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Author(s): E. J. Lowe

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The problem of the many and the vagueness of constitution

E. J. LOWE

In a recent paper ([2]), David Lewis has raised again P. T. Geach's paradox of the 1,001 cats as an example of what he calls, following Peter Unger, the 'problem of the many'. In the course of arguing for his own solution to the paradox, Lewis dismisses a solution which I defended some years ago in the pages of *Analysis* ([3], [4] and [5]; see also [6], pp. 68–77). Here I want to indicate why I think that Lewis's rejection of this solution is unjustified.

Geach's paradox, recall, goes as follows. We are to suppose that a certain cat, Tibbles, is sitting on a mat; moreover, Tibbles is the only cat sitting on the mat. Since Tibbles is a normal cat, she has at least one thousand hairs. Geach continues:

Now let c be the largest continuous mass of feline tissue on the mat. Then for any of our 1,000 cat-hairs, say h_n , there is a proper part c_n of c which contains precisely all of c except the hair h_n ; and every such part c_n differs in a describable way both from any other such part, say c_m , and from c as a whole. Moreover, fuzzy as the concept *cat* may be, it is clear that not only is c a cat, but also any part c_n is a cat: c_n would clearly be a cat were the hair h_n plucked out, and we cannot reasonably suppose that plucking out a hair *generates* a cat, so c_n must already have been a cat. So, contrary to our story, there was not just one cat called 'Tibbles' sitting on the mat; there were at least 1,001 sitting there! ([1], p. 215)

My solution to Geach's paradox was this: *neither c nor any of the other 1,000 lumps of feline tissue $c_1, c_2, \dots, c_{1,000}$ on the mat is a cat*, at least in the sense in which *Tibbles* 'is a cat'. For cats and lumps of feline tissue have different and incompatible criteria of identity, which import different persistence conditions for things of these respective kinds. c is a cat only in the sense that it *constitutes* a cat, namely, Tibbles – and constitution is not identity. Similarly, each c_n *would be* a cat only in the sense that if h_n were plucked out, then c_n would constitute Tibbles the cat. But it doesn't follow that c_n *is* a cat, in this constitutive sense, prior to h_n 's being plucked out: because what plucking out h_n does is to bring it about that c_n , instead of c , constitutes Tibbles the cat.

David Lewis objects to this solution in the following terms. First, he objects that it is 'unparsimonious' to deny that constitution is identity. He

concedes that a persisting object such as Tibbles the cat cannot be identified with the same parcel of matter throughout its existence. But he points out that if we are willing to admit that persisting things have temporal parts, we can nonetheless identify each temporal segment of Tibbles with a temporal segment of the parcel of matter then constituting it. However, I am no friend of temporal parts, and so find this objection unconvincing.

But Lewis believes that my solution to Geach's paradox is untenable even waiving his first objection. He remarks:

So only those who reject the notion of temporal parts have any need for the dualism of things and constituters. But suppose we accept it all the same. At best, this just transforms the paradox of 1,001 cats into the paradox of 1,001 cat-constituters. Is that an improvement? We all thought there was only one cat on the mat. After distinguishing Tibbles from her constituter, would we not still want to think that there was only one cat-constituter on the mat? ([2], p. 26)

Now, as I have already made clear, I *don't* think that Tibbles has many constituters, at least as far as Geach's original version of the paradox is concerned. Rather, *c* alone constitutes Tibbles, and each of the *c_n* *would* constitute Tibbles if the appropriate hair, *h_n*, were plucked out.

However, Lewis proposes an amendment to Geach's story, according to which Tibbles is moulting and each of the hairs *h_n* is loose: they are 'questionable parts: not definitely still parts of the cat, not definitely not' ([2], p. 25). With this amendment, we can no longer insist that *c*, which includes all of the *h_n*, is indisputably the one and only constituter of Tibbles. But we needn't be driven to saying that Tibbles has *many* constituters: we can say that she has just *one* constituter, but that it is *indeterminate* whether this is *c* or a certain *c_n*. That is, we can say that it is neither determinately true nor determinately false that it is *c*, as opposed to *c₁* or *c₁₅₃* or some other *c_n*, that constitutes Tibbles at present -- though it is determinately true that just one of them does, because *whichever* candidate were chosen as occupying the role of constituter of Tibbles would exclude all others from that role.

