

Comments on 'Ontological Anti-Realism'

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In 1950, Quine inaugurated a strange new way of talking about philosophy. The hallmark of this approach is a propensity to take ordinary colloquial sentences that all of us utter routinely when we are not thinking about philosophy, or (more often) other sentences that very directly and obviously logically entail such sentences, and treat those sentences (i) as having a clear content, calling for little or no elucidation, and (ii) as proper objects of philosophical controversy. Questions like 'are there numbers?' and 'are there tables?' were now placed on a par with questions like 'are there immaterial souls?' and 'are there sense-data?'.

Of course philosophers have always had a propensity to say things that sound odd to vulgar ears. What was new with Quine was a systematic policy of privileging these kinds of formulations over more distinctively philosophical idioms. Jargon which had been central to the practice of metaphysics—'logical construction', 'nothing over and above', 'reduce', 'ground', 'in virtue of', 'fundamental', 'consist in'...—were shifted to a much more peripheral role.

The tradition inaugurated by Quine raises some hard interpretative questions for anyone who, like me and Dave, thinks that there is a range of different propositions that people brought up as English-speakers might be tempted to try to get across by uttering one of these sentences. On the one hand, Dave and I agree that the propositions that any ordinary, unphilosophical use of a sentence like 'there are some free tables at the back of the café' would be intended to get across are (in many cases) extremely obvious. The idea that when ontologists assert 'there are no tables', or treat this claim as calling for serious debate, they are intending to call into question propositions as obvious as *that* seems implausibly uncharitable.

On the other hand, it is also a hallmark of the Quinean tradition that it claims to be using words in their ordinary sense, at least to the extent that (unlike its founder) it is willing to traffic in talk of meanings at all. Practitioners are trained to respond to questions like 'What can you possibly *mean* by denying that there are Fs?' either by a flat refusal—'Which word in "there are no Fs" don't you understand?'—or by offering verbal reformulations which raise the same interpretative problems.

Also, philosophers are notorious for getting themselves to question or deny propositions that are in fact very easy for non-philosophers to know. While it is in general a bad idea to someone as believing an obvious falsehood, the role of this sort of charity in the interpretation of philosophers is less clear than in other cases.

For all these reasons, the interpretative questions here are fairly complicated. And they become more intricate still when we consider more recent developments, in which certain offshoots of the tradition have taken to providing prolegomena attempting to explain what *they* mean to be talking about when they ask whether there are Fs; for these explanations typically do involve lots of hard quasi-technical concepts ('fundamental', 'perfectly natural', etc.), and no two are quite alike.

The view Dave calls 'ontological anti-realism' is, in the first instance, a view about these interpretative questions. But as Dave agrees, these are not the deepest questions in the vicinity. Besides interpretative questions about particular philosophical communities, metaontology also deals with some much more recognisably metaphysical questions about the shape and structure of the space of *possible* quantifier-meanings—'concepts of existence'—which lie behind them.

One good question I think we should ask about this space is this: is there *any* concept of existence such that when it is used to interpret sentences like 'there are tables' and 'there are numbers', the associated propositions have the epistemic features that seem to be presupposed in ontological debates—namely, being non-trivial and insulated from straightforward empirical confirmation or disconfirmation; having determinate truth-values; and (perhaps we should add) being worth thinking about. Say that a concept of existence with these features is *suited for ontology*. If there *were* a concept of existence that was suited for ontology, there would be at least a *prima facie* case for interpreting the quantifiers used by at least some ontologists as expressing it.

Dave doesn't directly address the question whether any concept of existence is suited for ontology. His central metaphysical claim is that there is no non-defective concept of existence that is *absolute*. What does this mean? Dave tells us that an absolute quantifier 'quantifies over what exists in the most primitive and fundamental sense' and 'is aimed at the fundamental structure of reality'. So the claim seems to be that the space of (non-defective) quantifier-meanings either includes none that is 'primitive and fundamental', or else that it includes several which are equally, and maximally, 'primitive and fundamental'.

One way to develop such a view would involve rejecting the notion of fundamentality altogether. But that is not Dave's way. He is happy with the notion of a fundamental truth, 'a truth that does not hold in virtue of other truths'. So we can ask which, if any, of the various concepts of existence are involved in fundamental truths. There are three possible answers: none; one; several. I will consider them in turn, with a view to seeing how they might bear on the question whether any concept of existence is suited to ontology.

