

Evaluative predicates as classificatory devices?¹

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Abstract

In “Value Ascriptions: Rethinking Cognitivism,” Sigrún Svavarsdóttir offers a novel account of the semantic function of evaluative predication, according to which such predicates function as “linguistically encoded classificatory devices.” This short paper raises three questions about Svavarsdóttir’s account: how it relates to familiar sorts of projects in and about semantics, how to understand the nature of “linguistic encoding,” and how to understand the significance of the account’s central use of sets.

Introduction

One of the central questions about our normative and evaluative thought and talk is whether it is best understood as fundamentally *representational* of some (purported) normative and evaluative reality. In contemporary metaethics, debate over this question is often conducted against a background of consensus concerning our normative and evaluative language: that ordinary normative and evaluative sentences *predicate* properties, that they can be true and false, etc. This consensus position is often motivated by appealing to certain relatively uncontroversial facts about the nature of our evaluative thought and talk. In “Value Ascriptions: Rethinking Cognitivism” (this volume), Sigrún Svavarsdóttir argues for a novel way of understanding part of this semantic aspect of central metaethical debates.

Svavarsdóttir focuses on a class of evaluative predicates: those that “ascribe value to whatever phenomena... can be desired, enjoyed, cherished, admired, loved, and so on.” (ms. 2) She offers a novel account of the semantic function of such predicates, according to which they function as what she calls “linguistically encoded classificatory devices.” She identifies two attractive features of this account. First, it is compatible with a variety of competing views about the nature of evaluative thought and talk. Second, it solves certain problems that face some such views: for example, it allows them to provide an informative characterization of what evaluative predication is. I would add that, by connecting the semantics of

¹ I am indebted to Sigrún Svavarsdóttir for helpful discussion of her paper, and to Derek Baker and David Plunkett for illuminating comments on a draft of this paper.

predication to the activity of classification, it potentially promises to make the nature of predication straightforwardly intelligible in familiar terms.

I have two aims in this short paper. The first is to briefly locate Svavarsdóttir's project in its philosophical context, and to summarize some of its key elements (§1). The second is to raise three classes of questions about how to understand the project, and about its ability to satisfy Svavarsdóttir's ambitions for it. I raise questions about how to understand the nature of the project (§2), how to understand the idea of public-language classification (§3), and the role of sets in the theory (§4). Because I take the project of Svavarsdóttir's paper to be intriguing and worth developing further, I offer these comments largely in the spirit of an invitation to clarify how best to develop this project.

1. The project in context

I begin this section by briefly explaining the central issue Svavarsdóttir's project aims to address. I then spell out the key elements of her novel proposal.

To begin, focus on a simple evaluative sentence:

- (1) The table is beautiful.

One central debate about simple evaluative sentences like (1) concerns whether accepting such a sentence commits one (in some sense) to some evaluative metaphysics. There are several ways that such commitment might arise. For example, (1) might be taken to be metaphysically committing in virtue of being *truth-apt*, or *fact-stating*. In this paper, Svavarsdóttir focuses solely on such commitments that might arise in virtue of sentence (1) involving *evaluative predication*. By this I simply mean that it involves ascribing an evaluative predicate, namely 'is beautiful.' A central question in this context is: does such evaluative predication commit someone who asserts (1) to the instantiation of the evaluative property *being beautiful*?²

One prominent view in this debate denies that acceptance of sentences like (1) commits one to any such metaphysics. Consider, for example, a simple expressivist view, according to which acceptance of (1) functions to conventionally express a certain positive attitude toward the table, and not to express commitment to the instantiation of any evaluative property. To get a feel for this view, consider, by analogy, the term '...wow', as it appears in:

- (2) The table... wow!

² A large theoretical moving part here is how to understand the relevant notion of "commitment" that I have been deploying here. We could potentially think of this as a matter of analytic entailment in English. Or we could think of this as a matter of inferences in thought that are in some sense licensed or represented by facts about the language. I will follow Svavarsdóttir in largely setting these interesting questions aside here.

