Laycock, Henry, *Words Without Objects: Semantics, Ontology and Logic for Non-Singularity*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 202, £35.00 (cloth).

Many languages mark a distinction which is commonly referred to as the "mass/count-distinction"; e.g., the distinction between the two occurrences of 'hair' in 'There is *hair* in my soup' and 'There is *a hair* in my soup'. Often, the mass/count-distinction is drawn primarily with respect to nouns and noun-phrases (or particular occurrences thereof); and it is drawn (at least in English) using syntactic criteria such as the presence or absence of plural-morphology and the licensing of particular kinds of determiners and quantifiers ('much' versus 'many', etc.). Such purely syntactic criteria lead to the following sort of classification:

Mass-Nouns: 'air', 'snow', 'clothing', 'knowledge', ...

Count-Nouns: 'beach', 'sheep', 'clothes', 'belief', ...

Dual-Use Nouns: 'hair', 'cloth', 'pain', 'justification', ...

Even more so than the question of how exactly the mass/count-distinction is to be drawn, linguists and philosophers have been exercised by the question of how this distinction should be interpreted semantically and whether it has any ontological implications.

Henry Laycock's recent monograph constitutes a welcome addition to the literature on the mass/count-distinction, especially since it marks the first published book-length examination of these issues by a philosopher; moreover, *Words Without Objects* also constitutes Laycock's return to this subject-area after some promising article-length contributions by the author several decades ago. Despite a voluminous literature on the mass/count distinction since the 1970s, primarily conducted from the perspective of model-theoretic semantics, I agree with Laycock's assessment that, in many ways, this area is still very much uncharted territory, particularly as its ontological significance is

concerned. Thus, almost fourty years later, Davidson's "problem of mass terms" is arguably still unresolved, and it is high time that more philosophers lend this worthwhile area of study the sort of attention it deserves (Donald Davidson, "Truth and Meaning", Synthese, Vol.17 (1967), pp.304-323, footnote 9). I very much hope that Henry Laycock's monograph will inspire, as it should, a resurgence of interest in what is after all, as George Boolos' seminal work on the semantics of plurals and second-order logic has shown, a prime breeding ground for questions concerning meaning, truth, reference and quantification.

Although much of Laycock's view, to my mind, remains puzzling and obscure, it is certainly sufficiently provocative and intriguing in its unfamiliarity to warrant examination in the literature. The primary semantic aim of Laycock's study is to give an analysis of the phenomenon of non-singularity; his outlook attempts to be non-reductive, in that it resists the assimilation of the non-singular mode of expression to the singular mode of expression. Among nouns, the non-singular mode of expression is represented by both the category of mass-nouns (or, as Laycock calls them, "non-count nouns" or "NCNs") as well as by the category of plural count-nouns; the singular mode of expression, on the other hand, is represented primarily by the category of singular count-nouns. And although Laycock insists that the contrast before us is semantic and not ontological, he nevertheless invokes the apparently ontological category of "stuff" to account for the denotations of at least a certain central subgroup of NCNs, nouns such as 'air', 'water', 'ice' and 'mud' which he terms "pure" NCNs. (What makes these NCNs "pure", in Laycock's view, is that they lack any semantic connections with cognate singular count-nouns [42-43]; in this respect, they differ from such "impure" NCNs as 'snow' and 'sand' as well as 'furniture' and 'clothing', which in his view do bear semantic connections to such singular count-nouns as 'snow-flake', 'grain of sand', 'piece

of furniture' and 'clothes'; since the denotations of these "non-pure" NCNs, for Laycock, are thus closer to those of singular and plural count-nouns in being "object-involving", they do not require the radical revisions in our outlook which are needed to accommodate the "pure" NCNs.) With respect to the semantics of plural count-nouns, Laycock finds himself to be largely in agreement with the combination of semantic irreducibility and ontological innocence advocated by the Boolos-approach.

What is especially provocative and puzzling about Laycock's views, then, is his position concerning the semantics of "pure" NCNs, as well as the ontological and logical implications which, in his opinion, flow from this semantics. Of course, for as along as there has been any interest in the grammatical count/non-count-distinction at all, this phenomenon has been thought to be associated in some way with the (alleged) "thing"/"stuff"-dichotomy as well as with the distinction between what we count and what we ("merely") measure. What is novel about Laycock's approach is what he makes of these purported connections, in semantic, logical and metaphysical terms. As the title of his book indicates, we are, in his view, dealing here with a category of "words without objects". Because such a category is unfamiliar to us and, if Laycock is right, cannot be accomodated in our familiar thinking about meaning, reference, truth and logic, we have been at pains either to ignore its existence or to reduce it to the category of singular count-nouns with which we are more comfortable. Whoever engages in serious talk involving "quantities", "instances", "aggregates", "parcels of matter", and the like, in connection with such pure NCNs as 'air', 'water', 'ice' and 'mud', is, in Laycock's view, guilty of what he calls the "strangely mesmeric tendency to privilege the singular" [115] and of imposing an "alien logic" [24, 28] on a class of expressions which deserve its own status. Since, as far as I can see, Laycock's charge affects all of us who have ever written

