What Is the Thingy Illusion and How Does It Mess Up Philosophy?

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The following is a transcript of an impromptu talk. The transcript has been edited and references have been added.

There's a mental phenomenon that I call the "Thingy Illusion" – that's "thingy" as in t-h-i-n-g-y – that taints an awful lot of philosophical thought. I've written about this elsewhere under a different name. I called it by a longer name in one of my papers [1]. I called it the "physiomorphic illusion." But that's too long a word. Let's just call it the "Thingy Illusion."

The Thingy Illusion is a mental phenomenon in which people tend to think that whatever exists has to be a thing, or at least be like a thing. Let me give you an example of this. The classic example comes from what’s called the ‘problem of universals’ in philosophy. The simplest special case of this problem boils down to this question: Are the properties of things real?

Here's an example showing what this question means. Imagine that there are a bunch of rectangular physical objects. Those objects are real. They have the property we call rectangularity – the property of being rectangular. The question is, is that property an entity? If there are five rectangular things, is there also a property called "rectangularity" that is an item distinct from those five things? In other words, when we say things have rectangularity, is that just a manner of speaking, a way of saying there are rectangular things? Or instead, is there a property called "rectangularity," which itself is real?

A more general problem than the problem of universals is the problem of the status of abstract objects. The general question of the status of abstract objects is this: are abstract entities, like properties and relations and sets and so forth, real? Is there really such an entity as the property of rectangularity, for example? Or when we talk about rectangularity, are we just using a figure of speech?
I've stated my position on this question elsewhere [1, 2]. I've said yes, properties and relations and so forth are real – but we can't regard them as existing in the same way that physical objects exist. Abstract entities are items of a very different kind. And we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that properties, relations and sets are extra things added to our universe. They are properties of things, relations of things, sets of things, and so forth. As such, they're real. But their existence is not of the same type as the existence of the things that have them. I've explained this in my other writings, so I'm just summarizing here.

You can see the Thingy Illusion in truckloads if you look at the philosophical literature on the question of the status of abstract objects. There are two main positions, called realism and nominalism. The realists say: yes, there are items like properties and relations in addition to the concrete physical items in the world. And the nominalists say: no, there really are not these abstract items, there really are just the concrete items, the things.

Both of these schools of thought are afflicted with the Thingy Illusion. Here's what I mean by that.

One of the most basic nominalist arguments – arguments against the reality of properties and relations and so forth – goes like this: "If we assumed there are these other entities, these other features of the world besides concrete physical objects, then we would be adding extra things to the universe, and that would violate the principle of parsimony." The principle of parsimony is a principle of scientific thought that says we shouldn't assume the existence of extra things unless there's good reason to do so. The principle of parsimony also is called Occam's Razor. This principle often is stated as follows: "Entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity." In other words, you shouldn't assume the existence of extra items unless there's a good reason to do so. So the nominalists argue that if we say there is an item called "rectangularity" in addition to the rectangular physical objects, we violate Occam's Razor.

Occam's Razor also is interpreted in other ways, such as the policy of using a simple explanation when possible instead of a more complex explanation. And the nominalists might think that an explanation that assumes the reality of properties and the like is needlessly complex. But this argument boils down to the same thing: don't assume that properties and the like are real, because this assumption adds complexity to the situation. Once again, the properties and so forth are implicitly taken to be added items, above and beyond the physical objects that have the properties.

The nominalists who use these types of argument are overlooking something important. Here's where the Thingy Illusion comes in. The nominalists begin by thinking about the idea that there's some feature of the world that can't be equated to concrete physical things. Then they slip, unwittingly, to the idea that this extra feature of the world would be an extra thing – that we're assuming the reality of someTHING other than the concrete things. This implies that we shouldn't accept the existence of an abstract entity, like an ordinary property, without the kind of evidence that would make us believe in the existence of a thing. And that's wrong. The feeling that there would be extra things if properties and relations existed is just wrong. Remember that
when we talk about properties and relations, we're not talking about things, or free-standing "entities" in any sense relevant to Occam's Razor. We're only talking about FEATURES of things! We already know that things have properties, and that things can stand in relations to each other (like this door is taller than that door). Suppose that we do assume that those relations are real and those properties are real, that they aren't just figures of speech and they aren't just illusions. That isn't the same as assuming an extra thing! If we do assume that the properties and relations are real, what extra thing do we get? There isn't an extra door or window being assumed, or extra pencil erasers, or anything else concrete. If you think that calling properties real is a violation of the principle of parsimony, then you're assuming that there's something there, someTHING there, in your picture of the world that wouldn't be in the picture if you called the properties unreal. And that's a big mistake. Either way, there are just things with properties.