In a range of ordinary contexts, uttering (2) arguably conveys appreciation for the aesthetic merits of the table. To take someone who uttered (2) to be thereby committed to the existence of a property of “wowness” would be to misunderstand our linguistic practice: sentences like (2) just aren’t in the property-ascription business. The simple expressivist takes the best theory of ‘is beautiful’ to be structurally similar to that for ‘...wow’: in both cases, use of the term expresses an attitude, rather than committing one to the existence of an evaluative property.

This analogy famously faces difficulties in light of certain apparent facts about verb phrases. To see this, consider:

- (3) The table is round
- (4) The table has the property of being round

Arguably, (3) and (4) are related in a way that permits us to infer either one from the other. And such implications do not appear to depend on quirks of the words ‘table’ or ‘round,’ but rather to hold as a matter of the nature of predication and property-ascription. This may suggest the following general principle:

Predicate-Property Link Every sentence of the form ‘X is F’ implies a sentence of the form ‘X has the property of being F’ (and vice-versa)³

Whether or not Predicate-Property Link is true, it certainly has true instances. And some of them appear to be evaluative. For example, it is plausible that competent speakers will allow that from (1), we can infer:

- (5) The table has the property of being beautiful

This is a *prima facie* challenge for the simple expressivist’s denial of metaphysical commitment, for it seems to suggest that acceptance of (1) commits one to the instantiation of the evaluative property of being beautiful. Further, it raises a worry for the simple expressivist’s motivating analogy. For consider:

- (6) ?? The table has the property of being wow

Sentence (6) appears ungrammatical. And this suggests reason to be suspicious of the simple expressivist’s analogy.

³ There are important questions about the scope of claims like Predicate-Property Link. For example, some terms with the surface grammatical form of predicates are arguably best modeled as indexicals. And it is at least rather unclear whether Predicate-Property Link holds for such predicates. Consider, for example, the indexical verb phrase ‘is here.’ The following speech strikes me as reasonable, if pedantic: “Jane is here, but she does not have the *property of being here*, because there is no such property! ‘Here’ is an indexical which contributes to the meaning of a sentence a function from contexts of utterance to locations, not a property.”

In light of facts like this, contemporary expressivists have tended to develop their views in ways that allow them to vindicate inferences like the one from (1) to (5). They have done this by appealing to two prominent strategies. The first is a so-called “hybrid” strategy, which involves arguing that ethical sentences express both attitudes and certain descriptive contents.⁴ Since Svavarsdóttir does not address this strategy, I set it aside.

The second prominent strategy involves embracing a view about the semantics of apparently metaphysical vocabulary – such as ‘true’, ‘fact’ or ‘property’ – according to which use of such vocabulary does not (by itself) commit one to any particular metaphysics. Following Svavarsdóttir’s fairly standard usage, I will call this strategy *deflationism*. I will call the contrasting view, according to which our ordinary use of such vocabulary does commit us to relevant metaphysics, *inflationism*.

Svavarsdóttir is focused on the debate between inflationists and deflationists about the word ‘property.’ Here is a simple way of framing of this debate, intended to be friendly to the more nuanced discussion in Section II of Svavarsdóttir’s paper. Inflationists and deflationists can be understood as agreeing on the truth of Predicate-Property link, but disagreeing concerning how to interpret its explanatory import. Canonically, the inflationist takes the right-hand side of the equivalence to be illuminating of the left. On this account, the thesis in general to thereby reveal something deep about the nature of predication: predication is property ascription. By contrast the deflationist takes the left-hand side of Predicate-Property link to illuminate the right. On this account, the biconditional illuminates the nature of ‘property’ talk: such talk is just another way of linguistically representing predication.

Why do we have this extra word ‘property,’ on the deflationist picture? The standard answer is that it makes certain ideas easier to express. For example, it allows us to elegantly state useful generalizations such as: *objects a and b have all of the same properties*.

The truth of deflationism has appeared to many to be highly appealing to the expressivist (some have even thought it indispensable to the expressivist project).⁵ On deflationism, acceptance of (5) does not commit the speaker to any evaluative metaphysics. So the seemingly easy inference from (1) to (5) is no longer a cause for concern. And the contrast in grammaticality between (5) and (6) can be chalked up to a matter of syntax: (6) is ungrammatical simply because ‘...wow’ is not a predicate, and Predicate-Property Link requires predicates to work with.

