Platonism’s Reference Problem

Abstract

This paper argues that platonism, defined as the view that there are abundant, non-causal abstract objects, is inconsistent with our ability to refer to abstract objects and that, consequently, it should be rejected. In the first half I argue that, given platonism, there are no definite descriptions by which one could establish reference to abstract objects. In the second half I examine and reject two attempts to accept this failure of definite descriptions without rejecting platonism—the supervaluational view according to which we say many true things about abstract objects without determinately referring to them, and Lewis’ reference magnetism view according to which we refer by a combination of indefinite descriptions and eligibility of referents.

The Problem

Part of what makes abstract objects mysterious is that, despite our being committed to them, there are not many definitive things we can say about them. To the extent that people do have theories as to the nature of these objects, there is a strong contingent of philosophers that believe these objects to be abundant, non-spatial, and non-causal things existing “up in Plato’s heaven.” In this paper I want to challenge this picture of abstract objects by showing that it would make reference to abstract objects impossible.

Roughly and intuitively, a theory of abstract objects is abundant if it says at least one category of abstract objects is maximally filled (with a few exceptions for paradoxes). For instance, a theory of sets is abundant if for any group of objects, if no paradox follows from there being a set of those objects, there is a set of those objects. A theory of possible worlds is abundant if for any way the world could be, if no paradox follows from there being a possible world that is that way, there is such a possible world. Similar things could be said for numbers, properties, propositions, relations, states of affairs, or any other category of abstract objects. The difficult part is obviously stating the paradox-avoidance clause in a more precise way—a difficulty I am not prepared to resolve at the moment. I thus will instead offer the following as a sufficient statement of abundance for properties, as I think those will be the easiest abstract objects to work with in this paper, but it should be fairly straightforward both how to define similar statements of abundance for other categories, and how the same reference problem would hold for each particular abundant theory.

Abundance If P(x) is a meaningful, precisely defined predicate chosen at random from among all such predicates, the probability that “there exists a property of being an x such that P(x)” if false is vanishingly small.
Non-Causality  It is never the case that there is an abstract object which stands in a causal relation to anything.

While not the only way the term has been used, I will use platonism as the thesis that Abundance and Non-Causality are true.\(^1\)

The argument of this paper is that, were platonism true, we would not be able to refer to any abstract objects, and that, since we have as much reason to believe that we refer to abstract objects as we do to believe that there are abstract objects, we should not believe in platonism. Thus, I claim that those who believe in abstract objects should reject Abundance, Non-Causality, or both. To set this up formally, I want to show the following argument is a reductio for platonism (premise 1 below):

(1) Abundance and Non-Causality.

(2) There is (at least) one abstract object to which I am able to determinately refer.

(3) For any object, if someone is now able to refer to it, then there is a person and a time such that at that time, that person establishes reference to that object.

(4) For any person, object, and time, if the person establishes reference to that object at that time, then either she stands in a causal relation to that object at that time, or she is able to pick out that object by definite description at that time.

(5) For any person, object, and time, if the object is abstract and the person is able to refer to it, then there is a person and a time such that the person is able to pick out the object by definite description at that time. (from (1), (3), and (4))

(6) There are abundant abstract objects, some of which we are able to refer to, and for each one we are able to refer to there is (or was) a person at some time who is able to pick it out by definite description. (from (1), (2), and (5))

In the first half of the paper I will show that (6) is false. I will do this by looking at five ways one might attempt to refer to abundant abstract objects by definite description and showing that they all fail.\(^2\) If (6) is false, it follows that at least one of (1)-(4) is false. I believe

---

\(^1\)I find the word “platonism” is most often used for this type of view in metaphysics, philosophy of math, and philosophy of language. In the introduction to Abstract Entities Sam Cowling writes, “A quick glance at contemporary work on these topics shows the apparatus of propositions and properties to be almost universally assumed in most investigations of justification, knowledge, value, rationality, and other issues.” (Cowling 2017) While it is less common to use the term “platonism” in these contexts, I suspect many or most of the views do in fact assume Abundance and Non-Causality as they assume there is an abstract object to fit any situation they have and that the object is not part of what makes up the world (and thus is not causal), though there are obviously exceptions. Despite this ubiquity, sustained defenses of this view are fairly rare, with the two most-developed ones coming from David Lewis’ and Peter van Inwagen’s theories of properties. (Lewis 1986; van Inwagen 2004) I thus focus on those in this paper, but it should be fairly easy to see how the reference problem applies more generally.

\(^2\)The argument that we cannot refer to abstract objects seems to trace its modern history to Benacerraf 1973. In that article, Benacerraf suggests two problems for abstract objects: the problem of how we refer to them, and the problem of how we know about them. Since then, almost all discussion has focused on the knowledge problem, leaving the reference problem substantially underdeveloped.
premise (3) is uncontroversial, as all it is doing is allowing me to ignore cases of reference transfer and instead focus on cases of establishing reference. Unless one thinks reference to abstract objects has been transferred from person to person from eternity past, this premise should be acceptable. I further think premises (2) and (4) are both plausible, from which it would follow that premise (1) is the one to deny.

Premise (2) is initially plausible because whatever reasons one has for believing there are abstract objects can easily be transformed into reasons for believing (2). For instance, if one followed van Inwagen in believing in abstract objects because they are implied by a great number of things we ordinarily believe (e.g. “there are anatomical features spiders and insects have in common,” “the royal armorer has created a new type of steel which has some but not all the characteristics of Damascus steel”), then one should accept (2) because it is also implied by a great number of things we ordinarily believe (e.g. “red is my favorite color,” “1+1=2”).

Premise (4) is initially plausible because establishing reference to a thing requires singling it out. If I say “let the tree in Montana be named ‘Alice’,” the name “Alice” will not be a name of anything, because there are way too many things fitting that description—it is a failed attempt at naming. If naming is to succeed, we have to be able to pick out the object to be named and (4) is giving the two ways we can do this.

Despite their initial plausibility, there are well-developed ways people have attempted to reject (2) and (4). In the second half of the paper, I will examine these rejections and show that they are ultimately unsuccessful. Given the prima facie case for (2) and (4), and the failure of their alternatives, I think one should ultimately conclude that they are true. If this is the case, then my central thesis follows: if one accepts that there are abstract objects, then one should deny Abundance or Non-Causality.

I turn first to attempts to accept (6)—attempts to refer to abstract objects by definite description.

