CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO QUINEAN ONTOLOGY

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Abstract

In this master's thesis I defend a Quinean approach to ontology. I first describe the Quinean approach as consisting of three steps and three theses. All three theses have been challenged in the contemporary literature. In each chapter I describe one such challenge, and then provide a response. The first challenge states that ontology is actually easy. Proponents of this challenge include Matti Eklund's maximalist, as well as Amie Thomasson. In response, I argue that the maximalist cannot consistently determine whether abstract entities exist. I also argue that Thomasson's account involves a certain slide in logic and is, in certain cases, ontologically uninformative. I then turn to the second challenge, which states that traditional ontological questions are not even worth pursuing. Here I discuss the work of Rudolf Carnap and of Jonathan Schaffer. I argue that Carnap fails to provide a cogent argument for the meaninglessness of ontological questions. Furthermore, I argue that one should not adopt Schaffer's Aristotelian view of metaphysics and ontology. I do so by constructing an argument, logically parallel to one of Schaffer's own, to demonstrate that there are no fundamental grounds. Finally, I consider the challenge posed by an ambiguity in 'existence'. According to Eli Hirsch, such an ambiguity results in verbal disputes. Hirsch argues that the remedy is to adopt ordinary English. In response, I accept that 'existence' is ambiguous. But I deny that this poses a significant problem for Quinean ontology.

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Introduction

The Quinean approach to ontology

1. Introduction

My aim in this thesis is to defend a Quinean approach to ontology. Ever since the publication of his "On What There Is" in 1948, Quine's approach has been extremely influential. It continues to dominate today.[1] Nevertheless, Quinean ontology is not without its critics. In recent years a number of philosophers have challenged the Quinean approach, and even ontology in general. Their challenges can be organized under three themes: that ontology is easy, that ontology is not worth pursuing, and that ontology suffers from the ambiguity of 'existence'. Of course, some of these philosophers endorse more than one of these challenges. Jonathan Schaffer, for example, endorses the second challenge as a result of endorsing the first.[2] But the challenges are logically independent: one can endorse one of them without endorsing the other two.

[1] Hilary Putnam claims that Quine "single-handedly" made ontology a respectable subject (2004: 79). As Thomas Hofweber puts it, Quine's approach is the "nowadays dominant view of how to achieve results in ontology" (2005: 276). Likewise, Jonathan Schaffer describes Quine's approach as "dominant", suggesting that the contemporary field of metametaphysics includes "a central Quinean majority, amid a scattering of Carnapian dissidents" (2009: 347, 350).

[2] Schaffer's views are discussed in chapter 2.

In this introduction I will provide a brief overview of the Quinean approach to ontology. In outlining the Quinean approach I will naturally draw from Quine's work. But as this introduction is not an attempt at detailed exegesis, I will not discuss everything that Quine ever wrote on the subject. Still, I do trust that the sketch provides an accurate summary of Quine's approach to ontology. I will condense the Quinean approach into three steps and three theses. Each of these theses is the object of one of the aforementioned challenges. For example, the Quinean thesis that ontology is difficult faces the challenge that ontology is actually easy. Each of the subsequent chapters is devoted to describing and rejecting one of these challenges.

2. Three steps of the Quinean approach

What, then, is the Quinean approach to ontology? According to Quine, the ontological question is simply "What is there?" (1948: 21). It is not what grounds what, what structures what, or what makes what true. Quine thought that there is a trivial answer to the ontological question, namely "Everything" (21). But as Quine observed, this just tells us "that there is what there is" (21). Ontologists want a more substantive answer; that is, they want to know exactly what exists. Quine, of course, had his own preferred views on this matter. Yet in "On What There Is" Quine is more concerned with the proper method for

determining what exists than he is with making a list of existing things. In other words, Quine is more interested in knowing how to answer the ontological question than he is with answering the question itself. Given that we are interested in Quine's overall approach to ontology (his 'metaontology', in the contemporary jargon), we shall ignore Quine's preferred views on what actually exists. We shall instead focus on his method for answering the ontological question.

According to the Quinean approach, we determine what exists by proceeding through the following three steps:

1. Identify our best theory of the world.

Identifying our best theory of the world requires criteria by which to evaluate competing theories. For Quine, these criteria include, at a minimum, simplicity and explanatory power (35-36). Quine notes that these are the same criteria as those used for evaluating scientific theories (35-36). In fact, for Quine our best theory of the world just is our best scientific theory. As he says elsewhere, "it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described" (1981: 21).

2. Formulate our best theory of the world into logical notation.

Quine denied that we can answer the ontological question simply by listing the claims of our best theory in ordinary English. This is because ordinary English is not sufficiently precise, and because it appears committed to the existence of entities that can be paraphrased away in logical form. For example, Quine thought that we can apply Russell's theory of descriptions to both definite descriptions and proper names, thereby avoiding the problem of reference to nonexistent beings (1948: 25-28).