Whether we should accept deflationism about ‘property’ is a difficult theoretical question. Svavarsdóttir notes that, at very least, the deflationist faces an explanatory lacuna. As mentioned above, the inflationist at least appears to have a clear story about the nature of predication: what predicates do, in the context of grammatical

⁴ For an excellent introduction to this strategy, see Toppinen 2018.

⁵ Dreier 2010, Price 2015. For a contrary view see McPherson *forthcoming*.

sentences is to (purport to) ascribe properties. The deflationist denies this, and, Svavarsdóttir suggests, has no readily available alternative story about the semantic function of predication (ms. 15-16).⁶ Svavarsdóttir aims to offer an account of the semantic function of (evaluative) predication that is independently plausible, and that can be common ground among inflationists, deflationists, and expressivists.⁷

Svavarsdóttir's core proposal is that the semantic function of predication is *linguistically encoded classification*. I will now briefly unpack the talk of 'semantic function' and 'classification' in this slogan. I find the explanation of "linguistic encoding" more difficult, and will discuss it in detail in §3.

First, consider *semantic function*. We don't get a precise gloss on this in the text, but we are told that the debate between traditional cognitivists and traditional non-cognitivists is to be understood as a debate about semantic function (Ms. 4 n.2). For example, recall the discussion of 'is beautiful,' above. I take it that the debate over whether that predicate is *attitude expressing* or *property predicating* is a debate about its semantic function, in Svavarsdóttir's sense. I will raise questions about this provisional characterization in §2.

Svavarsdóttir's account of the semantic function of predication appeals centrally to *classification*. Svavarsdóttir suggests that we can initially gloss classification as placing "particulars" into "categories" (ms. 19). I take it that the talk of "particulars" here should not be read as metaphysically serious: for the relevant purposes, a "particular" is just anything that we can talk about using the subject position in a subject-predicate sentence; for example, names for properties and relations can enter into the subject position, and hence can be "particulars" in this sense. A category, for Svavarsdóttir, is simply the set of objects associated with a classification (ms. 19).

To get a feel for the relevant idea of classification, imagine that we have a pile of toy blocks; we can imagine dividing the pile in various ways. Suppose that we choose some way of dividing the blocks into two groups. We could then call the blocks in one group the 'F blocks' and those in the other the 'G blocks.' Here, 'F' and 'G' serve as classifiers: they mark ways in which we have chosen to sort entities (in this case the blocks) into groups.

It appears that, according to Svavarsdóttir, every classification involves:

- (i) A *classificatory activity* that sorts entities, and
- (ii) A set of entities that is the "principled result" of this classificatory activity

We get a clear picture from Svavarsdóttir about the idea of the classificatory activity of an individual. The idea is that, if I am to *classify* toys (as opposed to just randomly placing them into piles), there has to be some psychological basis for sorting; as

⁶ All bare page references, like this one, are to Svavarsdóttir, *this volume*.

⁷ Svavarsdóttir's official focus is the subclass of evaluative predicates already mentioned. But the core proposal developed in this paper concerns the semantic nature of all predication, evaluative or not.

Svavarsdóttir says, merely “...applying a... term to some things and not others without any rhyme or reason” is not classification (ms. 29); a genuine classification must be guided by a principle (or principles) of classification (ms. 29).

The “principled result” of such an activity, I take it, is just the result that would arise if one flawlessly applied the classification-guiding principles. Return to my simple example: suppose that I am seeking to sort the pile of blocks into red and non-red, and there are no multicolored or borderline red blocks in the original pile. Various conditions (bad lighting, absent mindedness, etc.) might lead me to put a non-red block into the “red block” pile. But intuitively, these are mistakes, and the principled result of the relevant classification would be a pile of toys which contained all and only the red blocks from the original pile. On Svavarsdóttir’s usage of “category,” this set of the red blocks would be the category associated with my classificatory activity.

With this characterization of classification in hand, we can offer a new biconditional to replace Predicate-Property link as the focus of our explanatory attention.

Predicate-Classification Link Every sentence of the form ‘X is F’ implies a sentence of the form ‘X is in the category “the Fs”’ (and vice-versa) (compare ms. 22)

As I read Svavarsdóttir, where the inflationist took Predicate-Property Link to reveal the semantic function of predication, she instead takes (what I have called) Predicate-Classification Link to reveal this semantic function. That is, the right-hand side of this equivalence (with its talk of categories) is supposed to illuminate the semantic function of the predication that appears on the left-hand side.