**Referring by Definite Description**

**Solution 1: Descriptions Which Depend on Abstracta**

Suppose we were trying to establish reference to abstracta and we started with the following two examples: let “2” refer to the thing that is the successor of 1; let “red” refer to the property that is the complementary color of <is cyan>. Suppose we add that all reference to abstract objects will be by descriptions of this kind; it follows quite easily that this will fail to give us reference to abstracta.

The key is what is meant by “descriptions of this kind.” What I mean to distinguish is descriptions which either tacitly or explicitly refer to abstract objects within the description from those which do not. The two descriptions just given obviously fall into the former category since they refer to 1 and <is cyan> respectively. Call this the category of nominally unacceptable descriptions. These can be contrasted with descriptions like “the the

---

3I adopt the convention of using <is x> to refer to the property, if there is one, expressed by the predicate “x.” Of course, several properties such as <is red> are also commonly referred to by other names such as “redness,” but such canonical names do not always exist, so I find it easier to use the bracket notation.
thing that is even and prime” or “the property had by this car and that rose,” which plausibly do not refer to any abstract objects within the description. Call this second category the nominalistically acceptable descriptions. My claim is that nominalistically unacceptable descriptions are inadequate in a particular way. Specifically, they are inadequate because they do not allow us to move from not being able to refer to abstract objects, to being able to refer to them.

There was a time in the past (say a few seconds after the big bang) at which no human nor human ancestor was able to refer to abstract objects. Since we are now able to refer to them, any adequate theory of abstract reference must make it possible for us to move from not being able to refer to abstract objects to being able to refer, and it is precisely this requirement that nominalistically unacceptable descriptions cannot meet. Consider the two descriptions given above. Were nominalism true, they would be equivalent to “the thing that is the successor of ___” and “the property that is the complementary color of ___..” Obviously these are not definite descriptions, as they are not even complete descriptions. Nominalistically unacceptable descriptions, by their very definition, would not be meaningful if nominalism were true. Before we established reference to abstract objects, we were in the same linguistic position as the nominalist; hence, any description the nominalist would not be able to give, we would not be able to give prior to first referring to abstract objects. It follows that these descriptions alone would not allow us to refer to abstract objects.

While it is easy to see why “the successor of 1″ is problematic in this way, there are more subtle descriptions which are similarly problematic. One description which may fall into this category would be “the thing which is a natural number and counts the apples on the table.” It is not clear whether or not this is nominalistically acceptable. Whether or not it is depends on what is meant by the predicate “is a natural number.” If the predicate means something like “is a thing used to count discrete objects,” then this is perfectly nominalistically acceptable; however, if the predicate means something like “is one of the members of the series 1, 2, 3, 4, 5,...” then it is nominalistically unacceptable.4 If it is unacceptable, then it could not possibly be expressed by a person who was not yet able to refer to any abstract objects. Thus, this too is unusable to fully solve the reference problem if it is nominalistically unacceptable. Of course, I’m no linguist, and it might have a perfectly nominalistically acceptable meaning, so I will treat it as such going forward. I merely want to flag that any predicates used for nominalistically acceptable descriptions must be such that they are able to be expressed meaningfully by those who are not yet able to refer to abstracta.

Solution 2: Nominalistically Acceptable Descriptions

Nominalistically unacceptable descriptions will not by themselves provide a way to refer to abstract objects because they are only expressible by those who are already able to refer to abstract objects (they may be perfectly useful once we have referred to at least one abstractum). We thus need a definite description which does not depend on abstract objects for its meaningfulness—a nominalistically acceptable definite description. There are two

---

4 Many predicates seem to have this duality of interpretations. Consider, “is a primary color,” which might express “is a color which can be combined with other colors to generate all visible colors” or “is either <is red>, <is blue>, or <is yellow>. “
things this type of description might consist in: nominalistically acceptable predicates, and nouns referring to concrete objects. While these descriptions avoid the problems of Solution 1, they cannot contain enough content to single out a particular abstract object.

To see this, let’s first look at descriptions consisting only of predicates. Suppose we say, “let ‘2’ be the thing that is even and is prime.”\(^5\) We can see that this fails to be a definite description through a problem raised by Benacerraf.\(^6\) Benacerraf famously discussed a case of two children learning all of arithmetic from set theory up; they believe all the same things and can prove all the same theorems, except that they believe the numbers are different objects. The first child thinks that 1, 2, 3, 4,... is identical to ∅, {∅}, {∅, {∅}}, {∅, {∅}, {∅, {∅}}},..., while the other believes that the same numbers are in fact identical to ∅, {∅}, {{∅}}, {{{∅}}},..... The point is that both of these progressions (and infinitely many more) are consistent with all the axioms and all the derivable theorems of arithmetic. Nothing we can say mathematically will favor one progression of sets over the other, nor do any non-mathematical properties favor one over the other. But, if this is the case, then both {∅, {∅}} and {{{∅}}} have equal claim to being “the thing that is even, and is prime,” from which it follows that this description is not definite.\(^7\)

This problem is not limited to mathematical objects but extends just as easily to properties, possible worlds, and any other abstract objects (again assuming Abundance). For an easy example, how could we describe the color property <is red>? It is difficult to think of things to say other than logical descriptions such as “is self-identical,” which obviously does not single out anything. Perhaps we could describe it as “the thing that is a primary color,” but not only will this not distinguish it from <is blue> and <is yellow>, it also does not distinguish it from various gerrymandered properties like <is red and such that 1+1=2>, <is red and spatiotemporally connected to me>, or <is red and round, or red and not round>. Abundance guarantees that there are always multiple abstracta fitting any description of this kind.

The other linguistic category available for the nominalistically acceptable description is words referring to concrete objects. Suppose to pick out the number 2 we pointed to different pairs of objects and described it as the thing had in common by each pair, or to pick out <is red> we described it as “the thing had in common by this rose and that car.”\(^8\) Of course, multiple properties will be had in common by the various pairs or by the rose and the car, but the hope is that these other properties will drop away as we introduce more objects. For

---

\(^5\)Here I am assuming that “even” and “prime” can be defined in some pre-mathematical way. E.g. “a term is even if the things it counts could be partnered up with each thing having exactly 1 partner.” If one instead is using the terms in a mathematically robust way, such as “a number is even if and only if it is divisible by 2”, then obviously this will cease to be a nominalistically acceptable description.

\(^6\)Benacerraf 1965

\(^7\)It should become clear here why it was important to rule out the nominalistically unacceptable predicates above. If we could use those predicates, then we could have a definite description of the form “the thing that is even, is prime, and is a member of the von Neumann ordinals,” which would be a definite description of {∅, {∅}}. While this would be definite, it is also obviously cheating when it comes to the reference problem. We were only able to refer to {∅, {∅}} because one of the predicates in the description already referred to a series of abstract objects of which it was a part—it is borrowing reference from something that already refers to abstracta, and without this, it would be indefinite.

