

Laila Johnston

PHI 4500 - Spring 2022

Reading Reaction 1

### Prompt 1

**Consider Jubien's objection to conceptualism on the paragraph of his book that spans pages 28 and 29. Imagine you are conceptualist. Write a reply to the objection.**

In Michael Jubien's *Contemporary Metaphysics*, Jubien gives a description of what it means to be a conceptualist about numbers, offers three problems that arise from the conceptualist view, then provides two solutions (each with its own set of further problems). In this reading reaction, I will summarize what it means to be a conceptualist about numbers and offer replies to Jubien's objections of conceptualism.

Conceptualists hold the view that numbers exist, but they are not "independent, abstract entities" (as Platonism says). Numbers are concepts and they only exist because they are "ideas in our minds". If there were no human minds to talk and think about the number five, then there would be no such thing as the number 5. The number 5 exist because my mind, you're mind, our minds, have the idea of the number 5. As Jubien writes, numbers are "mind-dependent entities". That is, numbers "depend on minds for existence". So, without the mind, there would be no numbers. But because I can think about how  $4 + 3 = 7$  then the numbers 4, 3, and 7 exist.

This leads to the first problem of conceptualism that Jubien writes about. If numbers only exist in the mind and every human has a different mind, then does every human have a different idea of the number five? But then how do we also have a consensus about the number five? All of math and science works because there is a consensus about what five is. Even in a single

human mind, the idea I had of five yesterday is different from the idea I had of five today. Simply because I had one idea yesterday and another idea today (this assumes that ideas are time-dependent). So how is it that we can have different ideas of five and also come to an agreement on what five is? How can multiple fives and a singular common understanding of five exist at once?

Jubien's next objection to conceptualism is that it seems impossible that there are infinitely many numbers since our minds are finite. It is true that there are infinitely many numbers. It is a theorem of mathematics that you can take any number, add one to it, and you will always get a larger number. But it seems also true that there are only finitely many ideas. So it seems implausible that a finite entity – the mind – can have infinitely many ideas corresponding to the infinitely many numbers. Thus, maybe conceptualism isn't true.

I do agree that our finite minds cannot have infinitely many ideas. But we do have ideas about 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. We have ideas about some of the infinitely many numbers so these numbers exist. And from the existence of these numbers (the ones we can have ideas about), our minds can have ideas about theorems that possibly describe the relationships and properties of numbers. We can have an idea that maybe there are infinitely many numbers, and we can prove this idea using the existence of the numbers we do know to exist (because we have ideas about these numbers).

In other words, our minds cannot have infinitely many ideas corresponding to the infinitely many numbers, but our minds can have ideas that prove that there exist infinitely many numbers. Having ideas about theorems that prove the existence of a thing is still in line with the conceptualist framework (I think). If there were no human mind to have that idea of that theorem that proves the existence of something, then that something wouldn't exist. Even though, we

cannot have ideas about all the infinitely many numbers, we can have an idea that there exist infinitely many numbers and we can prove this idea using the finitely many numbers we can have ideas about (and thus know exist).

This train of thought is making me think of something else: Do all our ideas need to be proven to show they exist? In a rigorous conceptualist framework, I think having the idea would be enough proof to show it exists. But maybe in a more relaxed conceptualist framework, ideas need to be proven in some way. This may solve the problem of how can multiple fives and a singular common understanding of five exist at once. I can have an idea of five that is different from the common understanding of five, but I might not be able to prove my different idea of five. Whereas I can prove the common understanding of five so this five exists. Even when I stop thinking about five, that does not mean five no longer exist. Since I have used my ideas to prove that five exist, five exist.

Although you would probably use previous ideas that you have proven to exist, to prove the existence of a new idea. Then this gets to the question of, what is the first idea you have and how do you prove that this first idea exists when you do not know if anything exists? How to you show the existence of something from nothing? I'm getting off track here but just some thoughts.

Ultimately, numbers are just some symbol humans made up to help explain their world. If describing the world with numbers turned out to be really difficult (as in, a group of three bananas didn't exist or three bananas with two bananas didn't equal five bananas) then we would have probably come up with different symbols to explain our world. Since every human can see that when you have one thing and you add another, you get two things; we just decided to use the symbol 1 to mean that one thing. But the actual symbol 1 exist nowhere except in our minds. Numbers have proven (through human experience and science) to be a really good way to

describe our world so we, humans, use them. But if all humans were gone, it's hard to say whether a bee would think of its world using numbers. Of course, groups of things would still exist but the symbol "1" wouldn't. A bee probably uses other symbols to describe its world (and those symbols exist for the bee but do not exist for us humans).