Comments on Kathrin Koslicki's "Essence and Identity"

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Kathrin Koslicki's chapter is a wonderfully bold and innovative attack on the question of crossworld-identity: Quine thought Aristotelian essentialism was the problem; and she takes Aristotelian hylomorphism to be the solution.

Let me begin with a small point. Koslicki takes a criterion of crossworld identity to be a criterion for when an entity y_1 in a world w_1 is identical to an entity y_2 in another world w_2. It therefore appears to be a criterion for when a certain four-place relation holds between a pair of entities and a corresponding pair of worlds. But one might well wonder what this four-place relation is. Better, I would have thought, to formulate the criterion in the form:

> Given that y_1 exists in w_1 and y_2 in the distinct world w_2, then $y_1 = y_2$ iff $\varphi(y_1, w_1, y_2, w_2)$
>
> where $\varphi(y_1, w_1, y_2, w_2)$ is a condition in the variables y_1, w_1, y_2 and w_2 (or possibly just in the variables y_1 and y_2). Thus the criterion is for a straight identity, but given *under* the condition that y_1 exists in w_1 and y_2 in w_2 and given, under that condition, *by* a condition relating y_1, w_1, y_2 and w_2.[1]

As Koslicki points out, not every condition $\varphi(y_1, w_1, y_2, w_2)$ satisfying the biconditional will serve as a suitable criterion. Thus we cannot, on pain of circularity, substitute $y_1 = y_2$ for $\varphi(y_1, w_1, y_2, w_2)$. The general intent, it seems, is that the satisfaction of the condition should only depend upon how things go for y_1 in w_1 and y_2 in w_2.

But what is meant here by "how things go"? In the extreme case, how things go for an entity in a world will simply be a matter of its purely qualitative properties in that world. But as Koslicki also points out (p. 124),[2] we often aim to account for the

[1] Other aspects of identity criteria are discussed in Fine 2015. I should add that I here take for granted a possibilist framework in which the variables y_1, y_2, etc. range over all actual and possible entities.

[2] Koslicki also writes that "to avoid the threat of infinite regress, then genuine essentialists will have to go in for at least a partial commitment to primitive identity facts" (p. 125). But, in the extreme case, the identity criterion for a given class Y of entities may be given in terms of purely qualitative properties (so that the given class X of entities is then the null set).

crossworld identity for a certain class Y of entities in terms of another class X of entities. And, in that case, we should also allow the properties that constitute how things go for an entity in Y to include reference to entities in X.

To make this requirement precise, let us call a property *X-relative* if it only involves reference to the entities of X (so that the ∅-relative and the purely qualitative properties are the same), and let us say that y_1 in w_1 is *X-indiscernible*—or *indiscernible relative to* X—from y_2 in w_2 if y_1 exists in w_1, y_2 exists in w_2 and the X-relative properties of y_1 in w_1 are the same as the X-relative properties of y_2 in w_2. Then the requirement we have imposed on the criterion $\varphi(y_1, w_1, y_2, w_2)$ is that:

> $\varphi(y_1, w_1, y_2, w_2)$ should imply $\varphi(y, w, y_2, w_2)$ whenever y in w is X-indiscernible from y_1 in w_1 and w is distinct from w_2 (and similarly, of course, for y_2, w_2).

Koslicki proposes to solve the problem of crossworld identity by appeal to forms. At least in the case of entities which have a form, we can account for their identity in terms of their form; for given that two such entities y_1 and y_2 exist in the respective worlds w_1 and w_2, $y_1 = y_2$ iff the form of y_1 in w_1 is the same as the form of y_2 in w_2.[3]

But before we consider her solution, we should consider why there was thought to be a problem of crossworld identity in the first place. Why should we not simply take the crossworld identity of entities as given and not standing in any need of a criterion? There are two main reasons. One (considered by Koslicki) is conceptual. It is thought that we need to make sense of *de re* modal claims in terms of *de dicto* modal claims. When put in terms of possible worlds, this is then thought to be the question, as Koslicki puts it, of "how to identify entities across possible worlds" (p. 124). The other reason (not mentioned by Koslicki) is reductionist.[4] It is thought that Y-facts reduce to X-facts—facts about persons, for example, to facts about their experiences or their bodies, facts about macroscopic physical objects to facts about the micro-physical objects that constitute them, and so on. But this is then thought to require, in particular, that we explain facts about the crossworld identity of the entities of Y in terms of the entities of X. We should explain why *I*, for example, might have been an American rather than an Englishman in terms of the underlying psycho-physical facts.