Once we know that things are real, we can use Occam's Razor to argue against the existence of extra things for which we have no evidence. We shouldn't claim that there's an extra window in the room unless we find one there. However, Occam's Razor does NOT tell us that things don't have properties! We are not violating Occam's Razor just by recognizing rectangularity as an entity in the broadest possible sense – not as a thing, but as a feature of things. This doesn't give us any new free-standing object. It acknowledges a fact about the objects we already know about.

There's a difference between assuming that there's an extra window in the room when there's no evidence for one, and assuming that the rectangularity of the windows is real. There's a difference between assuming an extra object and just recognizing that a property really is present, which is all we're really recognizing when we say that there's some abstract entity called rectangularity.

So the nominalist argument implicitly confuses rectangularity with a THING. The argument presupposes that if you acknowledge that rectangularity really is present in the world, then you're asserting the existence of a separate thing, just as if you were asserting that there's an extra window in the room. Or if you said that there is an extra base in DNA that hasn't been detected. Or something else along those lines.

That's the way many nominalists seem to think of abstract entities like properties. These nominalists tend to think that we don't want to introduce a “domain” of extra entities by assuming that properties are real in some way – that properties have some kind of reality or existence, that they're not just figures of speech. And some writers even have referred to this domain as a "Platonic heaven" – Plato being the philosopher most closely associated with the problem of universals. Some writers have said that we shouldn't assume the existence of a "Platonic heaven" of extra things, in addition to the things in the concrete world. And that is silly! Acknowledging that rectangularity is real and is not a figure of speech, when you've got rectangular objects in front of you, is not the same as introducing a "Platonic heaven" or parallel universe of free-floating, extra, mysterious objects! Implicitly and without realizing it, the nominalists are making a mental slip from the idea that X is real, to the idea that X is an extra thing in addition to other things. That's their mental picture of abstract entities. They wouldn't be
using phrases like "Platonic heaven," with its imagery of a parallel world, if they weren't implicitly thinking of properties as extra things. And that's a good example of the Thingy Illusion.

The Thingy Illusion pervades much nominalist thought, but it afflicts realist thought too. Some realist lines of thought – "realism" in this case meaning the view that abstract entities are real – also portray properties as too much like things. Sometimes realists even think of abstract entities as being somehow more substantial than things. Some people have accused Plato of that type of thinking; the exact interpretation of what Plato said is a matter for debate. But some realist thought leaves you with the impression that if you label a property or relation as real, you're assuming the existence of a thing, or an item much like a thing. That's the Thingy Illusion. It's kind of a mental trick that we play on ourselves.

Perhaps the Thingy Illusion is rooted in human evolution. We evolved in circumstances that made us focus more on things than on abstractions. It's hard for us to get out of the age-old mindset of looking for lions, or looking for tree nuts, or whatever – looking for things that can help or hurt us. Humans are concrete-minded. We have trouble thinking of abstract entities without making them into concrete things in our minds. So we end up with the Thingy Illusion.

The Thingy Illusion also afflicts other areas of philosophy besides the ontology of abstract objects. For example, there is the debate between dualism and materialism in the philosophy of mind. If you say that the mind is not identical to the brain, many people fear that you must be saying there is a separate mental substance, a ghostly item, controlling the brain. That's an example of the Thingy Illusion! The mind could be something much more subtle than an extra thing, like a substantial Cartesian ego, controlling the brain. Even if the mind has a reality distinct from that of the brain, why do we have to assume that the mind is a mental substance? Why does the mind have to be THINGLIKE? Why couldn't the mind be of some other category altogether, besides ANY kind of substantial "thingy" or thinglike substance? Like some others before me, I've advocated the view that the mind is fully real but also abstract. This view, understood rightly, avoids the Thingy Illusion. There may be other possible views of mind that avoid it too. But in any case, why does the mind have to be like a thing? Why do the only alternatives have to be either a strong kind of materialism with no real mind, just a brain, or else a dualism with an intangible THING in addition to the brain? We have trouble thinking of minds without thinking of minds as things. That's the Thingy Illusion again.

The Thingy Illusion also affects religion and the philosophy of religion. We have trouble thinking of a supreme being, or ultimate spiritual reality, without thinking of that being as a thing. Thus, people who believe in God often gravitate toward the idea of a human-like, supernatural God, who pokes at the universe from outside in a very concrete way, and controls nature through supernatural action from outside the universe. I won't argue for or against that idea in this talk (I've said a lot about religion elsewhere [3]), but it's interesting that some people feel this is the only possible concept of God – the only way to think about a supreme being. That's the Thingy Illusion in action. We think that way because we have trouble not thinking that way. We have a tendency to take anything that's elusive, abstract or subtle, like the concept of
God, and turn it into a thing in our minds.

This summarizes what I have to say for now about the Thingy Illusion. It's a pervasive source of confusion in human thought.

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REFERENCES