(i) Dave describes several views on which 'fundamental truths are not truths about objects at all', which I interpret as equivalent to the claim that no concept of existence is involved in any fundamental truth. One is the claim that 'fundamental truths are truths

about the distribution of stuff, with quantifiers for stuff rather than objects'. This seems to presuppose that it makes sense to ask whether a *truth* is about 'the distribution of stuff' as opposed to being about objects independent of its expression in any given language. I don't see why this should be so. Surely one and the same concept could be expressed in one language by the expression 'there is an object such that...' and in another language by the expression 'there is some stuff such that...'. Why not? If so, given a language in which fundamental truths are expressed in the language of stuff, we can easily construct a language in which the very same truths are expressed using the word 'object'. So there will, after all, be a concept of existence—a possible meaning for 'there is an object such that...'—that is involved in fundamental truths.¹

Dave also suggests that the fundamental truths might be 'specified in an object-free predicate functor language where every sentence is analogous to "It is raining" or "Raineth"'. I have a similar worry about this proposal. The only languages of this form that have ever been described are ones for which there is an obvious correspondence between their formulas and the formulas of some language having a more traditional syntax. In particular, one of the predicate functors in Quine's language is clearly doing the same inferential work that existential quantifiers do in familiar languages. If the predicate-functor language in which fundamental truths can be specified is like *this*, I can't see what could prevent the meaning of the relevant predicate functor from being a possible quantifier-meaning.²

In principle it isn't hard to imagine views of the fundamental structure of the world on which the kinds of meanings that are fit for being assigned to quantifiers are just the wrong kinds of things to feature in any fundamental truths. A quantifier-meaning is the sort of thing that takes a predicate-meaning (or perhaps two) and makes a sentence-meaning. Someone might, for example, claim that what's needed for stating fundamental truths is something quite different—say, something whose meaning is the sort of thing that takes *three* predicate-meanings to make a sentence-meaning. But so far no one has succeeded in even sketching how a view like this—a view on which there is a radical mismatch between the structure of the fundamental facts and the sort of struc-

1 And even if some mysterious force makes it impossible to express the fundamental facts using a quantifier that's pronounced 'there is an object such that...' instead of 'there is some stuff such that...', ontologists will still have the option of reconstituting all the usual debates using the right kinds of quantifiers. We can ask questions like 'Is there any abstract stuff?'; 'Is there any stuff that has other stuff as a part?'; 'Is there any stuff that is not alive and weighs more than 50 grams?'; and so on. Perhaps there is some reason to think that even these questions will have trivial answers; but there may be ways to render them non-trivial by judiciously inserting the operator 'it is a fundamental fact that'. See the discussion under (ii) below.

2 Dave's third suggestion is that the fundamental facts may be facts about the quantum wavefunction. But quantum wavefunctions are standardly described using quantification over points of configuration space, complex numbers, etc; the standard form of such descriptions provides no clue as to what a quantifier-free description of the fundamental structure of reality might look like.

ture expressible via quantifier-meanings—might actually work. Certainly, stuff-talk and Quinean predicate functors are far too tame for this job.

(ii) One might think that the view that there is only one concept of existence that is involved in any fundamental truths would be unavailable to anyone who denies that there is any absolute non-defective concept of existence. If there is a concept of existence that is special in this way, wouldn't it thereby count as 'most fundamental and primitive' and 'aimed at the fundamental structure of reality'? Dave seems to think otherwise; but I don't quite understand why. Some of his remarks suggest that the concept of existence that features in fundamental truths might fail to count as absolute by failing to be *heavyweight*, i.e. by being such that certain unconditional or "ampliative" existential truths involving it are trivial. But the claim that any absolute quantifier was heavyweight wasn't supposed to be definitional—it was supposed to follow as the conclusion of an argument to the effect that an absolute concept of existence would have to be primitive, and that any *primitive* concept of existence would be heavyweight. But I'm not clear that this argument could go through on the present proposal—in what sense could the unique concept of existence that is involved in fundamental truths fail to count as primitive?³

(Perhaps the thought is that an absolute quantifier would have to be such that *all* truths involving it were fundamental—or at least, grounded in fundamental truths in ways that didn't involve anything distinctive about the meaning of the quantifier—whereas the concept of existence that features in fundamental truths also features (in an interesting, distinctive way) in non-fundamental truths?)

What is clear is that on the versions of this view that Dave likes, the concept of existence involved in fundamental truths isn't itself suited to ontology: it is either lightweight, in which case it interprets some and perhaps all distinctively ontological claims as expressing trivial truths or trivial falsehoods, or else it is heavyweight, in which case it interprets many such claims as indeterminate in truth value.

But now that we have the notion of fundamentality to work with, can't we use it to define, in terms of the quantifier that features in fundamental truths, another quantifier that is better suited to ontology? We could try saying something like

Let ' $\exists^*x(\Phi x)$ ' be true iff it is a fundamental truth that $\exists x(\Phi x)$, or

Let ' $\exists^*x(\Phi x)$ ' be true iff $\exists x(\Phi x$ & it is a fundamental truth that x exists), or

³ Dave says that this proposal might force one to count the concept of existence that features in fundamental truths as 'conceptually primitive' even if it is lightweight. I'm not sure if there's an intended contrast here between conceptual primitiveness and the kind of primitiveness involved in the definition of an absolute quantifier (metaphysical primitiveness?), and if so, why featuring in fundamental facts would only require conceptual primitiveness rather than the other sort.