I share with Kripke and others the view that the first problem is a pseudo-problem. *De re* modal claims are perfectly intelligible as they stand and there is no need to explain them in other terms. Koslicki appears to disagree. She writes "genuine essentialists still owe us an answer to such questions as 'Could Nixon have been a poached egg?'" (p. 119; see also fn. 9). But it seems to me that no such answer, in the context of discussion, is called for. Kripke and I insist on the *intelligibility* of the question as it stands. How the question should then be answered is another matter. Perhaps Koslicki is here thinking that a solution to the first problem must constitute a solution to the second problem since, given a criterion of crossworld identity, it will tell us whether Nixon in our world might be identified with a poached egg in another world. But, as we shall see (fn. 7), it is possible to provide a criterion of crossworld

[3] Cf. p. 131. Of course, for this solution to work, we must presuppose that the form is unique whenever it exists and that it remains the same in each world in which the entity exists.

[4] The difference between these two approaches to the problem is further discussed in Fine 1984: 34.

identity in such general terms that it provides no specific information about the *de re* possibilities.

In any case, let me go along with Koslicki (and many others) in supposing that there is a real problem here. Is Koslicki's solution in terms of forms of any help?

She seems to think that it is because standard solutions to the problem break down. She considers, in this connection, an example of McKay 1986.[5] McKay supposes that, in a given world w, there may be two ships, call them Ship One and Ship Two, with Ship One coming into existence at time t_1 and Ship Two constructed from the disassembled parts of and in the same manner as Ship One and coming into existence at time t_2. There would then appear to be a world w_1 in which Ship One exists at a later time t midway between t_1 and t_2 and a world w_2, just like w_1, in which Ship Two exists at, what for it, is the earlier time t. Thus Ship One in w_1 is indiscernible from Ship Two in w_2 relative to the things that are usually taken to matter (such as the underlying particles, their location, etc.) and so, if there were a standard criterion of crossworld identity, it would deliver the same result in comparing Ship One in w_1 to Ship One in w as it does in comparing Ship Two in w_2 to Ship One in w. But it should, of course, deliver different verdicts in these two cases and so no standard criterion can be correct.

This case is highly controversial. Can we seriously suppose that there are two possible worlds exactly alike in the arrangement of particles etc. but differing only in whether it is Ship One or Ship Two which is in the dock at time t? There are perhaps more convincing examples of the same sort, involving particles, say, rather than ships. But be that as it may, let us suppose that the original example is fine as it stands. Then how should our conceptual skeptic, who wishes to explain *de re* modal in terms of *de dicto* modality, respond?

I have suggested elsewhere that there is no need for him to provide a criterion of crossworld identity (1984: 38–9). He is faced with a world w containing Ships One and Two and a world v containing a single ship which he wants to be able to identify both with Ship One and with Ship Two. There is then no need for him to make a choice or fail to make an identification. For he can simply suppose that there is a duplicate world v′, just like v, and he can then identify Ship One in w with the ship in v, say, and Ship Two in w with the ship in v′.

The thought that he must provide a crossworld criterion of identity, tracking the entity from one qualitatively given world to the next, arises from the supposition that there is one *de re* world for each qualitatively given world. But this supposition is

[5] Koslicki's own example is in terms of Socrates and Callias. I prefer to put it in terms of ships rather than people (as in McKay's original example) in order to avoid certain irrelevancies.