3. Determine what our theory says exists by looking to the variables.

More precisely, Quine held that one determines what exists by identifying what the variables of the formulated theory must range over in order for the theory to be true. Hence Quine's famous slogan, "To be is to be the value of a variable" (34). At the same time, looking to the variables will not tell us what there is *tout court*. It will only tell us what our best theory says that there is (1948: 35; 1951a: 12). But if it is indeed our best theory, and the theory is indeed properly formulated, then what the variables range over is our ontology. As Quine summarizes:

> "The ontology to which an (interpreted) theory is committed comprises all and only the objects over which the bound variables of the theory have to be construed as ranging in order that the statements in the theory be true." (1951a: 11)

3. Three theses of the Quinean approach

In the preceding three steps, we have Quine's procedure for determining what exists. Additionally, we can also observe three other, more general Quinean theses:

I. Ontology is difficult.

If we adopt the Quinean approach, then determining what exists is not an easy exercise. First, we have to identify our best theory of the world. This involves evaluating theories according to a set of criteria for theory choice. For Quine, our best theory of the world is a scientific theory. So to determine what exists, we need to do science – far from an easy exercise. We also have to formulate our scientific theory into logical notation. Consequently, we cannot rest content with a firm grasp of the nuances of ordinary English. As Thomas Hofweber neatly states:

> "[W]hat Quine suggested [is that we] look at the best overall theory of the world, a theory that scientists not philosophers formulate, and see whether or not that theory requires the existence of certain entities. If yes, consider the question about the existence of these entities answered affirmatively, if no, consider it answered negatively. In any case, answering these questions will be at least as hard as coming up with our best overall theory of the world, which is to say: very hard." (2005: 258)

II. Ontological questions are worth pursuing.

This thesis is implicit in Quine's rigorous pursuit of ontological questions. Despite the difficulty of doing Quinean ontology, Quine thought it a worthwhile subject. Quine used his procedure to answer ontological questions about a diversity of various entities. Ontological questions are perfectly meaningful, and they are worthy of the philosopher's time. In fact, Quine claims that with his approach we now have "a more explicit standard" for determining ontological commitment (1948: 33). It is both fruitful and illuminating to put this standard to good use.

III. Ontologists should only be concerned with the Quinean sense of 'existence'.

By "the Quinean sense of 'existence'" I mean the sense in which an entity exists if it satisfies Quine's criteria for ontological commitment. This third thesis

may appear to be a corollary of the slogan, 'Existence is univocal'.[3] Yet this slogan involves a puzzle. The puzzle arises from a use-mention distinction between existence and 'existence'.[4] As the slogan is presently formulated, 'existence' is used, not mentioned. But existence cannot be univocal, for the property of being univocal applies only to words, not things. For example, 'proton' is univocal; protons are not. So this way of formulating the slogan cannot be quite right. At the same time, saying ''Existence' is univocal' leads to difficulties of its own. As we shall see in chapter 3, this claim is probably false: there is probably more than one meaning for 'existence' and its related expressions. But even if it is true, it is not a doctrine with which Quine would necessarily agree. Quine observes that we do use sentences of the form "there are [Fs]" loosely and variously in everyday speech. Yet he claims that such uses need "dusting up" when our thoughts turn "seriously ontological" (1969: 100). This suggests that for Quine, the issue is not so much whether there are different senses of 'existence' in ordinary English, but whether one of these senses should be the preoccupation of ontologists. Quine thought that ontologists should focus on what exists in the Quinean sense. Once we apply Quine's criteria for ontological commitment, the *ontological* question of which entities exist is

[3] For a defense of the view encapsulated by this slogan, see van Inwagen (1998: 236-237; 2009: 482-492).
[4] van Inwagen (1998, 2009) fails to observe this distinction.

settled.[5] Note that I will not defend this third thesis in its present form. Instead, I will defend a more modest version.

With these three theses, then, our summary of the Quinean approach to ontology is complete. As previously mentioned, the Quinean approach enjoys predominance in analytic philosophy today. It is also the approach that I will attempt to defend. I should inform the reader, however, as to the comparative modesty of my task. It is not my aim to defend the Quinean approach against every possible objection. Nor is it my aim to defend every philosophical view that Quine brought to bear on ontological questions.[6] My only aim is to defend the Quinean approach against three contemporary lines of criticism: that ontology is easy, that it is not worth pursuing, and that it suffers from an ambiguity in 'existence'. It is to the first of these challenges that we now turn.

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[5] The attempt to reconcile an ontologically privileged sense of 'existence' with the looseness of the word in ordinary language is a bit tricky (see chapter 3 for more on this problem). But some sense can be made of it. Consider Quine's example of Pegasus: if Pegasus does not exist, then he does not subsist either (1948: 23). Thus if the Quinean criteria for ontological commitment show that Pegasus does not exist, then the ontological question regarding Pegasus is settled. Given that the ontologist's job is to answer the ontological question, she does not need to run through a separate set of criteria to see whether Pegasus, though not existing, might nevertheless subsist or exist in some other sense. But the Quinean ontologist can still grant that, as a matter of descriptive fact, people use the words 'exist' and 'there are' loosely in everyday language. She can grant, for example, that some people say '… and there was Pegasus' when listing the contents of last night's dream. Still, this is of no particular interest to the Quinean ontologist, who is only concerned with answering the ontological question according to the Quinean sense of 'existence'.

[6] I do not, for example, attempt to defend Quine's behaviourism or his analysis of proper names in terms of Russell's theory of descriptions.

Chapter 1

Is ontology too easy?

1. Introduction

According to the first Quinean thesis, ontology is difficult. The ontologist must rely on scientific inquiry, and must also formulate her best theory of the world into logical notation. Yet this thesis has been challenged by what Theodore Sider calls "easy ontology" (2011: 189). Proponents of easy ontology deny that we need to go through the process of identifying our best theory of the world, formulating it into logical notation, and then looking to the variables. Instead, they claim that ontological questions can be answered simply by looking to some feature of language. In this chapter I will examine the easy ontologies of Matti Eklund and Amie Thomasson. In brief, I will argue that Eklund's 'maximalist' version of easy ontology does not allow us to determine the existence of abstract objects. I will also argue that Thomasson's version involves a particular slide in logic. Furthermore, I will argue that her version is, in certain cases, ontologically uninformative.

