Skolem Functions or Arbitrary Objects?

In 1985, in his book "Reasoning with Arbitrary Objects", Kit Fine observed and stressed three, in his opinion, important differences between A-objects and Skolem functions. The talk will rest on one of them. According to Fine, there is some kind of dependence relationship between objects that cannot properly be represented by any function. We will analyze this claim from the perspective of natural language, and discuss the improvement that the use of arbitrary objects seemingly provides over Skolem functions in dealing with dependence.

We will introduce into the discussion three examples:

(1) 1. Every product has a price.
2. For meat it is 10 dollars.

(2) 1. Everyone has a loved one with a problematic relative.
2. Sooner or later, one ends up helping some of them.

(3) 1. Everyone ends up helping a problematic relative of a loved one.
2. For John, it was Maria's.

Then, we will analyze these pairs of sentences in three steps: 1.- Dependence relationships in the first sentence of every pair; 2.- Skolemization of the first sentence of every pair; and 3.- Interpretation of the second sentence of every pair.

During the third step of our analysis we will observe that in the examples (1) and (2) the pronouns in the second sentence naturally seem to recover the Skolem functions which appeared after the Skolemization of the first sentence of the pairs. However, when we come to (3) something happens. Although the construction of the second sentence in (3) is quite similar to those in the previous examples, it cannot be interpreted alike. If the pronoun 'it' were interpreted as recovering any of the Skolem functions in the first sentence of (3), it would not provide the natural interpretation of the second sentence of the pair. We will give a reason for that in the talk.

Finally, we will recall Fine's definition of A-model, and wonder whether an analysis in terms of arbitrary objects really offers, as Fine seems to suggest, a deeper and more accurate representation of the phenomenon of dependence. For that, we will bring the examples (1), (2), and (3) up again, and discuss their interpretation in terms of A-models. We will see that the use of arbitrary objects provides us with a better interpretation of the problematic example (3). Our conclusion will be that arbitrary objects seem indeed to provide an improvement over Skolem functions.

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