\(^8\)This is plausibly the view of Saul Kripke (see Kripke 1972, p. 136) and Stuart Shapiro (see Shapiro 2011, p. 115)
instance, “the thing had in common by this rose and that car” could refer to <is red> or <is smaller than Mt. Everest>, but we could rule out the latter with the description “the thing had in common by this rose, that car, and Mars.” While including more objects on the list limits the properties they all have in common, Abundance guarantees that it will never get to the point where there is only one property shared by a group of objects. The strongest description we could give of this kind would be “the thing had in common by all red objects;” however, even this description will still be indeterminate between <is red>, <is red and such that it is instantiated by Mars>, <is red and round, or red and not round>, <is red and such that 1+1=2>, and infinitely many more. There is thus no amount of objects which will allow us to refer to the only property they have in common.

Since predicates and referring to concrete objects cannot make descriptions definite on their own, it is worth asking whether they might work together to do this. Combining what was said above, one might say that “red” refers to the thing that is a primary color and is had by all red objects. Unfortunately, this is still indefinite between <is red and such that 1+1=2>, <is red and is called “red” in America in possible world α>, etc. Likewise, we could let “2” refer to “the thing that is even, is prime, and is had by all pairs,” but this will again be indefinite between the various things playing the 2-role in different progressions (e.g. {∅, {∅}} or {{∅}}). Given Abundance, there is no nominalistically acceptable description which singles out an abstract object.

Solution 3: Intentional Content

A special instance of the above solution is worth highlighting and discussing in its own section, namely attempts to refer to properties not by the features they have but by the things they represent. While 2 has the property <is even>, it represents “is two in number,” and some have thought that this representational content is the more distinctive feature of the number 2 (I specifically have in mind here the view defended by Bernard Linsky and Edward Zalta). While Solution 2 tried to pick out properties by their extension, Solution 3 tries to pick them out by their intention.

The intuitive idea behind the solution is that predicates express properties, but predicates are also nominalistically acceptable (in that their meaning does not depend on particular abstract objects); thus, it seems we could say things about the world such as “the blue car is mine,” and subsequently refer to the properties expressed by those predicates with descriptions like “the thing I said of my car when I said it was blue.” In similar ways, we can refer to any abstract object that has representational content (e.g. I can refer to 2 as “the thing I said of the desks when I said there were two of them.”)

Somewhat more formally (though still removing some of Linsky and Zalta’s formalisms), we can state the position as the endorsement of the following theses:

(i) Abundance.

(ii) Abstract objects have their representational character essentially.

(iii) If x represents ϕ and y represents ϕ, then x=y.10

Linsky and Zalta 1995. This also is the view of Peter van Inwagen, personal communication.

ibid., p. 536
Abundance and (ii) allow us to say that for each condition on the world, there is an abstract object that essentially represents that condition; (iii) allows us to add that there is only one such object. These (ii) and (iii) also allow the view to avoid the Benacerraf problem. According to the Benacerraf problem, different sets can “play the 2-role” in different reductions of number theory to set theory, and the same set can play different number roles on different reductions. The former is ruled out by (iii), while the latter is ruled out by (ii). Of course, one could see the case in reverse—that the plausibility of the Benacerraf problem gives us reason to doubt (ii) and (iii)—but I want to grant them for the moment. Thus, the solution avoids the problem faced by Solution 2. Furthermore, since we can refer to an abstract object as the thing that, to use Linsky and Zalta’s terminology, encodes a condition we place on the world, and since we can place those conditions in a nominalistically acceptable way by merely formulating predicates, this view avoids the problem of first establishing reference faced by Solution 1. It thus seems to be a compelling solution to the reference problem.

While I think this solution has several advantages over the first two solutions, it is important to see that it rests on two crucial assumptions about the meaningfulness of predicates and properties. While each assumption can seem individually plausible, I don’t think any view on the relation between predicates and properties is consistent with both assumptions, and thus I do not think this ultimately succeeds as a solution to the reference problem. The first assumption is that predicates can be meaningful even if there are not properties which constitute their meanings. This has been the dominant view in metaphysics ever since Quine encouraged us to avoid reifying “meanings” and instead insisted that we are only committed to objects which fall within the range of an existential quantifier. The importance of this assumption is that, if it were false, it would not be at all clear how we could start formulating predicates if we had not already established reference to abstract objects. If <is blue> was the meaning of “blue”, then my ability to express that an object is blue depends on my ability to single out <is blue> as the property I am expressing; it is no more clear how I could express <is blue> without causal connection or definite description than it is how I could refer to <is blue>, so this does not seemed to have helped the problem in any way. In short, if predicates had abstract objects as their meanings, then using predicates to establish reference would merely be pushing the problem back a step, rather than solving it. Thus, it needs to be assumed for this view that predicates can be meaningful even if there is no object that is their meaning.

The second assumption of the view is that predicates stand in a 1-1 relation to properties in virtue of the meanings of those properties—the relation expressed above as “is the thing I said of”. The idea seems to be that properties represent in an abstract way what predicates represent in a linguistic way, and so we can refer to the property that corresponds to the nominalistically acceptable predicate we use. While I think there are several problems one could raise to this view, I want argue directly that, given Abundance, there could not be any relation that had these two features: holding in virtue of the meaning of properties and being a 1-1 relation between a predicate and a property.

In particular, I claim that, one, Abundance entails that for any property there are co-intentional properties (i.e. necessarily co-extensive properties), and two, any relation which a thing has to a property in virtue of the property’s meaning will relate that thing to any
co-intentional properties there are. From these two claims it obviously follows that whatever this relation is that is being expressed by “is the thing I said of”, that relation does not allow us to single out a unique property, given Abundance. The second claim is merely an expression of the fact that we do not have a notion of meaning that distinguishes among co-intentional objects. Some might suggest that if we can use impossible worlds, then we can be more fine-grained and allow for worlds at which the objects that instantiated <is blue> were not the same objects as those that instantiated <is blue and such that 1+1=2>, and so “blue” might relate to <is blue> but not to <is blue and such that 1+1=2> in virtue of how those properties related to that predicate at that impossible world. While any adequate discussion of impossible worlds is beyond the scope of this paper, here I merely want to point out that there is no reason to think impossible worlds would treat co-intentional properties differently. That is, if there are impossible worlds at which things are “blue” but do not have <is blue and such that 1+1=2>, then there are other impossible worlds at which things are “blue” but do not have <is blue>. Unless there is some pre-existing important relation between “blue” and <is blue> (e.g. one constituting the meaning of the other), impossible worlds will not help us distinguish co-intentional properties. Thus, the presence of co-intentional properties will prevent us from picking out properties based on their meaning.