I consider a related example in my Fine 1984, where I write (p. 38), "We may have two objects which, on independent grounds, we know to be distinct and yet have an equal right to be identified with a third individual. We may have a world w, for example, containing two indiscernible spheres S_1 and S_2. Suppose now we take there to be a world w′ in which there exists a sphere just like S_1 and S_2. Since it seems possible that either sphere should exist on its own, just as it is in w, there is the problem of saying which of S_1 and S_2, if either, is to be identified with the sphere in w′."

One might also want to say in such a case that it is indeterminate whether the new object is identical to one of the given objects. I consider a solution of this sort in my chapter on ontic indeterminacy in the present volume, but it is not one that either McKay or Koslicki take seriously.

overly simplistic and unnecessarily strict; and once it is given up, there is no difficulty in his making sense of these various *de re* claims.[6]

If this is right, then Koslicki's solution, or any solution like it, is unnecessary. But what if we insist upon adopting a criterion of crossworld identity without any duplication of worlds. Would her solution then be of any help? I think not. For would not the question of the crossworld identity of the individual forms be just as problematic (if not more problematic) than the question of the crossworld identity of the things themselves? In world w, Ship One has Form One and Ship Two has Form Two. There is another world v in which Form One is the form of the ship in the dock and yet another world v′ just like v except that Form Two is the form of the ship in the dock. But if there was a question as to whether Ship One rather than Ship Two was in the dock in v then is it not equally a question whether Form One rather than Form Two is the form of a ship in the dock? Indeed, the conceptual skeptic is likely to think that all *de re* modal claims are equally problematic, regardless of the *re*, and so there is no gain to be had in reducing one kind of *de re* modal claim to another.

Let me now turn to the reductionist stance on the problem (though it is not altogether clear to me that Koslicki wishes to consider the problem in this light). Suppose, to fix our ideas, that our reductionist wishes to reduce the macroscopic to the microscopic. She therefore wishes the facts concerning macroscopic objects to (modally) supervene on the facts concerning microscopic objects and therefore feels obliged to provide a criterion of identity for macroscopic objects in terms of microscopic objects.

Such a reductionist would reject McKay's case out or hand or, at least, regard it as highly problematic, since it involves two worlds v and v′ which are the same at the microscopic level but distinct at the macroscopic level (with Ship One existing in v and Ship Two existing in v′). But then how could the introduction of forms help allay the reductionist's qualms? The thought must be that, with the introduction of forms into the subvening base, the reductionist can distinguish the two possibilities, since one form will be present in v and the other in v′. But these forms will not then supervene on the original microscopic base; and if the reductionist is unhappy with the existence of the ships not supervening on the microscopic base, then why should she be any happier with the presence of the forms not supervening on the microscopic base?

Koslicki wishes to maintain a neutral stance on what forms might be and lists a number of rival accounts (p. 131 et. seq.). But in each case she faces a dilemma. For either the presence of the forms supervenes on the underlying form-free facts, in which case they can do no work, or the presence of the forms does not supervene on the underlying form-free facts, in which case they will be as problematic for the reductionist as the entities to be reduced. Speaking for myself, I would be decidedly uncomfortable with a conception of form whose presence could float free of the underlying facts as, I suspect, would many of the other philosophers whose work she cites.

[6] A solution of this sort is embodied in the distinction in Lewis 1986 (p. 230) between possible worlds and possibilities, though set within the context of his counterpart theory.

I have so far taken for granted that the reductionist would have to adopt a criterion of crossworld identity for the reduced entities Y in terms of the reducing entities X; and certainly, it is not legitimate for her, as it is for the conceptual skeptic, to evade the need for a criterion by appealing to duplicate worlds, since the reductionist's thesis is meant to relate to the *given* metaphysically possible worlds. However, there is a somewhat different reason why the reductionist need not accept the full force of an identity criterion. For there are two somewhat different ways in which such a criterion may fail to hold, one acceptable to the reductionist and the other not.

