"If existence is not a property, then there are no universal properties." A special version of the semantic argument

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In his treatise *On the Cosmos* Aristotle famously proclaims that nature has a liking for contraries or opposites. We indeed encounter opposites everywhere we look in reality. There is no light without dark, no heath without cold, no love without hate, no black without white, and so on. The list of contraries in nature seems endless. But why is this so? Why does nature love opposites? An answer to this question might come from Spinoza. In a letter to his friend Jarig Jelles on 2 June 1674 Spinoza posits an intriguing dictum: *determinatio negatio est*. If we translate this into English, it says: determination is negation. To be determined, to exist in the world as a determined entity, is to negate. In short, to exist is to negate. The idea seems to be that something can only exist in the world if its opposite exists as well. Everything that exists in the world needs for its very existence the existence of its opposite. If Spinoza is right, then the question above is easily answered. For if everything that exists requires the existence of its opposite, then it's no surprise at all that nature loves opposites. After all, nature simply has no other choice. It just has to love opposites because opposites are inevitable. Without there being opposites nothing would exist. There would be no world at all. No wonder then that nature loves opposites, as Aristotle holds in his treatise. There is no other way.

But is Spinoza right? Can we provide an argument for the claim that opposites in nature are unavoidable? I think we indeed can. In what follows I shall outline an argument for the claim that there are no *universal* properties. That is to say, there are no properties that all entities in the world have. Put differently, for each property there is always an entity in the world that does not have that property. Now, if there are no universal properties, a necessary condition for some entity to have a certain property is the existence of another entity that doesn't have that property. But then it indeed follows that opposites are unavoidable, as Spinoza has it.

Before I present said argument, I first need to define more precisely what I mean by property. A property is something for which it is logically possible that there is an entity that has it and for which it is logically possible that there is an entity that lacks it. Take for example 'being red'. Is that a property? It surely is. The existence of a red entity is clearly logically possible. And the same holds for the existence of an entity that is not red. In fact, we see many red and non-red entities around us in the actual world. So, there being red and non-red entities are undeniably logically possible states of affairs. Now take 'being material'. The existence of a material entity is indisputably logically possible. Again, we do in fact see numerous material

entities in the actual world. Further, even if materialism would be true, so that there are in fact no non-material entities in the actual world, the existence of a non-material entity is still logically possible. Hence 'being material' is a property as well. As a third example take 'being self-identical'. This is not a property. For the existence of something that is not identical to itself isn't logically possible. Finally, take 'being something'. This is not a property either. For again it's not logically possible for there to be something that is not something.

But how do I argue that there are no universal properties? My argument, called *the semantic argument*, consists of three premises. The first premise is the claim that there are no things that do not exist. This is an utterly modest metaphysical principle. It just says that everything that is, exists. There are no mysterious entities that "are" but do not exist. If something "is", then it exists. This premise seems to me so evident, that I find it hard to further substantiate it. If anyone wants to deny it, then he or she should provide us with an example of an entity that "is" but doesn't exist. I take it that any purported example of such an entity can be easily refuted by showing either that it *does* exist, or by showing that there isn't an entity like that.

The second premise is quite modest as well. Unless we are to become *semantic nihilists*, we should accept that expressions in natural language both have a *meaning* and a *reference*, and that the meaning *fixes* or *determines* the reference. For example, the expression 'red' has a meaning which determines the collection of all red entities in the world as its reference. The expression 'President of the United States' has a meaning as well. It fixes Barack Obama as its reference. Or take the expression 'blue table'. Its meaning fixes or determines the collection of all blue tables in the world as its reference. There are obviously many innocent examples like these. The second premise therefore seems to me rationally almost undeniable as well.

A little bit more work is needed to introduce the third and final premise. Since Frege we know that sameness of reference doesn't entail sameness of meaning. For example, the expressions 'morning star' and 'evening star' clearly have different meanings. Yet we do know that both in fact refer to the planet Venus and thus have the same reference. So indeed, from the fact that two expressions have the same reference we may not infer that they have the same meaning.