All that remains is to show that Abundance entails the existence of co-intentional properties, which it does if no contradiction follows from the existence of co-intentional properties. While there is no obvious contradiction from the existence of properties like <is blue> and <is blue and extended>, one could claim that a contradiction followed from some other necessary truth of metaphysics, such as “any two co-intentional properties are identical”; however, any theory which endorsed that claim would carry with it serious costs. For starters, this will not only mean that <is triangular> and <is trilateral> are the same property, but so too are world-indexed properties like <is the 44th President of the U.S. in α> and <is married to Michelle Obama in α> (where α is a name for the actual world). It would be incredibly odd to have a theory of properties in which we could not distinguish properties about Obama’s presidency from properties about his marriage, if those properties were world-indexed. Furthermore, all necessary truths will be true at all possible worlds, which means that <is such that 1+1=2> is the same property as <is such that second-order logic is incomplete> and as <is such that water is H₂O>. Given that we can believe some necessary propositions without believing others, and that interesting entailment relations hold between necessary propositions, we need to be able to distinguish them in order for them to do the theoretical work they are supposed to do. If one were to back off of strict identity for distinct propositions that happen to be true at all worlds, then one would reintroduce distinct necessarily coextensive properties such as <is blue and such that 1+1=2> and <is blue and such that second-order logic is incomplete>; thus, one who accepts Abundance cannot reasonably avoid the existence of co-intentional properties.

To summarize the problems for this solution, if properties constituted the meaning of predicates, then it would be clear how using predicates allowed us to refer to properties but unclear how we managed to use predicates in the first place. On the other hand, if properties do not constitute the meaning of predicates, then it is clear we can use predicates, but unclear how they could be used to pick out a unique property. Either way, this has not given us a way to refer to properties by definite description.
Thus far, we have concluded that we are not able to refer to abstract objects by singling them out by definite description and naming them. Perhaps, however, “singling out” is not what definite descriptions are supposed to do. One might think there are other relationships between definite descriptions and reference to abstract objects, and it is to this possibility that I now turn.

I argued above that the description “the successor of 1” could not be used to pick out the number 2 by someone who was not able to refer to 1, because it would be lacking content. What if it was not trying to use pre-established content to pick out 2, but instead was stating a relational requirement on whatever plays the roles of “1” and “2”? Of course this would not be limited to just “1” and “2”; one could say that the meaning of all of language is determined in this way. The core idea of such a view is that our referential terms refer to whichever objects make the most sentences we believe come out true (perhaps with weighting of certain important sentences), and that this accounts for how our words come to refer to both abstract and concrete objects; call this view *global descriptivism*. On such a view, our use of the descriptions “2 is the successor of 1” and “2 is the number which counts those tables” does not narrow down exactly one candidate for “2,” but instead gives sentences which must come out true on the “correct” or “intended” interpretation of our language. If, by giving enough descriptions of this kind, it came to be the case that there was a unique assignment of abstract objects to names which made these sentences come out true, then this assignment would supply the correct interpretation of our language, and our word “2” would refer to whatever got assigned to “2” on this assignment (hopefully the number 2).

One can think of this project as defining a certain structure among terms and the correct interpretation will be the unique assignment that preserves this structure. Whatever else can be said for or against this general picture of linguistic meaning, it is guaranteed to fail given *Abundance*. This is easiest to see in the mathematical case where we can again consider the Benacerraf problem. No more sentences will come out true or false if we assign the number terms “1,” “2,” “3,” “4,”... to ∅, {∅}, {∅, {∅}}, {∅, {∅}}, {∅, {∅}}, ..., or to ∅, {∅}, {{∅}}, {{∅}}, ... provided the term “successor” is assigned to a relation that holds between those objects in that order. Since *Abundance* guarantees there will be some relation which will hold between adjacent pairs of objects on either list, both will preserve all the same mathematical truths defined in terms of the successor relation, and similarly for any other mathematical properties. Both assignments will also preserve all the same non-mathematical truths, since there will be some relation which holds between {∅, {∅}} and any trio of objects and a different relation that will hold between {{∅}} and any trio of objects, so

---

12There have been and could be various things called “global descriptivism.” The version David Lewis seems to have in mind in Lewis 1984 is one according to which the best model not only assigns meanings to names but also to predicates. While the label has been used in different ways, I think my use of it here is fair. If one thinks otherwise, feel free to label the view I am talking about “global descriptivism*.” For more on the different versions of global descriptivism see Bays 2008, especially footnote 16.

13The problem I am raising in this paragraph is roughly similar to what Lewis called Putnam’s Paradox, but it is more similar what Alexander Bird calls the problem of non-trivial automorphisms (Bird 2007). While Bird argues that there are structures, and even infinite structures, for which this is not a problem, the examples of this paragraph are meant to show that *Abundance* guarantees the structure lends itself to non-trivial automorphisms.
there will be some relation we can fill in for “counts” to preserve the truth of sentences like “3 counts these chairs” (for that matter, we could have a squirrel or anything else assigned to “3” and still preserve the truth of these sentences, but more on this below). If one wanted to hold predicates fixed and merely used the network of sentences to fix the referents of nominals, Abundance would still allow for multiple truth-preserving assignments. For instance, one could assign “3” to $<\text{is 3 and self-identical}>$, “red” to $<\text{is red and self-identical}>$, and by similar method create an assignment which perfectly preserved the truth of our sentences and the relations among terms. Since there will always be more than one truth-preserving assignment of words to objects, there will not be a unique interpretation; if global descriptivism is true, it would follow that our language is meaningless (since our language just means whatever the unique best interpretation says it means). While this problem is different than the previous ones in that it depends on there being too many equally good assignments rather than there being too many candidates for reference, the same abundance problems will prevent it from allowing us to establish reference to abstract objects.

Solution 5: Experiential Content

The last solution supposes that we have some sort of direct, non-causal acquaintance with abstract objects. One way this has been proposed would be through the contents of our perceptual experience. If I have a visual experience whose content includes the proposition $<\text{there is a red ball in front of me}>$, then I gain the ability to form singular thoughts about the ball; why couldn’t I also gain the ability to form singular thoughts about the property $<\text{is red}>$ or the proposition $<\text{there is a red ball in front of me}>$?