Svavarsdóttir aims to provide an account of the semantic function of predication *in a public language*, as opposed, say, to within the idiolect of a specific individual (ms. 6). This semantic function is supposed to be “linguistically encoded” classification. Here is one general gloss of such encoding:

A predicate expression is the linguistic means for keeping track of the classifications of particulars.... The lexical meaning of the expression provides information about the way in which the particulars are classified. (ms. 21)

Unfortunately, I take there to be significant difficulties in making this gloss more precise, as I will explain in §3.

Svavarsdóttir’s project is intriguing. And it is potentially significant for the broader project of understanding the nature of value ascriptions. For Svavarsdóttir claims that the resulting picture of predication is compatible with either cognitivist or non-cognitivist interpretations of value ascriptions. And she concludes the paper by proposing that her project “deflate[s] expectations” about how much we can learn about the nature of value ascriptions (such as “The table is beautiful”) from their compositional semantics (ms. 38).

I will raise doubts about these broader conclusions below. However, my main aim in this paper is on the project itself rather than its significance. I find myself puzzled by several elements of the project. In what follows, I aim to set out some of my central questions in a constructive fashion, in the hopes that they are of some use to Svavarsdóttir as she develops the larger project of which this paper is a part.

2. How to understand the project and its ambitions

As we have seen, Svavarsdóttir's stated project is to explain the "semantic function" of predication. And this seems to amount to: seeking to identify what in general a predicate contributes to the meaning of a sentence, simply in virtue of being a predicate. In this section, I query the relation of this project to three more familiar sorts of project: formal semantics, constructive expressivist semantics, and metasemantics.

Consider first formal semantics. Predication is a central topic of formal semantics (introductory linguistic semantics textbooks typically dedicate a chapter to predication). Briefly consider a textbook formal semantics picture of predication. On this picture, the basic unit of semantic analysis is the sentence. Call the semantic content of a sentence a proposition. (We can remain neutral here on what the nature of propositions might be, beyond being whatever the semantic content of a sentence is.) What is the semantic function of subsentential elements? Precisely to combine, in characteristic rule-governed ways, to generate propositions. We understand the semantic function of the predicate in just this way. Thus, in some semantics textbooks, you will find the semantic value of a predicate described as being an "unsaturated proposition". Where to be "saturated" just amounts to being associated with a noun phrase in the way predicates are in complete sentences (e.g. Portner 2005, 33). This account seems to illuminate something important about the semantic function of predication (especially once the relevant compositional rules are filled out).

It also appears to be officially neutral between e.g. expressivism, deflationism, and inflationism. What we say about that debate will depend (for example) on what we say about the nature of propositions. Indeed, some expressivists have explicitly emphasized that their expressivist theories are not intended to be conflict or compete with mainstream formal semantics (e.g. Ridge 2014, 105-6).

Svavarsdóttir offers a brief suggestion of why she does not take formal semantics to be sufficient to her project, suggesting that her paper addresses "more fundamental" issues than those addressed by standard truth-conditional semantic theorizing (ms. 4 n.2). It is not clear to me how to interpret this talk of fundamentality. To bring this out, consider two salient projects that might be considered candidate forms of "more fundamental" theorizing. The first is the sort of systematic constructive expressivist semantics that we get in (Gibbard 2003) or (Schroeder 2008). Mark Schroeder, for example, offers a fully general constructive account of predication in (2008, §6.1). The second is a *metasemantic* theory of predication. In general, we can

think of metasemantics as addressing questions like: what are semantic properties, and (either in general, or in specific classes of cases) grounds the semantic properties of certain bits of language. In our context, a key metasemantic question is: in virtue of what do predicates in general make the semantic contributions that they do? One would suspect that cognitivists and non-cognitivists would give very different answers to this question.

Svavarsdóttir does not engage explicitly with either of these projects. And because of this, it is less than perfectly clear how we should understand her project and its motivations.