On this view, which seems quite plausible, the definite description 'the constituter of Tibbles' is a *vague designator*. (Such a view by no means implies, of course, that the name 'Tibbles' is likewise a vague designator -- at least if one denies, as I do, that constitution is identity.) Clearly, the kind of vagueness that I am invoking here is not *ontic*, but is a product rather of what Lewis calls 'semantic indecision' -- a phenomenon to which he appeals in his own solution to the paradox -- and can be handled by van Fraassen's method of supervaluations. (Unlike Lewis, though, I am not

hostile to the idea of ontic vagueness altogether: see [7].)

Here I should add, however, that even if one *were* compelled to say that Tibbles has many constituters – at least 1,001 – I don't see why this should be deemed paradoxical in the way that Geach's original story of the 1,001 cats is. For it is not as though we have some firm pre-theoretical intuition that there is only one cat-constituter on the mat, in the way that we do have such an intuition that there is only one cat there.

Perhaps foreseeing this reply, Lewis has one last objection to my solution to Geach's paradox:

Further, even granted that Tibbles has many constituters, I still question whether Tibbles is the only cat present. The constituters are cat-like in size, shape, weight, inner structure, and motion ... Any way a cat can be at a moment, cat-constituters also can be ... They are all too cat-like not to be cats. Indeed, they may have unfeline pasts and futures, but that doesn't show that they are never cats; it only shows that they do not remain cats for very long. Now we have the paradox of the 1,002 cats: Tibbles the constituted cat, and also the 1,001 all-too-feline cat-constituters. ([2], p. 26)

Here I protest that the concept of a cat is an *essentially historical* concept, a fact which is reflected in the criterion of identity for cats. A cat is a biological object with a certain kind of developmental history – a history which must be consistent with a certain restricted range of possibilities for change. Outside the realms of fairy tale, an object cannot *become a cat* for a few moments, having been something quite different before and going on to become something equally different later. Being 'cat-like' for a moment is by no means a sufficient condition for cathood. Even a friend of temporal parts should acknowledge this, and consequently deny that momentary cat-stages are themselves *cats*.

But, in any case, since I *don't* want to say that there are many cat-constituters in the (amended) Tibbles story, but rather that there is just *one* – albeit one whose identity is to some extent indeterminate or vague – Lewis's new paradox of the 1,002 cats simply does not arise for me, at least in the terms in which he states it. End of story. (If the paradox is restated in terms of *candidates* for occupancy of the role of Tibbles' constituter, then my reply will be once more to appeal to the essential historicity of the concept of cathood.)

I should mention, finally, that Lewis's own solution to Geach's paradox is to say that there are indeed many cats on the mat but that the many are 'almost one' by virtue of their high degree of overlap – though he combines this solution with a supervaluational approach which allows him to say that there is also a perfectly good sense in which there is just *one* cat on the

mat. But while I, too, appeal to supervaluations as far as *cat-constituters* are concerned, I don't with regard to *cats*, and am not compelled to acknowledge *any* sense in which there are many cats on the mat. The only plurality which I need to acknowledge is the plurality of *lumps of feline tissue*, c , c_1 , c_2 , ... $c_{1,000}$, each of which is an equally good candidate for exclusive occupancy of the role of being the constituter of Tibbles. Vagueness of constitution is not a heavy price to pay for a solution to the paradox (if indeed a multiplicity of constituters is deemed paradoxical), because constitution was always a semi-theoretical notion concerning which we have no firm pre-theoretical intuitions of sharpness.

*University of Durham,
50 Old Elvet, Durham DH1 3HN.
E.J.Lowe@durham.ac.uk*

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- [5] E. J. Lowe, 'On being a cat', *Analysis* 42 (1982) 174–7.
- [6] E. J. Lowe, *Kinds of Being: A Study of Individuation, Identity and the Logic of Sortal Terms* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).
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