ABSTRACT. I propose a fourfold categorisation of entities according to whether or not they possess determinate identity-conditions and whether or not they are determinately countable. Some entities – which I call ‘individual objects’ – have both determinate identity and determinate countability: for example, persons and animals. In the case of entities of a kind $K$ belonging to this category, we are in principle always entitled to expect there to be determinate answers to such questions as ‘Is $x$ the same $K$ as $y$?’ and ‘How many $K$s are there satisfying condition $C$?’; even if we may sometimes be unable in practice to discover what these answers are. But other entities apparently lack either determinate identity, or determinate countability, or both. In these terms I try to explain certain important ontological differences between familiar macroscopic objects and various rather more esoteric entities, such as the ‘particles’ of quantum physics, quantities of material stuff, and tropes or property instances.

‘Object’ or ‘thing’ is a notoriously slippery term in the mouths of philosophers, who often use it in restricted senses without making explicit the restrictions that they have in mind. One way in which this fact can be brought out is by reflecting on the difference between the trivial logical truth that every thing is a thing and the altogether more contestable, metaphysically substantive claim that everything is a thing. In English, at least, the seemingly minor syntactical difference between the free-standing use of the word ‘thing’ and its use in conjunction with the words ‘every’ and ‘some’ to form the quantifiers ‘everything’ and ‘something’ marks a semantic difference of great moment. When Quine famously replied to his own question, ‘What is there?’, with the single word, ‘Everything’, it was crucial to the plausibility of his answer that he did not split this single word into two (see Quine (1961), p. 1). So what is a ‘thing’ – and what could there be, if anything, other than ‘things’? We should look neither to lexicography nor to physics for replies to such questions, but to metaphysics, albeit metaphysics appropriately informed by philosophical logic. However, since everyday linguistic usage should not be our guide here, I shall use the semi-technical term ‘object’ in preference to ‘thing’ because, having less currency in ordinary language, it brings with it fewer distracting associations.

Grammatically, the word ‘object’ is a *count noun:* it forms a plural, ‘objects’, and we can, without syntactical impropriety, construct complex noun phrases combining this plural noun with numerical adjectives – such as ‘five objects’. But it is often pointed out, quite correctly, that in such a context the term ‘object’ does not function as a genuine sortal term, like ‘book’ or ‘tiger’: it is merely what David Wiggins has called a *dummy* sortal (see Wiggins (1980), pp. 63–4). This is because – subject only to a qualification discussed below – a genuine sortal, such as ‘book’, conveys, in the terminology of Michael Dummett, both a criterion of *application* and a criterion of *identity* (see Dummett (1981), pp. 74–5). A full grasp of the meaning of the term ‘book’ involves not only an understanding of what kind of items it applies to but also an understanding of the identity-conditions of items of that kind. By the ‘identity-conditions’ of items of a kind $K$, I mean the truth-conditions of identity statements of the form ‘$x$ is the same $K$ as $y$’. Very often, when we can meaningfully speak of the identity-conditions of items of a kind $K$, we are able, in principle, to state those conditions in an *informative* way: and such an informative statement of the identity-conditions of $K$'s is precisely what a criterion of identity for $K$'s provides. By ‘informative’, here, I mean at least ‘non-trivial and non-circular’. In this sense, the axiom of extensionality of set theory constitutes a paradigm example of a criterion of identity, in this case for *sets*. It states that if $x$ and $y$ are sets, then $x$ is the same set as $y$ if and only if $x$ and $y$ contain exactly the same members. Since we can, in principle, determine the membership of sets $x$ and $y$ without prior appeal to the identity or diversity of those sets, the axiom provides a non-trivial and non-circular statement of their identity-conditions, thus qualifying as a criterion of set-identity. However, we should certainly leave open the possibility that there are kinds $K$ for which identity statements of the form ‘$x$ is the same $K$ as $y$’ are meaningful, and determinately either true or false, even though no criterion of identity for $K$'s can, even in principle, be supplied (see further Lowe (1989), pp. 20–1). For items $x$ and $y$ of such a kind $K$, there will always be a *fact of the matter* as to their identity or diversity, even if there is no non-trivial and non-circular way of stating the identity-conditions of such items. Items such as these, then, will have *determinate identity*, but no determinate *criterion* of identity. Are there, in fact, any such items? I myself believe so, holding *persons* to fall into this category (see further Lowe (1989), pp. 121ff and Lowe (1996), pp. 41ff). I believe that there is always a fact of the matter as to the identity or diversity of persons, but no non-trivial and non-criterion of personal identity. However, to return to the point that ‘object’ is not a genuine sortal term: the lesson is that ‘object’ is, as we might put it, *transsortal* in its application. That is