One conjecture about the contrast is that both the constructive expressivist semantic program, and the metasemantic project are most reasonably understood as failing to be ecumenical in the way that Svavarsdóttir desires (at least when they are fully developed). For example, Mark Schroeder's project aims precisely to supply an *expressivist* semantic framework. So perhaps Svavarsdóttir's project must be different in virtue of its ecumenical aims. The difficulty is that it is hard to see how an account of semantic function as she conceives it could be ecumenical: as she notes, traditional cognitivism and non-cognitivism are accounts of semantic function (ms. 4n.2), so it does not seem obvious how a *complete* account of the semantic function of predication could be ecumenical. For example, how could one be an expressivist, while denying that the semantic function of evaluative predicates was to express certain attitudes?

In light of this, I want to propose a possible way of understanding the project of the paper that is different from that suggested by the talk of semantic function. I suggest that Svavarsdóttir's project can be fruitfully read as having similar aspirations as the competing explanatory claims about Property-Predicate Link, discussed above. Property-Predicate Link is not so much a matter of deep semantic theory as it is a thesis that can be justified inductively directly from cases. So you might think: this is a thesis that can play a role as a certain kind of *common ground* in debates among more theoretically committed hypotheses: it is a widely acceptable summary of (some of) the data that we need to capture. Predicate-Classification Link can be understood in a similar way, as a kind of relatively uncontroversial common ground. In both cases, there is an interesting "Euthyphro-ish" question about the generalization: which direction of the embedded biconditional is explanatorily illuminating? Svavarsdóttir's positive view can be understood as a (controversial) answer to *this* explanatory question. On this gloss, the specificity of Svavarsdóttir's project explains why she aims to remain neutral concerning a wide range of further questions that can reasonably be understood as questions concerning the semantic function of predication.

I find this to be an attractive characterization of a project that Svavarsdóttir might pursue. But it is worth emphasizing the modesty of the project, on this reading. As I have noted, Svavarsdóttir concludes the paper by suggesting that

...if successful, this paper has served to deflate expectations as to how much we can learn about the nature of value ascriptions from the

study of the compositional semantic structure of evaluative language. (ms. 38)

But as I have just argued, it seems most charitable to read Svavarsdóttir as addressing only a single explanatory question about evaluative predication. And once we are clear on this point, it appears to remain at least an open question whether *further* investigation of the semantics of such expressions might illuminate the dispute between expressivists and their opponents.

Further, once we generalize away from predication to compositional semantic structure more generally, the case for deflated expectations becomes even less clear. On the one hand, it is not at all clear how one would generalize from Svavarsdóttir's account of evaluative predication to a full theory that could underlie the compositional properties of evaluative language. On the other, a leading contemporary thesis about this topic (argued in detail in Schroeder 2008) is that the non-cognitivist can capture much of the compositional semantic data, but not enough to be a plausible hypothesis about evaluative language. Against the background of this argument, showing that some part of the compositional semantics can be modeled in a neutral way does not seem to me to support the more general deflated expectations that Svavarsdóttir suggests.

3. Classification in a public language

Recall that Svavarsdóttir's core proposal is that the semantic function of predication is linguistically encoded classification. I now turn to the crucial question: what is it for a classification to be *linguistically encoded*? "Linguistic" here is intended as a reference to encoding in a *public* language, like English or Hindi, and not in the idiolect of an individual speaker (ms. 24, 30).

Here is a central question about how to understand this proposal. On one way of understanding the idea of linguistically encoded classification, each predicate is associated in the language with a specific (possibly imprecise) classification. On another way of understanding the proposal, the idea is that predicates are, as a matter of linguistic convention, to be *used to classify*, but there is no specific classification that is linguistically associated with each predicate.

Different passages suggest each of these readings. The most striking example of a passage that seems to support the first reading is this one:

A predicate's extension is understood as the set that represents the principled result of the type of classification that the predicate regiments in language when applied to the relevant domain of actual and possible objects. (ms. 34)

This passage suggests that for every natural language predicate ‘F,’ there is an associated *type* of classificatory activity. This activity type will have as its principled result a set. And that set, in turn, constitutes the *extension* of that predicate.⁸

This passage is not idiosyncratic; Svavarsdóttir repeatedly mentions the *regimenting* role of predicate expressions (e.g. ms. 23, 24, 26, 29, 30, 32, 33). I find it natural to read this talk in line with the quoted passage. On this reading, we begin by observing that the classifications in fact associated with a given public language predicate by different individual users of the language varies. Public language *regiments* that varied use into a single classificatory activity that is *semantically* associated with that predicate by the public language itself. And the set that is the principled result of that public language classificatory activity is the extension of the relevant predicate in the public language.

