

Analytic Universalism

Dan López de Sa

ICREA & Universitat de Barcelona

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Abstract

Under which conditions do some things *compose* a further thing? According to *universalism*, under *any* conditions whatsoever: whenever there are some things, there is something they compose. According to *analytic* universalism, this is an (unobvious, but still) analytic truth of mereology—just like certain other truths of logic, semantics, and indeed metaphysics. After presenting the situation in more detail, I consider a basic objection to analytic universalism, as voiced by Karen Bennett, Ross Cameron, and Ted Sider, according to which no such (universally quantified) conditional with existential consequent can be analytically true. I respond by considering suitably similar mereological principles that are widely regarded as analytic, despite sharing the relevant form with universalism. I end with some general remarks summarizing this result and its dialectical significance.

Keywords

analyticity; David Lewis; mereology; universalism; unrestricted composition

1 Introduction

Under which conditions do some things *compose* a further thing? According to *universalism*, under *any* conditions whatsoever:

(U) Whenever there are some things, there is something they compose.

According to *analytic* universalism, (U) is an (unobvious, but still) analytic truth of mereology—just like certain other truths of logic, semantics, and indeed metaphysics.

After presenting the situation in more detail (section 2), I'll consider a basic objection to analytic universalism, as voiced by Karen Bennett, Ross Cameron, and Ted Sider, according

to which no such (universally quantified) conditional with existential consequent can be analytically true (section 3). I'll respond by considering suitably similar mereological principles that are widely regarded as analytic, despite sharing the relevant form with universalism (section 4). I'll then end with some general remarks summarizing this result and its dialectical significance (section 5).

2 Composition, universalism and analytic universalism

When you appropriately assemble four table legs and a table top, there is something they compose: the (assembled) table.¹ But maybe those same things already composed something before they were assembled: something that was unassembled and perhaps even scattered.

This is what universalism universalizes: *whenever* there are some objects, in *whichever* conditions—no matter how distant and otherwise unrelated—there is *always* something they compose. So, for instance, there is something composed of the right half of my left shoe plus the Moon plus the sum of all Her Late Majesty's earrings. Of course, we don't have any standard name for it, and we don't countenance it in most contexts and for most purposes. But strictly speaking, which is what matters for mereology, such a thing does indeed exist.

Why believe this? In essence, because apparently more intuitive *restrictivist* views—according to which some things may compose something in some conditions but not in others—are ultimately untenable. The main argument to this effect, from David Lewis, is fairly general and abstract, and concerns vagueness. Here is a characteristically concise formulation of his argument from vagueness for universalism:

The trouble with restricted composition is as follows. It is a vague matter whether a given class satisfies our intuitive *desiderata* for composition. [...] The question whether composition takes place in a given case, whether a given class of things does or does not have a mereological sum, can be stated in a part of language where nothing is vague. Therefore it cannot have a vague answer. There is such a thing as the sum, or there isn't. It cannot be said that, because the *desiderata* for composition are satisfied to a borderline

¹ Some things *compose* something iff everything is such that it overlaps that thing just in case it overlaps some of those other things. One thing *overlaps* another thing iff there is something that is part of them both. In a classical setting, if some things compose something, what they compose is unique, sometimes called their *sum* or *fusion*.

degree, there sort of is and sort of isn't. What is this thing such that it sort of is so, and sort of isn't, that there is any such thing? No restriction on composition can be vague. But unless it is vague, it cannot fit the intuitive *desiderata*. So no restriction on composition can serve the intuitions that motivate it. So restriction would be gratuitous. Composition is unrestricted. [Lewis 1986: 212–3]

The popularity of universalism varies greatly from context to context, in my experience—sometimes it is assumed to have been established as true, and sometimes it is assumed to have been established as false. However, the version of the view I'll consider here is hardly ever defended or discussed in detail: *analytic universalism*, according to which universalism is not only true, but *analytically* so.²

The debates over universalism already suffice to establish that it is not *obvious* that it is true, if it is. Thus, analytic universalism contends that universalism is analytically true, without contending that it is obviously true. All plausible views on this matter should allow that paradigmatic examples of analytic truths, like 'Bachelors are unmarried' and 'No surface is red and green all over', can be generalized to allow for more complex, interesting, and unobvious cases. (I will have the opportunity to comment further on the notion of analyticity at the end of the paper.)

It is not my purpose here to fully defend analytic universalism—or the argument from vagueness for universalism, for that matter. Rather, I aim to respond to a basic, often-voiced objection to analytic universalism, which, I think, is largely responsible for why this view is not taken more seriously.

3 “Existence-entailing” statements and analyticity

According to the objection, there is something *in the form* of universalism that precludes it from being analytically true.

Ted Sider says:

[...] it is very difficult to see how the sentence 'If some objects are in conditions C, then there exists something that is composed of those objects' could be analytic, for it conditionally asserts the existence of a thing, and how could such a statement be analytic?

² A notable exception objecting to this view is Parsons [2013]. The endorsement of analytic universalism can arguably be attributed to Lewis himself [1991: 79–81, 84–6].

[Sider 2003: 203]

After quoting this, Ross Cameron adds:

Indeed. The sentence in question conditionally asserts the existence of some thing on some conditions that do not mention the existence of that thing, and it does not seem that such a sentence could be analytic. Existence claims are, seemingly, never analytic; so it seems that a conditional whose consequent was an existence claim could be analytic only if the antecedent asserted the existence of the thing in question. [Cameron 2007: 102]

And Karen Bennett contends that what she calls “linking principles”—which would include, I take it, principles like (U)—³cannot be analytic, given that this would amount:

to saying that *we can define things into existence*. But surely an analytic claim cannot be existence-entailing in this way; surely the existence of a new object cannot follow *by meaning alone*. Who knew ontological arguments were so easy? [Bennett 2009: 56]

On the face of it, these authors seem to hold that there is something in the form of such statements with existential consequents that prevents them from being analytically true. They are not fully explicit about exactly what this feature might be, but they give us some clues.

