COMMENTARY:

"Second-Order Predication and the Metaphysics of Properties" by Andrew Egan

Egan argues against Lewis's view that properties are sets of actual and possible individuals and in favour of the view that they are functions from worlds to extensions (sets of individuals). Egan argues that Lewis's view implies that 2nd order properties are never possessed contingently by their (1st order) bearers, an implication to which there are numerous counter-examples. And Egan argues that his account of properties is more commensurable with the role they play as the semantic values of predicates than is Lewis's.

In what follows, I will refer to sets of actual and possible individuals as "L-properties" and functions from worlds to extensions as "E-properties." The first thing to note is that Lewis concedes the existence of E-properties, though he judges them to be better called "relations" and treats them as sets of ordered pairs of worlds and sets of individuals, i.e., L-properties of such pairs. Moreover, Egan ought to concede the existence of L-properties, if he believes (i) in actual and possible individuals and (ii) he believes in sets of things he believes in. [Lewis, 1986, p. 57]. But since both Egan and Lewis at least ought to concede the *existence* of both E-properties and L-properties, the question that remains is what exactly the issue between them is. In my view, there are two possibilities: which entities deserve the honorific "properties," and which entities are better suited to play various theoretical roles, in particular, that of serving as the semantic values of predicates. I will address each of these in turn. (Note: Egan suggests [p. 11]

moreover that E-properties deserve the honorific in part *because* they are better suited for this semantic role – more on this below).

Regarding the honorific, Lewis makes some comments that we ought to take to heart: "we have the word 'property', introduced by a varied repertory of ordinary and philosophical uses. … To deserve the name of 'property' is to be suited to play the right theoretical role … But it is wrong to speak of *the* role associated with the word 'property', as if it were fully and uncontroversially settled." [Lewis, 1986, p. 55][1] If Lewis is right, it could turn that both L-properties and E-properties deserve the name 'property' in virtue of being suited to play different roles associated with the word. That being said, E-properties do seem to conform better to certain *ordinary* uses of the term than do L-properties. We do (in more or less ordinary contexts) speak of things having their properties contingently. And while Lewis can arguably claim that the L-properties of world-bound individuals may be contingent by appealing to their otherworldly counterparts, Egan is right to point out that the *identical* manoeuvre cannot capture the contingency of properties of properties.[2] Nonetheless, Lewis does have available a *similar* manoeuvre. Arguably, all of the 2nd order properties that can be had contingently are in fact relations between 1st order properties and individuals. As a result, Lewis can treat the contingency of 2nd order properties as the failure of 1st order properties to stand in the same relations to counterparts of actual individuals that they do to the actual

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[1] It is worth noting that Lewis's concern in this passage is with the implication of his view that necessarily coextensive properties are identical.

[2] On the other hand, as long as there is a well-defined counterpart relation, an actual entity which existed at another world w could also have a counterpart at w. As a result, if we allow sets to have counterparts (and see Lewis p. 52), we might be able to use a similar manoeuvre to secure even the contingency of L-properties of L-properties despite their trans-world status.

individuals themselves.[3] I do concede, however, that this suggestion does have an air of artificiality to it (as does Lewis's original account of contingency). But even so, Lewis does offer tactical reasons for stipulating that the name "properties" apply only to L-properties in certain philosophical contexts:

> "…I do not approve of the terminology of 'properties' instantiated relative to this or that – it obfuscates and belittles the distinction between relations and genuine properties, and so puts us off guard against those theories that try to tell us that there are only relations where we might have thought there were genuine properties." [Lewis, 1986, p. 53].

At the end of the day, it is far from clear that either conception of properties is entitled to exclusive use of the name.

What remains to be discussed is the suitability of E- and L-properties for playing a certain sort of role in semantic theorizing. Egan suggests that, as above, the issue has to do with the honorific: "[what] *properties* do is provide semantic values for the predicates." [p. 11] However, in light the eschewal of talk of properties altogether by extensionalist semanticists, for example, I think we might reasonably balk here.[4] Nevertheless the semantic question is of independent interest. Egan offers the following reason for thinking that E-properties are better suited than L-properties to serve as (or "provide") the semantic values for predicates: "…what semantic values for predicates do is determine an extension at each world." [p. 11] *If* this latter claim is true, then Egan's defense of the privileged semantic role of E-properties is, I think, more or less uncontentious. But Egan's characterization of the function of semantic values for predicates is itself in need of justification. One thing worth noting at the outset is that this

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[3] The idea is, in effect, that a 1st order property has a 2nd order property contingently in virtue of the fact that it fails to have a 2nd order property which is a counterpart of the original.