2. Maximalism

2.1. Overview

Matti Eklund calls his version of easy ontology "maximalism" (2006: 102; 2008: 391-392; 2009: 153-154). Eklund endorses maximalism over other forms of easy ontology, though he sometimes hints that maximalism may be problematic.[7] Here is Eklund's most recent characterization of maximalism:

> "For any kind of object F, where the pluralist says that there is some language such that "Fs exist" comes out true (where "exists" expresses this language's existence-like concept), the maximalist says that Fs exist." (2009: 153)[8]

Thus, for the maximalist to believe that Fs exist, she must believe that "Fs exist" is true in some language. We can formulate this as the following condition:

> (L): There is some language in which "Fs exist" comes out true (where "exist" expresses this language's existence-like concept).

Now (L) is not meant to be a difficult condition to satisfy. For Eklund seems to assume that one can always construct a language in which, given a

[7] Eklund endorses maximalism over Eli Hirsch's 'quantifier variance'. He notes that one possible problem for maximalism is that it might allow for the coexistence of incompatible objects (2006: 112-114).

[8] In the original quotation Eklund uses "Ks" instead of "Fs". I have used "Fs" in order to maintain consistency with Eklund's (2006), as well as with Hale and Wright's (2009).

certain meaning of 'exist', "Fs exist" comes out true (2006: 103-104). As Eklund puts it, the maximalist "rejects the notion that there can fail to be a fit between language and reality" (104). The existence of Fs is easily secured by the fact that there is some language in which "Fs exist" comes out true. Consequently, Eklund claims that maximalism is a "shallow" approach to ontology (2009: 153). Those committed to maximalism "trivialize" ontological questions by reducing them to questions of assertoric practice (153). Consider, for example, a debate over whether 'incars' exist. An 'incar' is defined as a car that exists only when it is parked inside a garage.[9] To determine the existence of incars, the Quinean ontologist will plod through her requirements for ontological commitment. She will identify our best theory of the world, formulate that theory into logical notation, and then see whether the variables range over incars. The maximalist, by contrast, already knows that there is some language, actual or constructed, in which "incars exist" is true. So it follows that incars exist. There is no need for the maximalist to further determine whether incars *really* exist or not.

Given the availability of various existence-languages, it is not surprising that maximalism results in a decadent ontology (2006: 102; 2008: 391; 2009: 153). Not only will the maximalist accept that incars exist; she will accept the existence of any substitution for F as long as "Fs exist" is true in some language. Eklund does, however, seek to reduce the ontological commitments imposed by

[9] Incars were first introduced into the literature by Eli Hirsch (1976: 361-362).

maximalism. Before the maximalist accepts the existence of Fs, Eklund requires that the following two conditions be satisfied (2006: 102; 2008: 391-392):

> (a) The hypothesis that Fs exist is consistent.
> (b) Fs do not fail to exist, simply as a matter of contingent empirical fact.

Condition (a) allows the maximalist to deny the existence of self-contradictory objects. Condition (b) allows the maximalist to deny the existence of objects that are believed not to exist for empirical reasons. To use Eklund's example, condition (b) allows the maximalist to deny the existence of yetis (102). Of course, it does seem as if (b) significantly compromises the easiness of maximalism. For (b) requires that the maximalist consult the empirical facts when pursuing ontological questions. Empirical facts are a substantive, difficult matter – a question of science. Perhaps the maximalist could reply that (b) only renders some ontological questions substantive. There could be some putative entities the existence of which no empirical fact could possibly rule out. If so, then (b) is trivially satisfied with respect to such entities. Incars, for instance, might be entities of this type. Whether this response actually works is a matter for debate. Still, let us grant to the maximalist that (b) is compatible with the shallowness of some ontological questions. We can now turn to other objections.

2.2. Hale and Wright's objection

Bob Hale and Crispin Wright argue that the inclusion of conditions (a) and (b) actually renders maximalism tautologous:

> "[I]t seems that the cure is worse than the disease – for when clause (b) is understood as required to allow for contingent non-existence, its conjunction with Eklund's clause (a) would seem to be equivalent to: It is possible that Fs exist and it is not the case both that Fs don't exist and that they might. But this simplifies to: Fs exist, and Maximalism reduces to the tautology: Fs exist if and only if Fs exist!" (2009: 185-186, ft. 18)

In Hale and Wright's view, (a) and (b) are equivalent to "It is possible that Fs exist and it is not the case both that Fs don't exist and that they might" (186). Expressed logically:

$(ab_{HW1})\ \Diamond\exists xFx \wedge \sim(\sim\exists xFx \wedge \Diamond\exists xFx)$

Assuming that Fs are possible, this reduces to:

$(ab_{HW2})\ \exists xFx$

And if we continue to assume that Fs are possible, condition (b) reduces to:

(b_{HW}) $\exists xFx$

For the sake of charity, let us assume that there is always some language in which "Fs exist" comes out true. Consequently, maximalism is formulated as the tautology:

(M_{HW}) $\exists xFx \leftrightarrow \exists xFx$

On Hale and Wright's formulation, then, maximalism is indeed tautologous. But is their formulation of maximalism correct? There is reason to think not. Recall that for Hale and Wright, condition (b) is equivalent to "it is not the case both that Fs don't exist and that they might" (2009: 186). Yet this formulation omits a slight but crucial element of Eklund's condition (b). Here is how Eklund phrases (b):

> "Fs do not fail to exist, simply as a matter of contingent *empirical* fact" (2006: 102, emphasis mine)

And elsewhere:

> "[T]here can be objects of that type given that the *empirical* facts are exactly what they are" (2008: 391, emphasis mine)

Eklund does not spell out what he means by an "empirical fact." Let us take an empirical fact to be a fact about the contents of the physical world. For example, it is an empirical fact that yetis do not exist. With this in mind, we can simplify Eklund's formulation of (b) as follows:

> (b_E) There is no fact about the contents of the physical world that rules out the existence of Fs.