Let ' $\exists^*x(\Phi x)$ ' be true iff there is some Ψ such that it is a fundamental truth that $\exists x(\Psi x)$ and it is necessary that $\forall x(\Psi x \supset \Phi x)$.

The question 'are there abstract objects' will become something like 'is it a fundamental truth that there are abstract objects?', or 'is any abstract object such that it is a fundamental truth that it exists', or 'is there any property sufficient for abstractness such that it is a fundamental truth that something has that property'? Are the answers to *these* questions trivial? They certainly don't *sound* trivial; they sound, rather, like things that have been in dispute throughout the history of philosophy, and properly so. And I don't think Dave has given us any reason to think otherwise.

Perhaps there is some temptation to think that it's trivial that the existence of *composite* objects is not fundamental. Isn't it part of what it is to be composite that one exists, and is the way one is, in virtue of one's components and their relations? Not too obvious to have been widely denied, by emergentists of various stripes! And not just by anti-physicalists—many philosophers of physics take quite seriously the idea that large spatiotemporal regions have properties that supervene nomologically but not metaphysically on the properties of their subregions.

And even if we rule that non-fundamentality is in some sense built into the meaning of expressions like 'composite', 'abstract', 'number', etc., there will still be residues of ontological disagreement that can be stated without using these particular expressions. We can, for example, ask whether there is any fundamental relation among fundamental things that obeys the axioms of the calculus of individuals, or of Peano arithmetic. There is pressure to think that *these* kinds of questions about fundamental structure can't have trivial answers. For there are *some* possible patterns of relations over fundamental entities that we obviously can't trivially rule out or rule in; and it is hard to see any non-arbitrary way to make a principled distinction between these patterns and the those characterised by the calculus of individuals, by Peano arithmetic, etc.

It may still be that when we adopt this way of understanding ontological questions as questions about what's fundamentally true, they become *easier to answer* than ontological questions have sometimes be taken to be. Some arguments that ontologists take seriously will look transparently bad when we translate them into this framework. "Nihilistic" views will probably enjoy a considerable default advantage. But this conclusion has little power to deflate the pretensions of ontology as a subject. While it's part of most ontologists' self-conception that the *claims* they debate are non-trivial, surely every ontologist will agree that a great many of the *arguments* given by rival ontologists are such that a proper understanding of their content would reveal them to be wholly without force.

(iii) The last possibility is that there are several concepts of existence, each of which features in at least some fundamental truths. There are versions of this picture that are

clearly compatible with the claim that no concepts of existence are suited to ontology. For example, someone might claim that for every consistent ontological theory, there is a concept of existence on which that theory is true and fundamental.

But I'm not clear that the same is true of the version of the view that Dave takes seriously. Dave wants the fundamental truths to serve as criteria for 'admissibility' of quantifier-meanings. To do this job we need to be able to isolate a class of *sentences* that express fundamental truths, independent of any particular choice of a meaning for their quantifiers. Thus, it seems to be a consequence of the way he's thinking about this that if a sentence expresses a fundamental truth on a certain interpretation of its quantifiers, it will continue to do so if they are reinterpreted as having any other quantifier-meanings that are fit for stating fundamental truths at all.

If this is how things work, it should be possible to use the notion of fundamentality to define restricted versions of *any* of these concepts of existence, just as we did when we were thinking about the possibility that only one concept of existence is involved in fundamental truths. And if the concepts of existence involved in fundamental truths differ only as regards their role in non-fundamental truths, the concepts we introduce by restricting them in this way should all end up being extensionally equivalent. So everything will work out pretty much as it did in the previous case. There may be many different concepts equally suited to the purposes of ontology, but they will all be extensionally equivalent, so they will agree as regards the answers to ontological questions.

I conclude that even if Dave convinced us that no concept of existence is absolute, he would still have a lot of work to do to convince us that no concept of existence is suited for ontology.

This bears on the argument for his interpretative claim, to the effect that ontological existence claims are systematically indeterminate. It may be true that when ontologists try to explain what they are talking about, they claim to be using quantifiers that are uniquely, perfectly primitive and fundamental. (Certainly I myself have been known to say such things.) But at the stage we're at right now, there isn't so much consensus about how to understand and reason with notions like primitiveness and fundamentality that we can afford to be very picky about the exact wording of these explanatory prolegomena. Probably any two people at this conference who ever employ notions like these will find something to complain about in each others' ways of understanding them. If we are ever to get talk about anything *other* than metametaphysics, our working policy should be that if there is any not too arbitrary way of interpreting one another's object-level metaphysical utterances as expressing non-trivial, not obviously empirical, reasonably determinate claims, we should adopt it, at least as a working hypothesis.

