

Generics, Semantic Blindness and Mosquitoes

Abstract

This paper criticizes Leslie's (2007, 2008) recent account of semantic and metaphysical truth-conditions of generics. Generics are sentences such as birds fly, lions have manes and mosquitoes carry the West Nile Virus. They do not express claims about particular individuals, but rather express something general about individuals of a kind. Yet they do not express familiar generalizations like all birds fly or most lions have manes since generics tolerate exceptions in puzzling and almost indeterminate ways. Leslie's approach to the troubling truth-conditional aspects of generics is to separate the semantic theory, which is disquotational, from the metaphysical truth-conditions. Once this is done, her metaphysical truth-conditions are rendered in terms of a psychological explanation of the troublesome cases of genericity such as mosquitoes carry the WNV. I undermine such an approach in three steps: First, by giving four distinct types of counterexamples to Leslie's metaphysical truth-conditions. Second, by questioning the nature of troublesome generics such as mosquitoes carry the WNV upon which Leslie's account is based. And finally, by positing a form of semantic blindness related to generic interpretation that explains the psychological facts central to Leslie's theory and at the same time, why the seemingly recalcitrant data is not actually so. These objections and observations taken together not only undermine the letter, but also the spirit of Leslie's broader proposal that generics give voice to our primitive cognitive mechanisms most basic default mode of generalization.