Now, to state my third premise I need to introduce a new concept. In addition to a reference, expressions in natural language have a *reference set*. The reference set of an expression is obtained by taking together the references of its parts. For example, the reference set of 'morning star' is the collection of all mornings and all stars. The reference set of 'evening star' is the collection of all evenings and all stars. The reference set of 'President of the United States' is the collection of all presidents and this country The United States. The reference set of 'blue table' is the collection of all blue entities and all tables in the world. It thus also includes blue cars and red tables. From this all it follows immediately that the reference set of

a simple expression is just the reference of that expression. For example, the reference set of 'red' is simply the reference of 'red', namely the collection of all red entities in the world. For complex expressions though, the reference and the reference set are clearly not the same.

Now I'm in the position to state my final premise. We know that sameness of reference does not guarantee sameness of meaning. The third premise has it that sameness of reference sets does. That is to say, if two expressions have the same reference set, then they are guaranteed to have the same meaning. Let me illustrate the third premise with an example. Take again the expressions 'morning star' and 'evening star'. They clearly don't have the same meaning. Now their reference sets are indeed not the same either, which confirms the third premise. The third premise has substantial massive inductive support. No counterexample thus far has been found. So, I take it that the third premise is perfectly rationally acceptable as well.

From these three premises the conclusion that there are no universal properties follows. I shall show this by a *reductio ad absurdum*. Suppose there is some universal property after all. Let's call this property P. Since P is universal, the reference set of the expression 'P' is everything that exists. For according to the first premise there are no things that do not exist. Now take the expression 'existence'. Clearly, its reference set is everything that exists as well. But then it follows that the expressions 'P' and 'existence' have exactly the same reference set. According to the third premise both expressions thus have the same meaning. Hence 'P' just means 'existence'. But then, since P is a property, it follows that existence is a property as well. Now, a property is by definition something for which it is logically possible that there is an entity that does not have it. So it follows that it is logically possible that there is an entity that does not exist. This contradicts the first premise though. For on that premise there cannot be an entity that does not exist. We thus arrive at a contradiction. But then our *reductio* assumption must be rejected and the final conclusion that there are no universal properties follows. That is to say, for all properties there is an entity that does not have it.

Reality is apparently so diverse, so heterogeneous, so multi-facetted, that there is not a single property that all entities share. Nature cannot be limited or corseted. That is, reality cannot be restricted. No matter what property we could possibly think of, there will always be at least one entity in the world that does not have that property. The implications of the conclusion of my semantic argument, that there are no universal properties, are truly overwhelming. Take materialism. If there are no universal properties, then the property 'being material' is not a universal property. The world thus contains at least one immaterial entity and materialism is refuted. Given that 'being physical' and 'being natural' aren't universal properties either, it also follows immediately that reality contains non-physical and supernatural entities.

Or take pantheism. If there are no universal properties, then the property 'being divine' is not universal either. So there is at least one entity that is not divine. Pantheism thus fails as well. Or take idealism. The property 'being mental' is not universal either. So there are non-mental entities and idealism is rejected. Now take the properties of 'being contingent', 'being caused', 'being finite' and 'being a composite'. Since all these properties are not universal either, it follows immediately that the world contains necessary, uncaused, infinite and simple entities. For similar reasons the world contains transcendent entities as well, since the property 'being immanent' is not universal either. It goes on and on. There are entities in the world that are not good, since the property 'being good' also is not universal. And this corollary gives us at least some insight in to why there are entities in the world that are not good.

I'll stop here. The implications can be multiplied easily. In fact, if we deduce all consequences from this single formula, namely that there are no universal properties, we get back the whole world as we traditionally (have used to) know it. This single formula thus has the potential to become a comprehensive theory of everything. In the movie *The Theory of Everything* from 2014 cosmologist Stephen Hawking dreams of a single formula that is able to describe the whole of nature. He has been desperately looking for it his whole life, and never found it.

Perhaps the reason for this is that the desired formula is not a formula within cosmology or physics. It's a formula within *meta*physics, namely the thesis that reality as such is so diverse, so heterogeneous, that there are no universal properties. *That's* the reason we find so many opposites in nature, as Aristotle noticed. And that's the reason why these opposites in reality are in fact inevitable, as Spinoza stated after him. The ultimate principle of reality, the *arche*, the ultimate final truth about the world is *freedom*. Reality does not let itself be restricted or corseted by even a single universal property. The *origin* of the world is freedom. Free at last.