Contrast this with Hale and Wright's simplified formulation of (b):

> (b_{HW}) $\exists xFx$

Now we can show that maximalism is not tautologous by showing that (b_{HW}) is not equivalent to (b_E). We can do so by examining cases in which (b_E) is satisfied, when (b_{HW}) is not. Consider numbers. There is no fact about the contents of the physical world that tells us that numbers do not exist. If they do exist, numbers would not be among the contents of the physical world anyway.[10] So if there is a fact about whether or not numbers exist, it would not be an

[10] Barring some views to the contrary, such as that of Maddy (1990).

empirical fact. Consequently, (b_E) is satisfied with respect to numbers. Assuming also that "numbers exist" is true in some language and that numbers are logically coherent, Eklund's maximalist should believe that numbers exist.

But the fact that (b_E) is satisfied with respect to numbers does not entail that (b_{HW}) is also satisfied. Just because there is no empirical fact that rules out the existence of numbers does not entail that numbers exist. Numbers might not exist at all, regardless of which empirical facts obtain. In short, (b_E) can be satisfied even when (b_{HW}) is not. Therefore, Hale and Wright have not shown that maximalism is tautologous.[11]

2.3. The problem of abstract entities

Although maximalism is not tautologous, I will now argue that it faces another, more pressing problem. The problem, in brief, is that the maximalist cannot determine whether abstract entities exist. Let us begin by considering how the maximalist would determine the existence of some concrete type of entity F. She would first see whether there is a language in which "Fs exist" is true (condition (L)). She would next determine whether the hypothesis that Fs exist is consistent (condition (a)). Finally, she would consult the empirical facts (condition (b)). That is, she would ask whether there is a fact about the contents

[11] As the next section will show, this line of reasoning will provide other problems for the maximalist. For now, it is only included to show that maximalism is not tautologous.

of the physical world that rules out the existence of Fs. In the case of concrete entities, the answer is straightforward. All the maximalist needs to do is to see whether Fs are among the contents of the physical world. If they are, then Fs exist. If they are not, then Fs do not exist. To use our previous example, there is a fact about the contents of the physical world that rules out the existence of yetis. The fact is simply that yetis are not among the physical world's contents. Therefore, (b) is not satisfied with respect to yetis. The maximalist should therefore deny that yetis exist.

When it comes to abstract entities, however, the answer is less straightforward. Suppose the maximalist wants to know whether the Form of the Good exists. She goes through conditions (L), (a), and (b). She knows that there is a language in which "the Form of the Good exists" is true. So (L) is satisfied. She also knows that the hypothesis that the Form of the Good exists is consistent. So (a) is satisfied. She then gets to condition (b) – and gets stuck. Is there a fact about the contents of the physical world that rules out the existence of the Form of the Good?

As we assumed with the example of numbers, the most obvious answer seems to be 'no'. Regardless of the contents of the physical world, the Form of the Good could still exist. Examining the contents of the physical world would just be an exercise in formality: of course the Form of the Good is not among them. So there does not seem to be a fact about the contents of the physical

world that rules out the existence of the Form of the Good. Therefore, (b) is satisfied. Assuming that (L) and (a) are also satisfied, the maximalist should accept that the Form of the Good exists.

But then the maximalist recalls that some philosophers think that the answer is 'yes'. That is, some philosophers believe that there *is* a fact about the contents of the physical world that rules out the existence of the Form of the Good. This fact is just that the Form of the Good is not among the physical world's contents. Consequently, these philosophers deny that the Form of the Good exists. Consider J. L. Mackie's argument from queerness. According to Mackie, the Form of the Good, were it to exist, would be metaphysically strange or queer.[12] Its strangeness is due to the fact that it would be "utterly different from anything else in the universe" (1977: 38). Because the Form of the Good is not among the contents of the physical world, Mackie denies that it exists. So for Mackie, (b) is not satisfied. If the maximalist agrees with Mackie, then she must deny that the Form of the Good exists.

Now the maximalist is stuck. Is there a fact about the contents of the physical world that rules out the existence of the Form of the Good, or not? In order to answer this question, the maximalist must first determine whether

[12] Mackie directs his argument against "objective values" (1977: 38). But he claims that Plato's forms give a "dramatic picture" of what such values would look like (40). For a reconstruction of Mackie's argument that supports the assimilation of Platonic moral forms under objective values, see Timmons (1999: 49-51).

Mackie is right. The problem now is that there is no clear way for the maximalist to do this without giving up her maximalism.

To develop this point, let us consider two ways in which the maximalist might try to determine whether Mackie is right. One way might be to appeal to the existence of some other abstract entity, say, the Form of Justice. If the Form of Justice exists, then there is no reason why the Form of the Good cannot exist as well. The problem with this approach is that it just pushes the question back a step: what justifies belief in the Form of Justice? For the maximalist, such justification will have to come from the satisfaction of conditions (L), (a), and (b). To satisfy (b), the maximalist will have to determine whether Mackie's approach applies to the Form of Justice or not. And now we're back with the same problem.