The first obvious problem for the position is that I stand in a causal relation to the ball—its surface reflects light which enters my eye and is processed in a certain way—while I do not stand in any causal relation to the proposition or property, so it is easy and seemingly reasonable to treat the ball and the property $<\text{is red}>$ differently. However, since this view is merely standing in as an example of a view on which we have a direct, non-causal acquaintance with abstracta, let’s ignore this problem for now.

The bigger problem for this type of view can be phrased as a dilemma: either my perception of the ball gives me direct, non-causal access to every property the ball has, or to only some of the properties the ball has. Suppose it gives me access to every property the ball has. It then follows from Abundance that this gives direct access to infinitely many properties. This seems strange, but more than that, I don’t see how this could possibly help me refer to an abstract object. For an analogy, suppose someone thought that I have direct access to every atom with which I causally interact. This means I have direct access to, and should be able to form singular thoughts about, every atom in my visual field. Does it follow that I can pick out any particular atom that I want? Of course not—I would need some way of singling out the one atom I wanted to refer to from all the others; otherwise the mere fact that there is a causal connection between me and the atoms does not help me refer to them. Similarly, if I am going to refer to one of the infinitely many properties the ball has, I will need to be able to single it out and refer to it. This reduces the “direct access” solution to a version of Solution 2—I am trying to describe a property and part of my description is that it is had by a particular concrete object, the ball. This description was not definite before,
nor is it now. Since this view would give us access to infinitely many abstract objects, the
direct access hasn’t improved the situation.

On the other hand, one might think that my perception only gives me direct access to
some of the properties the ball has. If we were able to use perception to narrow down the
candidate properties, it is reasonable to think we could pick out one property from among
this smaller field. But, there does not seem to be any reasonable standard which would
distinguish properties I perceive from properties I don’t. A natural thought might be to
appeal to causality; it is <is red>, not <is red and such that 1+1=2> that causes me to
perceive the ball as red. The problem is that this obviously violates our Non-Causality
hypothesis. One might then try to respond that the ball, not the property, causes my
perception, but it is in virtue of the ball instantiating <is red> that I perceive it as red, so
I have some sort of special access to <is red>. While this may be the case, it returns to the
same dilemma we were trying to escape: either, for every property <is X> which the ball
has, we perceive it as X in virtue of its instantiating <is X> (e.g. we perceive it as being
red and such that 1+1=2 in virtue of the fact that it instantiates <is red and such that
1+1=2>), or we only perceive it as some of the ways it is. On the former, we again have the
same direct access to every property the ball has, so we are again faced with the problem of
sorting among them. On the latter, we are again in need of an explanation of why we see
the ball as X in virtue of its having <is X>, but not as Y in virtue of its instantiating <is
Y>—an explanation which causation is obviously not helping. One could try to appeal to a
way my mind is involved (e.g. I care more about the property <is red> than <is red and
such that 1+1=2>, so I perceive it as red but not as red and such that 1+1=2), but this will
only work if I am able to care more about some features than others (even if unconsciously);
this of course requires that I am able to single out these various features in order to care
more about them, which of course just reintroduces the original problem. Obviously far
more details could be spelled out for a particular theory, but I will skip trying to spell them
out because there does not appear to be any way for some form of direct access to help us
refer to abstracta.

**Solving the Problem**

In the previous section I tried to show that

(6) There are abundant abstract objects, some of which we can refer to, and for each one
we can refer to there is (was) a person at some time who is able to pick it out by definite
description.

is false. What I in fact showed was five failed attempts to refer to abstract objects by
definite description. Ideally I could show that those attempts were exhaustive of the ways
one could try to refer to abstracta through definite descriptions, and my proof would be
complete. Unfortunately, I cannot do that since they are not exhaustive, particularly of the
alternative ways one might try to connect descriptions to abstracta (e.g. solutions 4-5). One
can always come up with slight variations or combinations of views to formulate a view I
did not specifically address. However, I believe that these solutions are representative of
the views one could take (and of the views taken in the literature), and that the problems I
raised are easily extended to the various other views one could formulate. I thus think it is reasonable to conclude that (6) is false.

Since there was a valid argument leading to (6), it follows that at least one of the premises of that argument is false. Recall that I claim that (1) is the premise to be rejected, so what remains to be shown is that (2) and (4) are in fact true. I gave initial arguments for these propositions earlier, so in particular I want to now look at more complex, sustained defenses of their denials to see if these are tenable.

**Supervaluational Plenitudes**

One way to respond to the reference problem is to deny that it is a problem at all by simply denying that we determinately refer to abstract objects (i.e. deny premise (2)). The prima facie argument I gave for reference is that we believe a lot of propositions which seem to refer to abstract objects, so denying that we can refer to abstracta would seem to imply that all those propositions are false. Thus, the key to a solution which denies reference is to show that the consequences are not all that bad—that it does not require us to deny a majority of things we otherwise would believe.

While not necessarily the only way to do this, the most straightforward view of this kind follows the general picture given in Solution 4, that words mean whatever makes the majority of sentences we utter come out true (so “2 is the successor of 1” and “3 is the successor of 2” are just serving to create a network of claims which any adequate linguistic interpretation will make true). The problem for Solution 4 is that, for abstract objects, there is always more than one interpretation which will preserve the truth of all the sentences we want to preserve. What the present solution adds is that we can still consider these sentences true (in a supervaluationist sense) even though there aren’t any particular things that nominals in these sentences refer to. That is, since on every admissible interpretation of language “red is my favorite color” and “there are 8 planets” come out true, they are true in a supervaluational sense (the same sense in which “Harry is bald” is true because it is true for all precisifications of “bald”). There is some difficulty here since we want to leave room for some sentences being false—obviously people make false claims—so priority will need to be given to axioms and definitional sentences, but it is imaginable that there is some way of working this out. This view has only been explicitly defended for mathematical entities, but it is not hard to imagine its extension to properties or other kinds of abstracta.

While this view obviously faces the standard objections for supervaluationism, I want to add that it also faces a version of Newman’s objection to structural realism, namely, if this view is right, any domain of sufficient size will make all our sentences about abstract objects come out true, and will do so in many different ways. That is, the most these sentences

---

14 A different way to formulate a theory that denied definite reference would be to follow Solution 3 in terms of using predicates to refer to properties, but then conceding that our (nominalistically acceptable) predicates are indeterminate between several candidate precise properties that they could express. This way of framing the response will face the same problem as the global descriptivist way, namely, that we are not able to put any limit on the candidates to be expressed by a given predicate, so, for all we know, Julius Caesar and many other concrete objects are candidates.