This picture raises interesting questions. For example, what would ground the association of a given public language predicate with this rather than that classificatory activity? (Different metasemantic theories will presumably tell different stories about how such regimentation works.) Whose activity would this be? I set these questions aside here, because the proposal fails straightforwardly to be ecumenical in the way that Svavarsdóttir appears to intend.

For example, consider the predicate ‘...is beautiful.’ The sketched picture suggests that there is a set of entities that would be classified as beautiful by the classificatory activity semantically associated with this predicate. And this suggests that anyone who claims of such an entity that “it is not beautiful” is misclassifying, in the same way that I would be misclassifying in the previous example if I put a blue block in the red block pile. But this idea does not at all appear to be a suitable semantic “common ground” for metaethicists: at least traditional expressivists will want to deny that there is a set of objects semantically associated in English with the evaluative predicates ‘is beautiful.’⁹

Other passages in the paper appear to suggest the second, more modest interpretation of the slogan that public language predication is classification. For example, consider the following:

...the sole information provided [by characterizing verb phrases as predicates] is that these are all phrases that signal in language that the referent of [the associated noun phrase] is classified in one way or another. (ms. 22).

⁸ There are reasons for doubting the generality of this picture. Consider two examples. First, consider indexical predicates like “is here.” Indexicals only have extensions relative to contexts of use. Second, consider semantically complex predicates, like “is Svavarsdóttir’s favorite type of food.” Arguably, the semantics of such predicates should be understood compositionally, rather than by imagining that there is some specific classificatory activity associated with that complex predicate in our language.

⁹ This may be less clear on a view on which expressivism is the best interpretation of our thought and talk about the semantics of language as well (cf. Gibbard 2012).

This interpretation wholly ignores all of the talk of linguistic regimentation. On this interpretation, that ‘is F’ is a predicate in a public language entails only that ‘is F’ is to be used by speakers to apply *some consistent classification*. On this interpretation, that a term is a predicate does not entail that the language itself semantically associates any classification with that term: every competent speaker may associate a different classification with it, and be operating perfectly well in accord with its meaning as a predicate.

The modest interpretation can potentially offer a sort of meta-explanation of why certain sentences can express good inferences, in large part in light of their semantic form (compare ms. 33-4). The idea is that, with the modest interpretation in hand, natural ways of linking mental states to public language expressions will vindicate such inferences. For example, consider an expressivist-friendly mentalistic, way of developing this explanation. Given the modest interpretation, whatever mental states are expressed by sentences like ‘x is F’ must involve a consistent classification. So, consider (for example) the universal instantiation form: “X is F. All Fs are Gs. So X is G.” The idea is that the set-theoretic relations among the classifications associated with the mental states expressed by instances of the sentence-schemas will (other important things being equal)¹⁰ entail the goodness of the inferences that follow this schema.

One challenge to the modest interpretation is that it seems profoundly incomplete. If we accept a classificatory picture of predication, it seems plausible that each public language predicate should exhibit some sort of *distinctive* classificatory character. For example, if I use ‘is red’ in roughly the way others in my community use ‘is blue,’ I am of course using ‘is red’ as a predicate, but I am not using it competently.

It seems to me that there are two reasonable replies to this sort of worry about the modest interpretation. First, as suggested by my proposed interpretation of Svavarsdóttir’s project in the previous section, she might simply say that she is offering an *incomplete* account of what is semantically characteristic of public-language predication, and that she assumes that a more complete account will address this issue.

Second, Svavarsdóttir could seek to augment the modest account to address the problem in a way that is still ecumenical. For example, perhaps every public language predicate has:

- (i) The classificational aspect suggested by the modest interpretation, and
- (ii) *Something* that contributes to the distinctive meaning of that predicate, where, depending on the predicate in question, that something might either

¹⁰ Other things are not always equal; as Gilbert Harman (1986, Ch. 2) would say, inference is not implication. For example, sometimes, noticing that you accept a pair of claims that entail a third does not give you good reason to infer the third claim, but rather to abandon one of the two original claims.

be a content, a character (for indexical predicates), or some sort of expressive use rule.