Another strategy might be to claim that positing the Form of the Good explains various features of our world. Given such explanatory value, we can reject Mackie's stance and accept that the Form of the Good exists. Of course we may question whether positing abstract objects really has any explanatory value at all. But there is another problem with this strategy that strikes at the heart of the maximalist enterprise. The problem is that if the maximalist chooses to add explanatory value as a criterion of existence, then she loses much of what is distinctive about maximalism. Recall that maximalism, as its name suggests, is ontologically decadent. As Eklund claims, it is supposed to ensure a constant fit

between language and reality (2006: 104). With condition (a), this decadence is restricted to entities that are logically consistent. With condition (b), this decadence is further restricted to entities that are not ruled out by any empirical facts. By adding the further condition that the entities must have explanatory value, the maximalist's permissivism is almost entirely compromised. To demand that whatever exists must have explanatory value denies the existence of all sorts of otherwise maximalist-friendly objects.

It seems, then, that the maximalist must advance some other strategy for determining whether Mackie is right. It is not clear what this other strategy might be. In its absence, I conclude that the maximalist is unable to determine whether abstract entities exist. Consequently, maximalism should not be adopted as a successful form of easy ontology.

3. Thomasson's easy ontology

3.1. Overview

There is, however, another version of easy ontology. This is the version developed by Amie Thomasson (2007, 2008). Thomasson's idea is that we can determine whether some sort of entity K exists just by examining whether 'K'

refers. If 'K' refers, then Ks exist. No further work needs to be done to see whether Ks *really* exist. Thomasson puts it simply (2008: 65):

(E) Ks exist iff *K* refers.[13]

Now the dependence of existence on reference may suggest that existence questions are substantive and difficult. But for Thomasson, reference is easily secured by the fulfillment of what she calls "application conditions" (67). Application conditions are just the rules of use that determine under which circumstances a term is properly applied. They are established by speakers through the acceptance and refusal of the term under various circumstances (67). For example, suppose someone baptises a certain species of fish 'baubleheads'. The application conditions for 'baublehead' will just be those circumstances in which that particular species of fish is present. The application conditions for 'baublehead' will not be fulfilled if, for instance, the fish is absent and there is only seaweed in the area (68; cf. 2007: 39-40, 48-49, 83-84). Or consider the example of phlogiston. The application conditions for 'phlogiston' are fulfilled when a certain chemical is released during combustion. Given that no such chemical is actually released, the application conditions for 'phlogiston'

[13] The asterisks are Thomasson's.

are never fulfilled (2008: 74-75). By making reference depend on the fulfillment of application conditions, we get (67):

(R) *K* refers iff the application conditions for *K* are fulfilled.

In short, whether Ks exist depends on whether 'K' refers (condition (E)). And whether 'K' refers depends on whether the application conditions for 'K' are fulfilled (condition (R)). Once we see that the application conditions for 'K' are fulfilled, the existence of Ks is settled. We can now appreciate why Thomasson's approach is a form of easy ontology. It is not due to the easiness of determining whether the application conditions are fulfilled. On the contrary, determining whether the application conditions for 'phlogiston' are fulfilled required a significant amount of scientific investigation. Rather, Thomasson's approach is a form of easy ontology because it easily settles certain controversial ontological questions. To see this, let us return to our example of numbers. Quinean ontologists will have to struggle through the process of determining whether our best theory of the world is really committed to the existence of numbers, or whether numbers can be reduced or paraphrased away. But on Thomasson's account, the answer is easy: just look to see if there is a context in which the application conditions for numerical terms are fulfilled. Because there are such contexts (whether in mathematics or in everyday life), it follows that numbers

exist. Or consider the example of Sherlock Holmes. Whether or not Sherlock Holmes exists is, for Thomasson, quite an easy matter. One simply observes that there are contexts in which it is appropriate to use 'Sherlock Holmes', such as when reading Arthur Conan Doyle's books. It follows that, on Thomasson's account, Sherlock Holmes exists. Thomasson claims that we can likewise demonstrate the existence of stories, symphonies, propositions, universals, and artifacts (72, ft. 20; 74). Because there are contexts in which the application conditions for their corresponding terms are fulfilled, all these entities exist.

On Thomasson's account, then, it is quite easy to answer certain controversial ontological questions. In fact, it is so easy that there is little left for ontologists to do. Thomasson actually denies that we should have a distinctive discipline of ontology at all. In Thomasson's words, her method for answering existence questions "leaves very little room for doing ontology, if we conceive of this as a distinctively *philosophical* enterprise of figuring out what *really* exists" (75, emphasis in original). Anyone with a working knowledge of English will know how to answer existence questions.

3.2. Problems for Thomasson's account

Thomasson's account is intriguing, and her method straightforward. Still, her account faces two problems. The first problem is that Thomasson slides

between the appropriate *use* of a term to the *existence* of the term's reference. We can see this in the following passage:

> "Consider, for example, terms such as 'story' and 'symphony'. Barring radical sceptical hypotheses, it seems that the standard application conditions associated with these terms are regularly fulfilled (given the relevant creative acts, performances, etc.), and so that such things exist. But if such things do exist, as normally understood they cannot be identified with any spatiotemporally located entities such as copies of texts or performances." (72)

Here Thomasson suggests that the application conditions for 'symphony' are fulfilled in the presence of, say, an orchestra performing Beethoven's ninth. This seems right. It is perfectly appropriate to utter 'there is a symphony playing' or 'I am enjoying the symphony' while listening to the orchestra. Given that the application conditions for 'symphony' are fulfilled, Thomasson claims that symphonies exist. She also claims that symphonies are abstract entities. So given that it is appropriate to use the term 'symphony', Thomasson concludes that an abstract entity – a symphony – exists.