15 Defenders of this view in math include David Lewis (see Lewis 1993), Michael Resnik (see Resnik 1981), and Mark Balaguer (see Balaguer 1995; Balaguer 1998; Balaguer 1999)
are doing is defining a complex structure our “abstract objects” need to satisfy, but given
enough concrete objects (say countably many) and an Abundance of relations between them,
all our sentences about abstract objects will be satisfied by merely concrete objects. There
are or could be eligible, truth-preserving interpretations of our language in which I am the
property <is spherical> and Socrates is the number 4. This is both absurd in itself, and it
has the further consequence that the only reason to posit abstract objects is for cardinality
reasons, which is incredibly strange.

So why do I think it has this bizarre consequence? I will argue in two steps. First, I claim
that any view of this kind will need to be supervaluational over both nominals and predicates.
There is some ambiguity in how the view is stated, but one might think that, contrary to
the way Lewis stated the view, one could claim that our abstract object nominals like “1’
and “the property of being spherical” have multiple candidate meanings which we must be
supervaluational over, but that logical terms like “not” and predicates like “is round” were
perfectly definite. Since we are only trying to solve a problem of referring to abstract objects,
we could then use these other words which had definite meanings in order to help us refer.
While it is true that the only problem we are worried about at the moment is how abstract
nominal terms refer, if one wants abstract objects to help us understand, discuss, or model
the world in any way, then one will have to be supervaluational over predicates as well.

Define a bridge principle as a statement that connects a predicate to an abstract object
such as “if 2.6 measures the amount of paint we need in liters, then we need 2.6 liters of
paint” or “if <having a full valence shell> is true of an argon molecule, then that argon
molecule has a full valence shell.” If we want to apply abstract objects to problems in the
real world, then we have to accept bridge principles likes these. The success of applied math
thus seems to explicitly depend on these bridge principles, which makes them incredibly hard
to deny. But, if one accepts a bridge principle connecting a nominal to a predicate, and that
nominal is indeterminate between several different objects, then it follows that the predicate
is indeterminate over many different meanings. Proof:

Suppose there are abstract objects A₁, A₂, a nominal N, a true bridge principle
“x has N iff P(x)” and that there are admissible assignments which assign N to
refer to A₁ and admissible assignments which assign N to A₂. Then there could
be predicates P₁ and P₂ such that P₁≠P₂ and “x has A₁ iff P₁(x)” and “x has
A₂ iff P₂(x)” are both true. If so then P(x) is neither determinately identical nor
determinately non-identical to P₁(x) or P₂(x).

That is, assuming that there could be predicates which perfectly express the different abstract
objects, then a predicate connected to an indeterminate nominal will itself be indeterminate.
The claim on predicates is quite weak since it doesn’t claim their existence but merely the
possibility of their existence, so it seems plausible. But, if this is true, our predicates will be
as indeterminate in meaning as the nominals are. This is not particularly surprising if one
is familiar with vagueness debates in which it is largely assumed that many predicates are
indeterminate in meaning; the current point merely extends this to almost all predicates.
Importantly though, if the predicates are indeterminate in meaning, then the sentence “4 is
the successor of 3” will only be true if it is is true on all admissible interpretations of “4”,
“3”, and “is the successor of.”
Given that one is supervaluational over both predicates and nominals, any attempt to limit the range of eligible candidates to play various roles will be an ungrounded regress. Consider for instance that there are infinitely many progressions structurally isomorphic to the natural numbers in which the first member is \( \emptyset \), the second member is the Eiffel Tower, and the third member is Julius Caesar. We would like to rule these out as not admissible natural number progressions, because if they were, Julius Caesar would be the number 2 on some precisifications of “2.” Balaguer, one of the main defenders of this view for mathematical objects, is aware of this problem and says that we have a “full conception of natural numbers” and that only progressions meeting this full conception are eligible candidates for supervaluation.\(^{16}\) One might think that, for instance, part of the full conception of natural numbers includes that they are not partially composed of carbon, so we can safely conclude that Julius Caesar is not the number 2; however, the problem with this type of solution is that, given the above thesis, any attempt to specify the full conception of natural numbers must be done using terms which are themselves indefinite. While we can specify that the object assigned to “2” will fall within the range of the meaning assigned to “non-carbon-based,” this will only exclude Caesar from the “2” role if it also excludes predicates true of Caesar from the “non-carbon-based” role. Since we know we must be supervaluational over potential things expressed by “non-carbon-based,” how could we possibly know that none of them applied to Caesar? The only way we could know this, is if we could limit the admissible candidates for “non-carbon-based,” but what could be used to limit these candidates except another predicate or nominal referring to an abstract object? The regress here should be obvious—there are no ways to specify a definite range of admissible candidates for “2.”\(^{17}\)

Given that all our abstract object nominals are indeterminate between referring to many different objects, and that there is no way to specify the limit of what is and is not admissible as a referent of one of those nominals, what follows? One way to respond would be to say that there are no limits; absolutely anything (the Eiffel tower, Julius Caesar, this desk, etc.) can play the role of the number “2.” This seems obviously absurd. Surely we know enough about numbers and properties to know that no concrete object could ever be them. The tree outside my house, whatever its admirable qualities, could not play the role of \(<\text{is a squirrel}>\). Additionally, if this were the case, then the only reason we would need to posit abstract objects at all is to make sure there are enough objects to make our sentences true. Imagine Smith has just presented an argument for abstract objects from the fact that there are anatomical features that spiders and insects have in common and that the only

\(^{16}\)Balaguer 1999, p. 77

\(^{17}\)One might think that a distinction between object language and meta-language would be helpful here, but I do not think it is. If one could specify from a meta-language how our language determined admissible candidates for “2” or “non-carbon-based,” then this would address the current argument, but there simply do not seem to be any good ways to fill in an answer here. For instance, we can say from the meta-language that certain sentences must come out true in the object language, but this does not rule out Julius Caesar from making them true. Or, we can say from the meta-language that the totality of human linguistic use in certain circumstances gives meaning to words, but this does not specify what can or cannot be the referent of various nouns. We could say that words should explain behavior in certain ways, but if Julius Caesar is the number 2, then the fact that the number of tables in the next room is Julius Caesar explains the fact that we think there is enough room for Amy and Bri to take an exam in that room (since of course, the number of students needing to take the exam is Julius Caesar, the same as the number of tables). As far as I can tell, meta-language moves seem to be a non-starter in solving this problem.
thing features could be is abstract objects, and Jones responds, “but don’t you see Smith, substantivalism about space-time points is true, as is mereological universalism; there are in fact enough space-time points to play all the roles you have for abstracta, so we do not in fact need to posit abstract objects at all!” Smith’s argument said nothing of the number of objects, and yet, if the no-limits view of abstract object nominals is correct, then all that is required for our sentences about numbers and properties to be true is for there to be enough objects and relations to satisfy them, so Jones’ response was completely applicable. Our arguments regarding abstract objects have nothing to do with parallel universes; it would be incredibly weird if a later scientific discovery of enough parallel universes to meet cardinality demands falsified the claim that there were abstracta. I thus find this view highly untenable.