on the count/non-count-distinction, his sweeping indictment as well as the new direction he suggests deserve to be taken seriously.

As far as the central subgroup of "pure" NCNs is concerned, then, Laycock's main motivation for the radical departure he urges us to embark on is that he finds our discourse involving these nouns to be lacking in full-fledged criteria of identity and persistence over time. In the case of such nouns, even when what we say appears to be straightforwardly denotational, so Laycock maintains, nothing that could be said to remain the same over time has been singled out by our words; rather, what is indicated by expressions like 'the ice in my drink' is at most a potentially unstable and fluctuating amount of stuff: "Evidently, to the extent that they apply at all, the concepts of identity-criteria and persistence-criteria do not apply in the same straightforward manner to what expressions like 'the ice' denote as to what expressions like 'the cat' denote" [23].

These conclusions concerning our apparently denotational talk involving NCNs also have far-reaching repercussions for the interpretation of quantificational expressions containing such nouns, such as 'all ice', 'no ice', 'some ice', 'much ice', or 'most ice'. Exactly how apparent quantification over the denotations of "pure" NCNs, as in 'All water is pure', is to be interpreted, unfortunately, remains underexplored in Laycock's book: the substitutional approach he favors [134-135] appears to yield the wrong results for such statements as 'Most water is polluted', whose truth is independent of how many pointings or referential acts involving water are also pointings or referential acts involving polluted substances [p.135, n.20]; but no alternatives to the substitutional approach are offered. Thus, in the absence of a more developed theory, it is difficult to see how NCN-reference and quantification could be made to work without at some stage invoking the more familiar, object-involving and identity-bearing, semantic values utilized by the canonical approach.

Moreover, at least in the eyes of this particular reader, Laycock's central claim, that our apparently referential talk involving "pure" NCNs is in fact non-identity-involving and fails to single out a determinate semantic value, requires more conclusive evidence. Laycock cites in support of his claims such considerations as the fact that we would, for example, ordinarily continue to speak of 'the ice in my drink', even as the ice is slowly melting away, so that the amount of ice, or the particular parcel of matter at issue at one time cannot be numerically identical to that present at the next time. But compare this to 'the cake at the birthday-party': as more and more of the cake is eaten, we may equally continue to speak of 'the cake', until it is completely gone, just as "only when all of the ice which you added to your drink has melted will that ice have finally ceased to be" [22]. Thus, in the absence of further considerations to the contrary, the obvious reply to the considerations Laycock presents is that we are dealing here simply with the phenomenon of change of parts over time, which can apparently occur just as naturally in the case of "pure" NCN-denotations as it can in the case of other noun-denotations. In particular, I fail to see how there is a sufficiently substantive difference here between the so-called "pure" NCNs like 'air', 'water', 'ice' and 'mud', and the "non-pure" NCNs, like 'snow', 'sand', 'furniture' and 'clothing', to warrant the postulation of an entirely distinct, non-objectual and non-identity-involving, semantics, logic and metaphysics.

On the metaphysical side, Laycock attempts to elucidate the category of "stuff" by citing the work of ecologists and environmentalists on the boundless and fluctuating nature of water [7-9] as well as the tradition of romanticism in music and art [170-171], at the very beginning and at the very end of his work; however, these remarks are too metaphorical to facilitate the reader's grip on the puzzling idea of how there could be something, e.g., some water, without there being any particular thing. Thus, given its wide-ranging and shattering break with our familiar semantic, logical and

metaphysical tradition, I suspect that, for many of us, Laycock's study contains too few details to cure us once and for all of our deeply engrained tendency to "singularize".

In sum, if Laycock is right, then we have all suffered for a long time –in fact, to be precise, since the time of the Presocratics-- from something like a collective delusion, viz., the "singularizing tendency"; its accompanying object- and identity-involving semantics, logic and metaphysics is tailored specifically to the needs of singular count-nouns. The possibility of an apparent mass-deception of this sort, as well as its possible causes, are of course worth investigating.

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