Finally, I am not completely certain that even the modest interpretation of the slogan is ecumenical. Suppose that I sincerely utter “The table is beautiful.” Must I have in mind some principled way of sorting objects into the beautiful vs. non-beautiful? Can’t things just *strike* me as beautiful, without my having any sense of their being an underlying principled unity to my classification? It seems to me that they can, especially if one is inclined to a standard expressivist interpretation of this sentence. On that interpretation, my sincere utterance is conventionally expressing a certain positive attitude I have towards the table. It does not seem that in expressing this attitude I need to be committed to there being any principle of classification that guides my attitude. Setting aside expressivism, consider a particularist view of the beautiful, according to which *there is* no principled means of classifying the beautiful. These examples suggest doubts about how ecumenical the idea that predication necessarily involves classification could be, even on its most modest gloss.

Neither the theoretically committal interpretation, nor the modest interpretation strike me as unproblematic as interpretations of the paper. (Perhaps the intended account is somewhere between the two interpretations, and I have simply failed to understand it.) But the latter at least seems more promising as an account that might achieve what Svavarsdóttir aims to accomplish in the paper.

4. Predication and sets

As we have seen, the account of predication as linguistically encoded classification appeals centrally to *sets*. The guiding image of classification is of partitioning a collection of objects into subsets on some principled basis.

One flatfooted question about this is simply: why sets? One thought might be that talk of sets is less metaphysically committal than talk of properties. But why not the familiar tools of possible worlds? Or just functions (seeking to remain neutral concerning the relata of these functions)? A meta-question is: how seriously should we take the appeal to sets? I think that the answer is that sets seem to fit best with the idea of a *classificatory* activity. But I worry that framing that activity in terms of sets introduces non-trivial difficulties.

One familiar worry is that sets appear ill-suited to represent the semantic function of predication. For predication is plausibly *hyperintensional*. And this hyperintensionality has loomed large in metaethics. For example, some philosophers have been attracted to the idea that, necessarily, something is good just in case and to the extent that it is pleasant. Famously, this appears to be a substantive view about goodness. It seems to show that two *different* predicates (‘pleasant’, ‘good’) can apply to all and only the very same actual and possible objects. But that means we cannot understand the semantic nature of these predicates simply in terms of the sets of objects they pick out.

The case just sketched does not arise simply because of an implausibly simple theory of what is good. If we accept the supervenience of the evaluative, and a suitably expansive stock of non-evaluative predicates, it seems that we *must* be able to construct a non-evaluative predicate that has the same intension as a given evaluative predicate, and yet is distinct from the latter.

The more general lesson here is that the lovely initial motivating picture of a person sorting entities is a somewhat misleading way to think about predication. There seems to be more to predication than grouping entities.

One might reply to this worry by appeal to companions in guilt: standard possible worlds semantics faces similar issues. Another reply would echo an idea already suggested: that the account is not intended to tell us *everything* about the semantic function of predication, but only an uncontroversial “core.”

A different approach would be to focus more on classificatory *activities*, and less on the sets those activities generate. The thought would be that, even if classification *as good* and *as pleasant* divide possible entities into the same sets, these can nonetheless be distinct classificatory activities. On this picture, predicate meanings could be individuated by classificatory activities, and not by the categories that they generate.

If this is right, then perhaps Svavarsdóttir could afford to simply be neutral concerning whether the outputs of classificatory activities are sets or something else: perhaps what is important to the account are the activities themselves. But then it would be nice to have a clearer understanding of what these activities are, especially if there are supposed to be such activities at the level of the linguistic community, and not merely the individual.

Conclusions

As I have sought to illustrate here, Svavarsdóttir’s project of developing an account of predication in terms of the activity of classification is well-motivated and intriguing: there is something compelling about thinking of predication in terms of the activity of grouping items together on the basis of some sort of similarity. Here, I have focused on trying to identify some central questions for this sort of view, and what seem to me to be attractive ways of potentially refining the project in light of those questions. My hope is that this critical engagement will be of some use to Svavarsdóttir in developing her ideas further, and to others interested in how to think about evaluative predication.

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