The only alternative, given the two claims defended above, is to say that there are in fact limits on what can be the referents of our abstract object nominals, but that we cannot possibly assert what those limits are (from which it would seem to follow that we cannot know what those limits are). However, this seems hardly better. It remains the case that, for all we can specify, Caesar could be the number “2.” Likewise, for all we can specify, Jones’ response that there are enough concrete objects to make our sentences true is a good response to any argument for abstract objects. This position, while better than the previous one, seems likewise untenable.

Reference Magnetism

One last way to defend platonism is to deny that the only ways to establish reference to something are by causal connection or definite description (i.e. to deny premise (4)). The only alternative to these options of which I am aware comes from David Lewis and is usually referred to as “reference magnetism.”18 The central claim of reference magnetism is that reference is determined by a combination of indefinite descriptions and the inherent eligibility of certain things to be referred to. There is a strong tendency for our words to refer to highly natural objects and properties, so in any instance of referential indeterminacy, we in fact refer to the most natural (or joint-carving) of the potential referents.

It is one thing to say that the referents are involved in establishing reference, but far more complicated is stating how they get involved. The theory’s name is perhaps misleading in making it seem like the referents are involved in some sort of causal way, which would obviously be inconsistent with our assumption of Non-Causality, but this is not what Lewis has in mind (Lewis himself having never used the term “reference magnetism”), nor is the theory a psychological claim about what we as humans are disposed to refer to. Rather, reference magnetism is best viewed as a claim about how language works. Lewis compares his background view of language to that of a regularity view of laws of nature.19 Just as in a regularity view, something is a law if and only if it is a law in our best theory, so too, according to Lewis’s view of language, having a semantic property amounts to having that semantic property in our best theory, or as Lewis puts it, “contenthood just consists in getting assigned by a high-scoring interpretation.”20 There is nothing more to word W

18Lewis 1983; Lewis 1984
19Lewis 1983, p. 377
20ibid., p. 377. This interpretation of Lewis is heavily influenced by J.R.G. Williams. For his full exegesis and critique of Lewis see Williams 2007
having meaning X than W meaning X within the best semantic theory—the theory which best explains the totality of human linguistic use.

Reference magnetism is the conjunction of this view of language, with the claim that part of what makes a theory best is the naturalness of the referents it assigns to words. If theories which assign relatively natural abstract and concrete objects to the meanings of our words are always better *mutatis mutandis* than theories which assign relatively unnatural objects to our words, and if the meaning of our words is determined by which theory is best, then our words will strongly tend to refer to relatively natural abstract and concrete objects. Because naturalness of referents is only a virtue of a theory and not a guarantee of a theory, we are still able to refer to relatively unnatural things (such as trout-turkeys or the property <is grue>), but there is a strong tendency for our words to refer to more natural things.

There are plenty of foundational worries one could raise against Lewis’s view of language. Granting these foundational issues for the moment, we can ask the more focused question of why one should think that naturalness of referents is a theoretical virtue? The reason Lewis explicitly gives is that he believes it is the only viable solution to Putnam’s paradox (since he does not think causal solutions or accepting the conclusion of the paradox are viable options). Absent independent reasons, it would seem a bit *ad hoc* to posit a never before discovered theoretical virtue merely to solve a paradox (or perhaps a few paradoxes if we include the Kripkenstein paradox). However, we are not entirely without independent reasons. Ted Sider and J.R.G. Williams have both offered independent arguments for the naturalness of referents being a theoretical virtue. While these arguments are complex, interesting, and worthy of attention, I propose bypassing them here and simply granting Lewis his point—naturalness of referents *is* a virtue of a theory (though obviously this is one more point where someone could get reject the theory). Granting this point, we can turn to the more relevant question for this paper, namely does this allow us to establish reference to abstract objects by means of this combination of indefinite descriptions and reference magnetism? I will argue it does not, because it falls prey to the problem of isomorphisms.

It has been noted elsewhere that even if we assume reference magnetism, there is no guarantee that our words are referential. Suppose there are two semantic theories $T_1$ and $T_2$ which are such that, one, they explain all the same data (e.g. the same sentences come out true), two, they have all the same semantic values (e.g. the same objects are referred to in each theory), but three, individual words have different semantic values in the two theories—call such theories isomorphic. Since reference magnetism depends on the claim that our words mean whatever they mean in our best semantic theory, if there were two isomorphic theories competing to be the best, there would be no best semantic theory, and our words would be meaningless. Thus, the possibility of isomorphic semantic theories

---

21I myself do not share the Humean assumptions that underlie this view. I think our scientific theories describe the causal powers that things have independent of our theories, and I likewise think semantics describes the meanings that words have independent of our theories. In more technical terms, I think productivist meta-semantics are better than interpretationist meta-semantics (for a discussion of these two theories see Simchen 2015). To the extent one shares this intuition, one should think that reference magnetism is a non-starter for referring to abstracta. For objects to affect the meaning of a word in a non-Humean metasemantics, the object must be causally effective, which would make reference magnetism violate the *Non-Causality* requirement of platonism.

22Sider 2011; Williams 2007

23Hawthorne 2007; Williams 2007
is a very serious problem for reference magnetism—and we know they are possible. For the simplest example, suppose the universe were perfectly symmetrical so that for any occurrence on or around Earth, there was a duplicate occurrence on or around twin-Earth (the planet on the other side of the universe). Were the universe this way, then there would be two isomorphic “best” theories which explained all human linguistic use, the traditional way we think of in which our word “Obama” refers to Obama and twin-Earth’s homophonic word “Obama” refers to Obama’s counterpart, and the isomorphic theory in which our word “Obama” refers to Obama’s counterpart and twin-Earth’s word “Obama” refers to Obama. Obviously the eligibility of referents cannot favor one of these theories over the other, because they share the same referents. Thus, these seem to be equally good semantic theories, from which it follows that, were the universe this way, there would be no best theory.

