blueness did exist in this world of no blue, how would we ever know that blueness exists if we cannot ever see it. To say that a property exists without there being instances of the property seems meaningless because we can never know for sure if this property exists or not. It seems ridiculous to claim that a certain property exists even though we know nothing about it. We do not even know how to describe it or even what to call it.

If the world where there are no instances of blue, we, as humans, would not even be able to imagine what blue would look like. We could not even have a notion of the property of blueness so how could we know it exists. There are wave lengths of light that us humans cannot see. Before we discovered that gamma rays exist, did the property of being a gamma ray exist? Realism would say yes. The property of being a gamma ray has always existed, we as humans were just not knowledgeable of this property. We came to know about the property of gamma rays through discovering how to measure its instance (i.e., through the discovery of measuring gamma rays). It seems that all there is, is the instance and without the instance we can never really know if a property exists.

Realism says that every property, even the ones humans are not yet aware of exist, have always existed, and will never change. If this is true, it seems right to claim that the property “mitery” (a word and associated property I just come up with) is true and exists. I claim this

because there are an infinite amount of properties that I do not know about and so there is a possibility (even if it is a very small possibility) that the property “mitery” exists, we just have not been brought to the awareness of it yet. This seems unhelp, as I can just make up properties and give no instantiable evidence for its existence and you’ll just have to accept my made-up property because all properties exist.

Works Cited

Jubien, M. (1997). *Contemporary Metaphysics*. Blackwell Publishers.