Immediately after her aforementioned contention, Bennett remarks that a conditional like the following is not “genuinely existence-entailing in the troublesome sense” (*ibid.*, my underlining):

If somebody is a husband, then there is someone else to whom he is married.

Meanwhile, Cameron states that the issue depends on whether “the antecedent asserted the existence of the thing in question” (*ibid.*, my underlining).

Although, strictly speaking, Bennett’s husband example could be said to refute both Sider’s original claim and Cameron’s amendment of it, while leaving us in the dark about

³ Here Bennett is arguing in particular against the possible analyticity of principles such as: “If there are simples arranged tablewise in *R*, then there is a table in *R* which is numerically distinct from the simples arranged tablewise” [Bennett 2009: 56].

the exact trouble at hand,⁴ I think there is something they are after. The consideration in question doesn't suffice for dismissing analytic universalism, however—or so I'll argue in the next section.

4 Some similar (arguably) analytic principles of mereology

We have already encountered *similar* statements in mereology with as good a claim as it gets to be analytic. The definition of *overlap* immediately implies:

(O) If one thing overlaps another thing, there is something that is part of them both.

Like (U), (O) is a (universally quantified) conditional with an existential consequent, whose antecedent “does not assert” the existence of the thing in question, as Cameron would put it. And since (O) is just part of the *definition* of overlap, it is hard to imagine a stronger case for analyticity.

One might say: although the existence of the thing in question—the thing which is part of both—is not “*explicitly* asserted” in the antecedent of the above conditional, it is somehow “*implicitly* asserted”, or “built into” what the antecedent “asserts”. And it is in this way that the whole conditional turns out not to be “genuinely existence-entailing in the troublesome sense”, as Bennett might put it. One might say this, but the situation is *exactly like this*, according to analytic universalism, in the case of (U).

One might think: precisely because it is practically a definition, the *triviality* of (O) contrasts with the indisputable *controversiality* of (U). Principles of this sort, one might think, should be *obvious* if they are analytically true, just like (O)—and *unlike* (U).

In contrast, I suggested above that all plausible views on analyticity should allow that paradigmatic examples of analytic truths that are *obvious*, can be generalized to allow for more complex and *unobvious* cases. Now I contend that this idea is in fact presupposed in mereologists' treatment of *other* relevantly similar principles with the same form. Consider the case of *weak supplementation*:

(WS) Whenever something is a proper part⁵ of another thing, there is something that is part of the latter that does not overlap the former.

⁴ See Daly and Liggins [2015]. Like them, I have adjusted her original example “If there is a husband then there is a wife” to avoid false presumptions.

⁵ The *proper* parts of something are those of its parts other than itself.

Once again, we have here a principle with the same form, whose existential consequent is not “asserted” in its antecedent.

Is the existential consequent here, however, somehow “implicitly asserted” by the antecedent? Specialists divide: some hold that weak supplementation is indeed analytically true (Simons [1987], Varzi [2008]), while others argue that it is, in fact, false (Donnelly [2011], Cotnoir and Bacon [2012]). Which is the right view on this matter is, of course, far from obvious. But the fact that this is not obvious doesn’t prevent the view that weak supplementation is analytically true from being taken seriously,⁶ despite the relevant similarity between (WS) and (U). Indeed, mereologists have given serious consideration to the view that weak supplementation is analytic. So it would seem that the view that universalism is analytic also deserves to be taken seriously.

5 The relative good standing of analytic universalism

I want to conclude with some general remarks summarizing my result and its dialectical significance.

I introduced analytic universalism as the claim that universalism is analytic, even if it is not obvious—*just like* other similar principles of mereology and related domains.

This comparison between analytic universalism and other similar cases serves to clarify what I have, and what I have *not*, in fact, argued for—which makes the contribution of the paper both modest but, for the same reason, also capable of making its point while sidestepping some genuine philosophical difficulties.

My aim here has not been to fully defend analytic universalism, but just to defend it from the basic Bennett-Cameron-Sider objection to the analyticity of any such principles. Crucially, this defense has been quite modest. I haven’t defended the analyticity of weak supplementation. Nor I have relied on any particular understanding of ‘analyticity’ (or, indeed, defended its viability in the face of skepticism). All I needed for my defense to be

⁶ See Cotnoir [2021] for a recent survey of the controversy. He himself ends up defending the view that (WS) is (arguably) analytical *relative to* one of several possible interpretations of ‘proper part’ (for a similar view, see also Parsons [ms])—of these, the definition I indicated in the previous footnote is, although standard, just one. And indeed, it seems to me that appropriately sophisticated notions of analyticity will leave room not only for non-unobvious but also for *equivocal* analyticities, which are analytic under one disambiguation but not under another, or under one precisification but not under another. For further discussion on of these two notions, see Lewis [1989].

persuasive (if it was, as I hope) were some limited claims I made concerning plausible *views of analyticity*.

In effect, my overall argument can be seen as one of “good company”. Analytic universalism deserves to be taken as seriously as the claim that weak supplementation is analytic. In both cases, we are dealing with mereological (universally quantified) conditionals with existence claims in their consequents. And in both cases, it could be contended that the antecedents of these conditionals *analytically suffice* for their consequents, while admitting that this is not at all *obvious*. Nothing I have said here excludes the possibility of swiftly dismissing such views *in all these cases*. But it seems more promising to me to explore them all further.⁷

Dan López de Sa
ICREA & Universitat de Barcelona
Montegre 6, 08001 Barcelona
dlopezdesa@ub.edu

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