This only shows a possibility of failure for reference magnetism, but still the possibility is worrisome. Rather than discuss exactly how worrisome it should be, I propose to strengthen the theory of reference magnetism in a way proposed by Sider. Specifically, though for slightly different concerns, Sider proposes adding a requirement of “counterfactual robustness” to the theory—the best theory “must make sentences which would be believed in certain counterfactual circumstances come out true in those circumstances.” Call the revised theory which adds in this requirement on the best semantic theory “reference magnetism+.” According to reference magnetism+, the best semantic theory is one which maximizes naturalness of referents while explaining not just the actual data of human linguistic use, but would also do the best job of explaining human linguistic use in the nearest counterfactual situations. The symmetric universe fails at just this point, because in the vast majority of counterfactual situations, Obama and his twin-Earth counterpart will do different things, and in those scenarios the theory in which “Obama” refers to Obama will quickly become explanatorily better than its rival. Symmetric universes rest on a very precise coordination in order to make both semantic theories equally good at explaining human linguistic use, so the theories are not counterfactually robust.

What would be needed for reference magnetism+ to fail to imply a best semantic theory is for there to be two semantic theories with the same set of semantic values which explain all the same human linguistic use and which would still explain all the same linguistic use in close counterfactual situations. If that situation obtained, then both reference magnetism and reference magnetism+ would fail to give us a unique best semantic theory, and thereby would fail to give definite semantic properties to words. Abstract objects create just such a situation.

This is easy to see in a number of cases. First, consider a theory in which 1, 2, 3, 4,... are defined to be the sets ∅, {∅}, {{∅}}, {{{∅}}},.... and another theory in which they are defined to be ∅, {{∅}}, {∅}, {{{∅}}},...., these will obviously be isomorphic theories since they refer to all the same sets and and explain all the same human linguistic use, even in counterfactual situations. Second, consider necessarily coextensive properties. If we can refer to both <is red> and <is red and self identical>, then they could be flipped so that “is red” referred to <is red and self identical> and “is red and self identical” referred to <is red>, and this would not affect the explanatory power of the theory or the naturalness of the referents. A third example exists if we can refer to equally natural, symmetric properties.

\[^{24}\text{Sider 2011, p. 32}\]
Given current science, it is quite conceivable that our fundamental theory of reality will involve bivalent on/off-type properties such as <having unit negative charge> and <having unit positive charge>, or <has up-spin> and <has down-spin>, but if it does, then we can again get isomorphic theories which switch which one is referred to in any given context. All these examples involve the simple flipping of two referents, but it is also quite imaginable (though more difficult to describe) that there are more complex permutations which preserve truth and refer to the same things, but which drastically switch which words refer to which things. Since the rules regarding how the semantic values of words combine to give the semantic value of the sentence will be the same for all theories, the truth and falsity of all the same sentences guarantees that these various permutations do not affect the simplicity or explanatory power of a semantic theory. There is thus a vast multiplicity of isomorphic semantic theories referring to abstract objects which will all have equal claim to being the best semantic theory.

It is reasonable to conclude from the above examples that even with naturalness of referents being a theoretical virtue, there is no uniquely best semantic theory which refers to abstract objects. Given the assumption that our words mean whatever our best semantic theory says they mean, it follows that our words don’t have definite meaning. It may be tempting here to respond, as Lewis himself responded in the mathematical case, by saying that the fact that there are equally good semantic theories does not matter, since all the same sentences come out true in each theory. While it is true that this would mean words do not have definite semantic properties, we could still know to be true all the same sentences about abstract objects, and this is all we really wanted in the first place. However, this response simply returns to the supervaluationism of the previous section, which is to concede that reference magnetism itself has not given us a solution to the reference problem. I thus do not think reference magnetism provides a viable alternative to premise (4)—establishing reference (at least to abstract objects), if it occurs, occurs by causal connection or definite description.

Is All Reference in Trouble?

At this point I have defended, at least against their major alternatives, the two most controversial theses of my argument. If they are true, and if the various failed attempts at reference show that one cannot refer to abstracta given Abundance and Non-Causality, it follows that platonism is false. If one wants to believe in abstracta, one should give up either Abundance or Non-Causality or, in my opinion, both. One way to do this would be to accept a constituent ontology which posits abstract objects as parts of the world (such views include trope theories, bundle theories, and immanent universals). For those who, like me, prefer relational to constituent ontologies (so prefer to say that abstract objects are not in the world but merely stand in important relations to things in the world), it is far more difficult to find views that deny Abundance or Non-Causality. It is perhaps noteworthy that Plato’s theory of forms would not be a version of platonism since he posited a causal connection between ourselves and the forms in order to explain our knowledge of them. More recent relational ontologies which would allow for a causal connection would include Amie Thomasson’s view that we create fictional characters and Penelope Maddy’s early views according to which we

---

25Lewis 1993, p. 15
perceive sets. Obviously much more can and should be said regarding such views, but for now I think these illustrate that there is at least logical space for a solution to this problem as long as one is willing to give up at least one of the two assumptions attacked in this paper.

One last response to my argument which I want to consider is a Moorean response which says that, obviously my claims about reference must be wrong because they would imply that we could never refer to anything. For instance, one might be inspired by Quine’s “gavagai” argument to claim that the problem raised here equally proves that we can never refer to a rabbit (as opposed to an undetached rabbit part, a one-second rabbit stage, or some other object in the area of the rabbit). The fact that we can refer to rabbits is more certain than any of the claims of my argument, so there must be a problem with something I have said.

While I agree that I would reject my argument if it implied we could never refer to rabbits, I simply don’t think it carries that implication. The fact that there are problems referring to abundant, non-causal things does not imply that we cannot refer to sparse, causal things like rabbits. At worst, my argument might imply that we could not refer to rabbits if the doctrine of arbitrary undetached parts or universal composition were true, because they create situations similar to Abundance (though this is far from clear, since one still might stand in interesting causal relations to a rabbit which could secure reference). However, if this is the case, then so much the worse for those metaphysical theories. The Moorean fact is only that we can refer to things, not that we can refer to things and that these other metaphysical theories are true. Unless one had an extremely compelling argument for one of these theories, and an argument that reference to rabbits couldn’t occur causally or by some other means, then I simply don’t think the Moorean response exempts the platonist from having to deal with my argument.

References


26Thomasson 2003; Maddy 1990