But this cannot be right. It may be appropriate to use the word 'symphony' when listening to Beethoven's ninth. Yet this does not entail that a corresponding abstract entity exists. Plato's heaven is not populated by people using words in contextually appropriate ways. In order that the application conditions for 'symphony' are fulfilled, all that needs to exist is a physical

orchestra playing a certain piece of music. The fact that it is appropriate to use the word 'symphony' in such a context does not entail the existence of some abstract entity in some abstract realm. No abstract entity is created by our correct use of 'symphony' while listening to Beethoven's ninth. Thus, securing the existence of abstract entities is not quite as easy as Thomasson would have us believe.

Now Thomasson could concede that the appropriate use of a term does not entail the existence of its reference in a full-blooded sense of 'existence'. She could, however, claim that the reference still exists in some other sense. Yet if Thomasson's account only secures existence in a lightweight sense, then she is engaged in a harmless exercise. Easy ontology is easy when using a lightweight sense of 'existence'. But ontology is still hard when using a more substantive sense of the word.

There is another problem with Thomasson's account. Recall that for Thomasson, whether Ks exist depends on whether 'K' refers. And whether 'K' refers depends on whether the application conditions for 'K' are fulfilled. The problem here is that in many cases, whether or not the application conditions for 'K' are fulfilled depends on whether Ks exist. We can look to Thomasson's own examples as cases in point. In order for the application conditions for 'baublehead' to be fulfilled, there must actually exist the right kind of fish. But then the fulfillment of the application conditions does not tell us anything that

we would not already know. For we need to know whether baubleheads exist in order to determine whether the application conditions for 'baublehead' are fulfilled. It is therefore an exercise in redundancy to use the fulfillment of application conditions as a gauge for determining what exists. The same point can be made about phlogiston: for its application conditions to be fulfilled, we already need to know whether there actually exists a chemical that is released during combustion. Knowing (contrary to fact) that the application conditions for 'phlogiston' are fulfilled does not inform us of the existence of 'phlogiston' – we already had to know that in order to determine whether the application conditions were fulfilled. So the fulfillment of application conditions is, in many cases, ontologically uninformative. When combined with the preceding problem, there is a cumulative case to be made against Thomasson's easy ontology. We should therefore not invoke Thomasson's account as reason to deny that ontology is difficult.

4. Chapter summary

In this chapter we examined two forms of easy ontology. According to Eklund's maximalism, we can determine what exists simply by looking to the truth of sentences in various languages. Given the plurality of actual or possible languages, few things will fail to exist. We saw that Hale and Wright's rejection of

maximalism, namely on the grounds that it is tautologous, is not convincing. This is because Hale and Wright fail to formulate maximalism correctly. However, the maximalist still faces the problem of abstract entities. Before she can claim that an abstract entity exists, the maximalist must first decide whether the entity's absence from the physical world counts against its existence. Yet there is no clear way for her to make such a decision without compromising her maximalism. Appealing to the existence of other abstract entities just begs the question. And adding another criterion of existence, such as explanatory power, greatly compromises the maximalist's attempt to ensure a constant fit between language and reality.

In addition to Eklund's maximalism, we examined Thomasson's version of easy ontology. I argued that Thomasson's account contains two errors. First, Thomasson slides between the appropriate use of a term and the existence of the term's reference. For just because it is contextually appropriate to use a term does not imply that the term's reference exists in some abstract realm. Furthermore, we saw that Thomasson's account is often ontologically uninformative. Thomasson claims that we can determine whether Ks exist by examining whether the application conditions for 'K' are fulfilled. But to know whether the application conditions are fulfilled, we already need to know whether Ks exist. So the fulfillment of the application conditions will not be what

informs us about the existence of Ks. Neither Eklund nor Thomasson, then, have given us reason to deny our first Quinean thesis.

Chapter 2

Are ontological questions worth pursuing?

1. Introduction

Our second Quinean thesis states that ontological questions are worth pursuing. As is well known, Rudolf Carnap denied this claim. In this chapter I will first describe Carnap's distinctions between various types of existence questions. I will then claim that none of Carnap's arguments gives us reason to deny the worth of ontology. Having discussed Carnap's arguments, I will turn to the contemporary work of Jonathan Schaffer. Unlike Carnap, Schaffer believes that traditional ontological questions are perfectly meaningful. But like Carnap, Schaffer denies that they are worth pursuing. Instead, Schaffer suggests that philosophers should focus on determining which entities are 'fundamental', and which are 'derivative'. I will argue, using an argument parallel to one of Schaffer's own, that there are no fundamental entities. If my argument is sound, then there is little point in pursuing Schaffer's preferred approach to ontology.

2. Carnap's "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology"

2.1. Overview

In my discussion of Carnap I will focus on Carnap's famous essay, "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology" (ESO). Carnap first published ESO in the *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* in 1950, and then in 1956 as a supplement to the second edition of his *Meaning and Necessity* (citations will be to the latter). ESO remains very influential. As a rough quantitative measure, of the seventeen contributions to the volume *Metametaphysics* (2009), thirteen cite ESO. In fact, there are now a number of 'neo-Carnapian' philosophers.[14] Given its influence on contemporary discussion, I have chosen to include an examination of ESO. At the same time, ESO is difficult to understand.[15] In my discussion, therefore, I will rely on Graham Bird's (1995, 2003) interpretation of ESO. Bird's delineation of Carnap's distinctions, as well as his discussion thereof, is most informative.

