Predication and Ontology: Reply to Denyer

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In his book *Language, Thought and Falsehood in Ancient Greek Philosophy*[1] Nicholas Denyer argued (p. 164ff.) that names and verbs engage in quite distinct ways with the concepts of truth and falsity, and with negation: only verbs, he claimed, are true and false of objects and admit of significant negation. He drew on these distinctions in support of a broadly nominalistic position, and suggested further that the unity of the declarative sentence depends on the special nature of the verb. In my article 'The Unity of the Declarative Sentence'[2] I argued, on the contrary, that the grammatical distinction between names and verbs (in general: verbal phrases) is a metaphysically superficial one. I claimed that it is a mistake to appeal to grammatically peculiar features of the verb to account for the unity of the sentence, for we can point to examples of unified sentences which contain no verb; in fact, as far as the issue of unity is concerned, we may as well regard all the semantically significant components of a sentence as (logically speaking) names designating objects (cf. Aristotle: *De Int*. 16b19ff.). These objects may be of different sorts: most fundamentally, some may be particulars, some universals. But I suggested that there is no unique way in which a division of objects into these two classes has to proceed: if Socrates is wise, we may regard Socrates as a basic particular instantiating the universal wisdom (among other things), but we may equally regard wisdom as a basic particular instantiating the universal Socrates (among other things). I further argued that the ontological distinction between particular and universal (however these are constituted on the ground) suffices to account for the distinctions among various linguistic items to which Denyer drew our attention—I put it thus vaguely, because how we label these items, and in particular what we call names, will now be a crucial issue—in respect their engagement with truth and falsity, and with negation. If that is correct, and given that the relative constitution of the classes of particulars and universals is fundamentally indeterminate, it follows that merely adverting

[1] *Language, Thought and Falsehood in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1991).

[2] *Philosophy* **73**, 1998, 21–45.

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to the presence of relevant distinctions at the linguistic level will not, just as such, promote the cause of nominalism.

In his article 'Names, Verbs and Quantification'[3], Denyer takes up the cudgels again on behalf of the nominalist, suggesting that my attempt to play down the ontological importance of the distinction between grammatical names and verbs ignores some striking logical differences between them. He argues that, while there is no difference between *intransitive* verbs and names which, in the logic of monadic predication, shows up in any difference between first-order, standard second-order and what he calls 'pure' second-order quantification, there is such a difference between *transitive* verbs and names in the logic of polyadic predication. And he suggests that this difference does indeed have metaphysical import: it cannot make sense, he urges, to blur this difference by treating all words as expressions which refer to objects—by, in effect, treating all words as (logically speaking) names.

Denyer's insistence that there is a difference between the ways transitive and intransitive verbs behave in the various logics he examines is well taken. But there is a mismatch between the metaphysical position Denyer adopted in his book and the implications of his article. In his book Denyer argued for the metaphysical significance of the name/verb distinction quite generally. There was no suggestion that that significance attaches only to the distinction between names and transitive verbs: indeed, the opposite was clearly implied by Denyer's repeated use (ibid.) of 'purrs' as his standard example of a verb. My counter to Denyer preserved this uniform approach to the verb, for my claim was that the grammatical distinction between names and verbs, taken quite generally, lacks metaphysical depth. In his article, however, Denyer aims to undermine my position by appealing to a difference between names and specifically *transitive* verbs, based on the ways in which logics specializing in various types of combination of names, transitive verbs and intransitive verbs resemble and differ from one another. But if the issue of the metaphysical significance, or otherwise, of the name/verb contrast is now to be made to depend on these logical distinctions—and, assuming that my polemic against Denyer's original position worked, they may be nominalism's only remaining hope—a nominalist who falls back on them will be obliged to accommodate a rather substantial exception. The claim will now be, not that *verbs* (*simpliciter*) do not designate objects and that *universals* (*simpliciter*) are ontologically dispensable 'fancy goods' (cf. ibid., p. 165), but merely that *transitive* verbs do not designate

[3] *Philosophy* **73**, 1998, 619–23.

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objects and that there are no '*polyadic*' universals (i.e. relations). But it will have to be conceded that *intransitive* verbs, in contradistinction, *do* designate objects, if names do, and that '*monadic*' universals are genuine existents, if particulars are. The shades of Leibniz and Bradley will perhaps look on in approval, as may the ghosts of those Aristotelian commentators who demoted the category of Relation (*pros ti*) to the status of a mere offshoot of the other nine categories, which were held to exist *per se* (*kath'hauto*)[4]. But surely the ideality of relations is a discredited philosophical position, if any is. (I shall return to this point.) In any case, if the upshot is to be such a differentiated position, classifying monadic predicates not with polyadic predicates but with grammatical names, I do not think that it can be dismissed as without significance in quite the way Denyer seems to want to do at the end of his article. For any abandonment of monadic properties to the realist would represent a substantial (if not decisive) defeat for nominalism, and one which, historically, few nominalists would have tolerated.