[4] The issue might instead be whether E-properties or L-properties are entitled to a status akin' to that of Lewis's "sparse" or "natural" properties (in contrast to "abundant properties"). [Lewis, 1986, p.59 ff.]

suggestion is plausible only if we are concerned with a semantic theory for utterances and not expression-types. Whatever else they are, the semantic values of expression-types will be functions *from* various features of possible contexts of utterance, not just the world of utterance.[5]

Let's consider now a semantic theory for utterances. I am going to assume that the semantic value of an uttered sentence is a proposition, and following Lewis take a proposition to be a set (or L-property) of possible worlds. Moreover, I am going to focus on (utterances of) simple subject-predicate sentences, i.e., sentences of the form "N is F." First, if our concern is with the predicate treated as an unstructured whole, then while ordinarily the semantic value will be best thought of as an E-property, there will be sentences in which it is better thought of as an L-property.[6] What I have in mind here are *de re* modalities (or, more generally, world-indexed utterances), such as those of the form "N is possibly F."[7][8] Now Egan might rightly point out here that such predicates should be subjected to a compositional analysis according to which the semantic value of "[is] F" is a function from worlds to extensions and the semantic value of "possibly" is a function from E-properties to (corresponding) L-properties, or something along these lines. The trouble with this suggestion is that once we accept this minimal compositional analysis of predicates, there seems to be no principled reason to resist an analysis in terms of

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[5] One might, for example, utilize a 2-dimensional semantic framework according to which the semantic values of expression types are functions from pairs consisting of centered worlds and worlds to extensions.

[6] In either case, it might be better to think of the meaning of the predicate as a whole to be a function from the meanings of names to propositions. We might take just the categorical component of the predicate – the adjectival or common noun phrase – to be an E- or L-property.

[7] It is worth noting that the proposition expressed by "N is possibly F" will be the set of all worlds if the sentence is actually true, and will be the empty set if the sentence is actually false.

[8] We might think of the semantic value of "is possibly F" as the union of the extensions of "F" at each possible world. Similarly, we might take the semantic value of "is necessarily F" as the intersection of the the extensions of "F" at each possible world. In either case, however, the semantic value is an L-property.

temporal and spatial indices as well.[9] Many (most?) predicates can be deployed with (tacit or explicit) time and location references, as in "N is F at t in l."[10] And the semantic value of "[is] F" in such utterances cannot be an E-property – a function from worlds to extensions – but only, at best, a function from times, locations, and worlds to extensions.[11] [12]

The point of this discussion is not to disparage E-properties or to argue that they are irrelevant to semantic theorizing. It might even turn out that semantic theories which invoke them have various pragmatic advantages. Egan has not, however, shown that there are in principle grounds for preferring E-properties to L-properties in semantics or, for that matter, that there is any reason for reserving for the former exclusive use of the honorific "properties."

Peter Alward
Department of Philosophy
University of Lethbridge
peter.alward@uleth.ca

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[9] Note: these are not features of the context of utterance, i.e., the time and location of its occurrence; they in part constitute the subject matter of the utterance.

[10] More generally, we might frame things in terms of quantification over classes of times and locations as in "$(\forall t)(\forall l)((At \ \& \ Bl) \supset N$ is F at t in $l)$".

[11] One might even take the semantic value of "F" to be an undifferentiated L-property and leave the semantic task of carving up the set in various ways to other (tacit or explicit) elements of the utterance.

[12] All of this has presupposed that the semantic values of utterances are sets of worlds. In a more radical mood, we might even give this up, fix the world index and let the spatial or temporal indices run free. This would yield sets of times or locations as the semantic values of utterances, rather than sets of worlds.