

The Puzzles of Modal Variation

Intuitively, ordinary objects could be somewhat different, but not radically different than they actually are. The Eiffel Tower could be slightly smaller; the Ship of Theseus could have slightly different planks; War and Peace could be slightly shorter. This suggests that ordinary objects are tolerant: they could have somewhat different properties than they actually do. Equally plausibly, we also normally think that there are limits to this tolerance, e.g. the Eiffel Tower could not be grain-sized, War and Peace could not be one sentence long etc. Therefore, ordinary objects are not hyper-tolerant: they could not have any properties whatsoever. However, as often is the case in metaphysics, there is a valid argument, which shows (using only intuitive principles) that if an object is tolerant (admitting of slight variation), then it is also hyper-tolerant (admitting of radical variation).

The Eiffel Tower is 300 meters in height. It's possible for it to be slightly (say, 10%) smaller. So it's possible for it to be 270 meters in height. However, it seems that if that were the case, then the Eiffel Tower would still be tolerant. After all, being tolerant seems to be a necessary feature of ordinary objects. This means that had the Eiffel Tower been 10% smaller, it would be possible for it to be 10% smaller still. So it's possibly possible for it to be 243 meters in height. It seems that whatever is possibly possible is just possible. Therefore, it's possible for the Eiffel Tower to be 243 meters in height. It's easy to see that a series of steps along these argumentative lines would lead us to the conclusion that it's possible for the Eiffel Tower to be grain-sized. This is puzzling. We either have to reject one of the intuitive steps in the argument or accept the surprising conclusion that the Eiffel Tower could be grain-sized. The analysis of puzzles such as this one provides a great entry point into many hotly debated topics in philosophy. Using the conceptual tools of metaphysics and logic, this project will investigate these modal limits on how different ordinary objects could be through analysing the unstable meanings of the expressions used to state the claims about what's possible.

Significance of the project

The project aims to constitute a building block in the ongoing rapid development of a new area of research: higher-order metaphysics. Furthermore, it aims to answer questions that are highly relevant to multiple important debates in other fields such as epistemology and the philosophy of language.

Project outcomes

The planned outcome of the project is providing an answer to the following questions:

- Are the formal tools of higher-order logic preferable to the first-order tools of counterpart theory in dealing with the puzzles of modal variation?
- Does the revision of the assumption that everything necessarily exists make it harder to solve the puzzles?
- Are the currently developed theories of knowledge (based on the normality condition) as successful in dealing with sceptical problems as the classic ones (based on the safety condition)?
- Does the semantic plasticity in the term 'person' lead to ethical misanthropy?

Research methodology

The research methodology of the project is the methodology typically employed in analytic metaphysics. As usually is the case in metaphysics, I will investigate the consequences of adopting certain intuitive principles; if these principles lead to implausible consequences, they will be revised. I will also rely on the appropriate formal tools, including higher-order modal logic, counterpart theory, and formal semantics.