In his article Denyer speculates that, since I ignored the logical facts he mentions, I can only have had monadic predication in mind. He points to two passages of my article which suggest such a restricted purview. One is a passage in which I state, following Geach, that the main predicate of a sentence can by definition only occur once. Now the phrase 'main predicate' is a term of art which coincides roughly with what Dummett calls a 'complex predicate', i.e. it is an unsaturated expression formed from a sentence by the omission of another expression, the omitted expression then counting, according to some adequate category theory which allocates expressions to levels of a syntactic hierarchy, as an expression of level one lower than that of the remaining expression. Hence the main predicate of a sentence is the expression of *highest* level in that sentence, according to some such category theory. In my article I claimed that there is no principled means of adjudicating between the Fregean way of disposing expressions among the levels of the hierarchy on the one hand, according to which 'Raleigh' in the sentence 'Raleigh smokes' is an expression of level 0 and 'smokes' an expression of level 1, and a systematic permutation of this disposition on the other, according to which in that sentence 'Raleigh' is an expression of level 1 and 'smokes' of level 0. On this alternative way of disposing the expressions, 'Raleigh' would count as the main predicate of our sample sentence. That, in lodging this claim, I can only have had monadic predication in mind is indicated, Denyer thinks, by the alleged difficulty of fitting a categorial analysis along

[4] See e.g. Simplicius *In Aristotelis Categorias Commentarium*, K. Kalbfleisch (ed.) = *CAG* 8 (Berlin: Prussian Academy, 1907), p. 174, 14–30.

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the lines of the alternative strategy onto a sentence like 'Richard loves Richard', compatibly with observing the constraint that a sentence's main predicate only occurs once. For in this sentence the name 'Richard' occurs twice. But this alleged difficulty is not a real one. In the sentence 'Richard loves Richard' the first occurrence of 'Richard' may, like the second occurrence of that name, be assigned to a level one higher than that to which 'loves' is assigned, but if we make these assignments (following the alternative strategy to Frege's), it does not follow, in breach of the above constraint, that the main predicate is the first 'Richard' and is also, separately, the second one, so occurring twice. Rather, the main predicate will be the complex 'Richard ... Richard', which only occurs once in our sample sentence. (Think of the sentence as meaning, on the alternative strategy, something like: 'Loving is Richard-Richard-instantiated'.)

The second passage Denyer cites is one where I claimed both that 'first-level predicates do not carry a determinate number of argument-places for second-level predicates' and that '[Fregean] proper names can themselves be classified as second-level predicates'. Denyer interprets me as implicitly restricting my purview to monadic predicates, given that both claims cannot simultaneously be held in respect of polyadic predicates. But in fact the first claim is just mistaken, in respect of both monadic and polyadic predicates. The phenomenon of valency, as it occurs in natural language, guarantees that all expressions carry a determinate number of slots for other expressions (that they have determinate adicity), that these slots are specifically 'charged', and that both of these features obtain determinately regardless of where in the levels of a syntactic hierarchy we locate completing and completed expressions. To give a simple illustration, we might represent 'Raleigh' as carrying a single positive charge, 'smokes' as carrying a single negative charge, 'loves' as carrying a double negative charge, 'is between' as carrying a triple negative charge, and so on. Hence 'loves' carries two slots for expressions like 'Raleigh', and that regardless of whether expressions like 'Raleigh' are assigned to a level one lower than that to which 'loves' is assigned, as Frege had it, or to a level one higher, as the alternative strategy has it.

There seems to me, then, no compelling reason to except polyadic predication from the main thesis of my paper, once the mistake noted in the previous paragraph has been corrected. That returns us to the issue we broached earlier: do the differences between logics which specialize in expressions of different adicity point in the direction of a restricted nominalism, one which concedes the reality of monadic properties, but contests the reality of relations? I stated that this position is discredited, but I owe the reader a justifica-

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tion for this claim. I have space for no more than a sketch of how such a justification might go. Although there is of course a syntactic distinction between monadic and polyadic predication, the distinction has no metaphysical depth because (a) polyadic predications entail monadic predications, given that we can construct complex monadic predicates which incorporate relations (e.g. if James and John satisfy, in that order, the polyadic predicate 'is to the left of', then James satisfies the monadic predicate 'is to the left of John'); (b) monadic predications entail polyadic predications. Consider the following examples: to ascribe a secondary quality such as a colour to something is to say that that thing has a disposition to affect suitably disposed subjects of experience in certain ways under suitable perceptual conditions; to ascribe a primary quality such as a shape to something is to say (among other things) that that thing is disposed to interact with other shaped objects in certain ways depending on the shapes of those other objects (among other factors); to give something's spatio-temporal position is to relate it to other spatio-temporally positioned things according to some agreed co-ordinate system. Now reverse the *onus probandi*: can you think of a monadic property which something can have without its entering, expressly or by implication, into relations? I cannot.

If monadic and polyadic predication are thus intertwined, we surely cannot seriously entertain a position which is realistic about the former but nominalist about the latter. The differences between logics specializing in different levels of a syntactic hierarchy, to which Denyer draws our attention, derive from the difference between expressions like 'Raleigh' and 'smokes' on the one hand, and expressions like 'loves' and 'is between' on the other, i.e. between expressions with one (positively or negatively charged, let us say) argument-place on the one hand and expressions with more than one (negatively charged, let us say) argument-place on the other. This distinction, which cuts across the traditional grammatical distinction between name and verb, enjoys if anything even worse prospects for yielding ontologically significant dividends than does that traditional distinction.

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