Quiddities and Repeatables

Towards a Tripartite Analysis of Simple Predicative Statements

Boris Hennig

Abstract

I argue that a tripartite analysis of simple statements such as "Bucephalus is a horse", according to which they divide into two terms and a copula, requires the notion of a repeatable: something such that more than one particular can literally be it. I pose a familiar dilemma with respect to repeatables, and turn to Avicenna for a solution, who discusses a similar dilemma concerning quiddities. I conclude by describing how Avicenna's quiddities relate to repeatables, and how both quiddities and repeatables may contribute to a tripartite analysis of predication.

1. What Repeatables Are

For most purposes, it is convenient to think of statements such as "Bucephalus is a horse" as dividing into two parts, the name "Bucephalus" and the predicate "… is a horse". Following Frege, the predicate may be taken to represent a function that maps particular items onto truth values. Every now and then, however, it might be more helpful to divide such statements into *three* parts: "Bucephalus", "is", and "a horse". Classical authors, for instance,

often treat the copula as a distinct element of simple predicative statements, so that we cannot always be sure that a bipartite analysis brings out what they have in mind. Also, there might be purposes for which we want to make the copula visible as a distinct element of the logical form of a statement, for instance when we want to apply modifiers, operators, or the negation directly to the copula, as opposed to any of the terms, the Fregean predicate, or the entire statement. So it will be useful to ask how a tripartite analysis of a simple predicative statement might be made to work.

As Wiggins 1984 and Clark 1986 suggest, the copula may be defined as a function that maps general terms onto Fregean predicates. For this to work, a general term "G" must be able to combine with "is" such as to yield the predicate "… is G", which may be true of more than one particular. On a syntactic level, this is fairly straightforward, but the semantics is more tricky. In a tripartite framework, we will want to treat the "is" in "Bucephalus is a horse" as a function that takes whatever "a horse" stands for as an argument and yields a predicate that is true of Bucephalus as well as all other horses. "A horse", in turn, is a complex expression, consisting of an indefinite article and a common noun. So we need to consider three questions: What is the semantic contribution of a common noun such as "horse"? How does it combine with the indefinite article "a" such that the result is a general term? And what do general terms such as "a horse" stand for?

…