Carnap begins ESO with a section entitled "The Problem of Abstract Entities" (205). He first observes that empiricists are generally suspicious of stating that numbers, properties, and propositions exist. Unfortunately, science is rife with talk of such entities. Empiricists must therefore find a way of denying that abstract entities exist without compromising their commitment to science.

[14] Thomas Hofweber explicitly identifies his position as "neo-Carnapian", though he does not agree with all of Carnap's arguments (2005: 282). Eli Hirsch also claims that his views are "roughly Carnapian", though like Hofweber he qualifies the extent of his agreement with Carnap (2009: 231). Note that Hirsch is often identified as a "neo-Carnapian" in the literature. See Hawley (2007: 237) and Eklund (2009: 137).

[15] Peter van Inwagen, for instance, states that he cannot understand Carnap's arguments (2009: 489, ft. 29).

Carnap gives the example of an empirically-minded physicist. This physicist might try to avoid talk of numbers. But he will still keep on talking about numbers like everyone else. Yet he will do so "with an uneasy conscience, like a man who in his everyday life does with qualms many things which are not in accord with the high principles he professes on Sundays" (205).

How then is the empiricist to reconcile his commitment to science? One way might be to paraphrase scientific claims so that they avoid reference to abstract entities. Carnap, however, does not adopt this method. Instead, he argues that the entire debate over abstract entities involves meaningless questions (206-207, 209, 210, 212, 213, 214, 215, 218). Carnap calls such questions "external questions", and contrasts them with "internal questions" (206). Internal questions are meaningful; external questions (barring a certain kind) are not. But as Bird argues, we can actually observe a fourfold distinction in ESO (2003: 98-100). Thus we must distinguish between 'particular internal questions', 'general internal questions', 'practical external questions', and 'theoretical external questions'. Let us examine each in turn.

Particular internal questions ask, quite simply, whether particular things exist. Examples include "Is there a white piece of paper on my desk?" or "Is there a prime number greater than a hundred?" (207, 208-209). Particular internal questions are answered either synthetically or analytically, depending on the case at hand. For instance, the existence of a particular piece of paper will be

determined synthetically, whereas the existence of a particular number will be determined analytically (207, 208-209). Carnap believes that particular internal questions are perfectly acceptable.

General internal questions, by contrast, ask whether general categories of things exist. For example, one such question is "Are there numbers [in general]?" (209). The answer to a general internal question depends on the answer given to its corresponding particular internal question. If there is, say, a prime number greater than a hundred, then it follows that numbers (in general) exist (209). Carnap also believes that general internal questions are perfectly acceptable.[16]

Practical external questions are less focussed on existence. Instead, they ask whether it is useful for us to speak of certain entities. A practical external question might ask, for instance, whether it is advisable to adopt the language of physical objects (207-208). The answer to a practical external question should not depend on any ontological claim about what really exists. The focus should rather be on the scientific benefits of using the language (cf. 221). In light of this, some commentators interpret Carnap as a relativist. Daniel Goldstick, for example, claims that "adherence to any philosophy of life, for the Carnapian, will

[16] As Bird (2003: 103; cf. Haack 1976: 468, Chateaubriand 2003: 70) points out, the presence of general internal questions refutes Quine's (1951b) interpretation of ESO, according to which all questions about entire categories are external questions. At the same time, it is interesting to note that Carnap never claims that Quine misunderstood his distinction, not even in their personal correspondence. The relevant letters are found in Quine and Carnap (1990: 424-441).

in the end be wholly grounded on a free choice, a non-rational leap of faith" (1971: 254). This is almost certainly a mistake. Carnap actually identifies a number of criteria to determine which language is best. These include efficiency, fruitfulness, ease of use, and conduciveness to the aim for which the language is intended (208, 214, 218, 221). All languages are not equal.

The final category is of theoretical external questions. According to Bird, theoretical external questions are defined by exclusion (2003: 99-100). They are not particular internal questions, nor general internal questions, nor practical external questions. Rather, they tend to be questions only asked by philosophers (207). Sometimes philosophers describe such questions as about what "really" exists, or about the existence "of the system of entities as a whole" (206, 213, cf. 214). For example, consider again the question 'Are there numbers?' When asked as a general internal question, the answer is easy. This is because, according to Carnap, the existence of numbers can be derived analytically from "five is a number" (209). But the traditional philosopher wants more. She wants to discern "the ontological status of numbers" (209). She wants to know whether numbers have a "certain metaphysical characteristic called reality" (209).

Carnap rejects theoretical external questions as meaningless (209, 210, 212, 213, 214, 215, 218). Clearly, meaningless questions are not worth pursuing. In what follows I will present Carnap's three arguments for the meaninglessness of theoretical external questions. All three arguments can, I believe, be resisted.

If my objections are sound, then Carnap has given us no reason to abandon the pursuit of ontology.

2.2. The delineation argument

We can call Carnap's first argument 'the delineation argument'. According to the delineation argument, no one has yet managed to delineate a fourth category of meaningful existence questions. At best we have a few vague characterizations of questions about what 'really exists' or about the 'ontological status' of entities. But such flourishes do little to carve out a genuine, substantive category.[17] Carnap motivates the delineation argument by considering the debate among philosophers over whether numbers really exist. Although the philosophers in this debate seem to be engaged in a substantive dispute, Carnap denies that they are actually debating the answer to a meaningful question. Insofar as the question 'Do numbers really exist?' is meaningful, it is because the question is simply an instance of one of the other three types of question. Here is how Carnap puts it:

[17] One could also try to delineate theoretical external questions as those questions for which no one can agree on what counts as the relevant evidence. Carnap does not state that anyone has actually suggested this delineation, but he does argue that at least one theoretical external question, namely that of the (external) existence of numbers, suffers from such disagreement (219). Still, this would not work to delineate a new category of question, given that many internal questions suffer from the same problem.

