Qualification in Philosophy

Abstract

Qualifiers such as "insofar as" and "in itself" have always been important ingredients in key philosophical claims. Descartes, for instance, famously argues that *insofar as* he is a thinker, he is not made of matter, and Kant equally famously argues that we cannot know things *in themselves*. Neither of these claims are meant to be true without qualification. Descartes is not simply denying that humans consist of matter, and Kant is not simply denying that we know things. Therefore, we cannot even begin to understand such claims without knowing how qualifiers work. Unlike the logic of quantification, however, the logic of qualification is rather underexplored. In this paper, I examine several instances of philosophical uses of qualifiers, taken from Aristotle, Avicenna, Descartes, Kant, and 20th c. action theory. In the light of these examples, I discuss several accounts of how such qualifiers work.

Introduction

By "qualification", I mean constructions involving "qua", "as", "insofar as", "as such", "in itself",[1] and the like. Such constructions have always been important in philosophy, and there is by now a rich array of accounts of various sorts of qualification.[2] However, as will become apparent, several of these accounts focus on toy cases such as "Jane is corrupt as a judge", none of them captures all philosophical uses equally well, and some of them yield rather uncharitable readings of classical philosophical positions.

The present paper divides into two parts. The purpose of the first part is to get a

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[1] As I will point out, "in itself" may be construed as a qualifier ("S in itself" = "S qua S") or as signifying a lack of qualification ("S not qua anything").

[2] For a small sample, see Fine 1982, Bäck 1996, Poli 1998, Szabó 2003, Asher 2006, Baxter 2018, Werner 2020, and Loets 2021.

feeling for some of the philosophical claims and theories that a theory of qualification should be able to illuminate. In the second part, I will turn to contemporary accounts of the logic and semantics of qualification.

A couple of disclaimers are in order before we begin. My discussion is not intended to be exhaustive or balanced. The choice of examples is limited, and I ignore some accounts of qualification without prejudice (e.g. Kroon 2001 and Asher 2006). Other accounts will be discussed only in passing (e.g. Fine 1982 and Lewis 2003). Also, I will not expect that all qualifiers, or all uses of a given qualifier, can be accounted for equally well by any given theory. Part of my project is to reveal some of the diversity there is. Further, I will not attempt to clearly separate data from theory. I do not think it is possible to discuss historical uses of qualifiers without already introducing certain general assumptions as to how qualifiers work. Throughout the first part, I will therefore already collect and briefly consider recipes for parsing qualified statements that come up, explicitly or implicitly, in the primary and secondary literature. Some of these accounts of how qualifiers work are of very limited use and some require a lot more work, but others will turn out to be as useful and worked out as any.

One more preliminary point. Most of the primary sources that I discuss do not rely on Fregean logic with its clear distinction between concepts and objects. To avoid anachronisms, I will therefore adopt a slightly old-fashioned notation. I generally abbreviate qualified statement as "S is P qua Q", where "S", "P", and "Q" are singular or general *terms*. None of these upper case letters will represent Fregean *predicates*, that is, functions from objects to truth values. Rather, they will all stand in for names or more or less general descriptions of *objects*. For instance, when I abbreviate "Jane is corrupt as a judge" as "S is P qua Q", "S" stands in for "Jane", "P" for "someone corrupt", and "Q" for "a judge" (so that we get: "Jane is *someone* corrupt qua *a* judge"). I will occasionally use *italicized* upper case letters, *F* and *G*, for Fregean predicates.