The first is the case in which there is crossworld indiscernibility, i.e. distinct entities y_1 and y_2 from Y and distinct worlds w_1 and w_2 such that y_1 in w_1 is X-indiscernible from y_2 in w_2. For let us assume (as is not unreasonable) that there is some third world w_3 distinct from both w_1 and w_2 in which y_1 exists. Then the criterion φ would deliver the *same* verdict in comparing y_1 in w_1 to y_1 in w_3 as in comparing y_2 in w_2 to y_1 in w_3, when it should be delivering *different* verdicts. In this case, the reductionist thesis will also fail for, given that y_1 in w_1 is X-indiscernible from y_2 in w_2, w_1 and w_2 will be distinct but X-indiscernible worlds.

The second is the case in which there is an intra-world indiscernibility, i.e. distinct entities y_1 and y_2 from Y and a *single* world w with y_1 in w X-indiscernible from y_2 in w. For again suppose (as is not unreasonable) that there is another world w' in which y_1 exists. Then the criterion φ would deliver the *same* verdict in comparing y_1 in w to y_1 in w' as in comparing y_2 in w to y_1 in w', when again it should be delivering *different* verdicts. However, in this case there is no failure of the reductionist thesis.[7]

A reductionist thesis does not require a criterion of crossworld identity; what it requires, strictly speaking, is a criterion of crossworld *existence*. Given that y exists in w and given a distinct world w', the reductionist needs a criterion for when y exists in w'. But she may be in possession of such a criterion without having any criterion by which to distinguish y in w' from some entity y' indistinguishable from y in w'.

Thus the reductionist, in contrast to the orthodox conceptual skeptic, is in a position to accept intra-world indiscernibles. She need have no objection, for example, to there being a world of microscopic objects containing two indiscernible macroscopic objects, whereas the orthodox conceptual sceptic would have a difficulty when it came to identifying an object from another world with either one or the other of these objects.

But this then raises a question. For how is the reductionist to distinguish between intra-world indiscernibles? Surely it cannot be, at least in many cases, that they are *simply* distinct. Take, for example, the case of the gold sphere and the piece of gold, which happen to coincide in the actual world but which would fail to coincide if the gold were reshaped into a bar. It may well be thought that they are indiscernible in terms of the particles they contain, their spatio-temporal

[7] It may also be argued that these are the only two ways in which there can fail to be a criterion. For let us suppose that there are no distinct objects y_1 and y_2 and worlds w_1 and w_2 (which may or may not be the same) for which y_1 in w_1 is X-indiscernible from y_2 in w_2. Let the *role of* an entity y in w be the conjunction of all its X-properties and let the *profile of* y be the disjunction of its roles. The criterion $\varphi(y_1, w_1, y_2, w_2)$ may then be taken to be: there is a common profile satisfied by y_1 in w_1 and y_2 in w_2.

relationship to other objects etc., and yet surely we require some explanation of what their difference consists in.[8]

This is an instance of the more general problem of intra-world identity: given that entities y_1 and y_2 both exist in a world w, we require a criterion for when they are the same.[9] And it seems to me that, in regard to this problem, the appeal to form is genuinely of some help. For what distinguishes the gold sphere from the piece of gold, for example, is their form: the gold sphere has the form of sphericity while the piece of gold has the form of connectedness.[10] But note that this conception of form is not one which the reductionist need reject; for the presence or absence of a form—sphericity, say, or connectedness—will always supervene on the underlying facts.

I conclude that the appeal to forms is neither necessary nor helpful in dealing with the problems raised by the conceptual skeptic but that it may be of limited help in dealing with the problems raised by the reductionist—not to the problem of cross-world identity as such, since that would require the postulation of nonsupervening forms, but to the problem of intra-world identity and of how, even for the reductionist, indiscernible but reducible entities within a given world can still be distinct.

References

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[8] It might be thought that this problem cannot arise if the entities in question are taken to be of the same kind. But even here I am not so sure (Fine 2000).

[9] Koslicki (p. 114) distinguishes the question of crossworld identity from the questions of intra-world crosstemporal identity and intra-world synchronic identity. But there is also a question of intra-world identity (with no reference to time) corresponding to the question of synchronic identity.

[10] In Fine 2008 I discuss some other ways in which the appeal to form may be of help in distinguishing objects which would otherwise be indiscernible.