> "Unfortunately these philosophers have so far not given a formulation of their question in terms of the common scientific language. Therefore our judgment must be that they have not succeeded in giving to the external question and to the possible answers any cognitive content. Unless and until they supply a clear cognitive interpretation we are justified in our suspicion that their question is a pseudo-question, that is, one disguised in the form of a theoretical question while in fact it is non-theoretical" (209)

We can further express Carnap's point by trying to discern what exactly the philosopher is trying to ask. If she wants to know whether a particular number exists, then she should just look to mathematics. Her question would then be a particular internal one. If she wants to know whether numbers in general exist, they she should see whether particular numbers exist. Yet then her question would just be of the general internal variety. And if she wants to know whether she should even speak of numbers, then she should consider the practical benefits of number-talk. This would be to answer a practical external question. The philosopher, however, wants to ask a different question. But what more could she be asking? Until she answers this question, Carnap believes that we can regard her own question as meaningless.

My response to the delineation argument is to appeal to Thomas Hofweber's delineation of theoretical external questions (2005: 277-279). First we must distinguish between two senses of 'existence', namely an 'internal' and

an 'external' sense.[18] External questions are then delineated as those questions that ask whether something exists in the external sense of 'exists'. Consider again the example of numbers. According to Carnap, the truth of mathematical statements such as 'there is a number greater than five' is sufficient for numbers to exist (209). Now philosophers may grant that this shows that numbers exist in the internal sense of the word. But when asking their external questions, philosophers use a more demanding sense of 'exist'. They may acknowledge that numbers exist in the internal sense, though they still want to know whether numbers exist in the external sense as well. For example, they might want to know whether numbers exist in the Quinean sense of being ranged over by the variables of our best theory. Thus numbers may indeed exist in the sense that they are analytically derivable from certain mathematical sentences. Yet they may still fail to exist (contrary to fact) in the sense of being ranged over by our best theories of the world. In this case, the answer to the general internal question 'Are there numbers?' will be affirmative, whereas the answer to the corresponding theoretical external question will be negative. The latter question does not collapse into the former.

2.3. The category argument

[18] Hofweber's reasons for claiming that there are two senses of 'existence' are discussed in chapter 3.

We have seen that theoretical external questions can form a distinct category. This is because we can appeal to a sense of 'existence' not mentioned by Carnap. Yet there is a different way in which theoretical external questions can be delineated. This is to characterize theoretical external questions as questions about the existence of entire domains.[19] But Carnap argues that when theoretical external questions are characterized in this way, they are still meaningless. He explains why in what Bird calls Carnap's "category argument" (2003: 116). The argument is short but suggestive:

> "To be real in the scientific sense means to be an element of the system; hence this concept cannot be meaningfully applied to the system itself." (207)

Carnap here uses "system" instead of "domain". Unfortunately, Carnap does not define "system." So I have followed the precedent of Haack (1976: 461), Bird (2003: 116; 118-119), and Demopolous (2011: 649-650) in taking "system" to be equivalent to "domain". I diverge from Bird's interpretation, however, as to which problem the category argument actually identifies. Bird claims that the problem is with philosophers making an invalid inference:

[19] If there is no way to distinguish between this way of formulating theoretical external questions and general internal questions, then so much the better for Carnap's delineation argument. But we might try to motivate the distinction in the following way: general internal questions ask, say, whether there are numbers as elements of some domain; theoretical external questions ask whether the domain itself exists. As Carnap suggests in the category argument, domains exist over and above their elements.

> "The category argument insists generally on a crucial difference between ascribing a property to elements of some domain and ascribing it to the domain itself . . . In particular it rests on the claim that there is a fallacy in inferring properties of the domain itself "as a whole" from properties of the elements in the domain. The fallacy is easily illustrated from the natural contrast between elements belonging to sets and the sets themselves. We cannot infer from the fact that humans are mortal to the conclusion that the set of humans is mortal; and in a parallel way we cannot infer from the fact that some statements in a language are true to the conclusion that the language is itself true." (2003: 118)

Given his examples, the fallacy identified by Bird is the fallacy of composition. Just because each of the domain's elements are real does not mean that the domain itself is real. This does seem fallacious.[20] But the category argument does not state that the problem is with philosophers making an invalid inference. The problem is rather that philosophers ask about something that is definitionally impossible. They want to know whether domains are real, when by definition domains cannot be real. It is not that philosophers are invalidly inferring the reality of domains from the reality of the domains' elements.

With this clarification in place, we can respond to the category argument itself. The most promising response, it seems to me, is to reject Carnap's definition of 'real'. For Carnap, to be real is just to be an element of some domain. Now if this definition is to match our ordinary use of 'real', then it must

[20] Although there are parallel cases that are not fallacious. For example, we will grant that a theory is true if all of the theory's statements are true (thanks to Nick Griffin here).

be judged a failure. While being an element of some domain may be a necessary condition for being real, it is generally not sufficient. Otherwise, Pegasus would be real just because he is part of the domain of mythical creatures. On the other hand, if Carnap's definition of 'real' is purely stipulative, then it is inconsistent with some of his other uses of the same word. At one point Carnap states that the reality of Pegasus is to be determined by empirical investigation (207). Yet such empirical investigation would be redundant if the reality of Pegasus could be determined just by noting that Pegasus is an element of some domain. In short, we can accept the category argument if we accept Carnap's definition of 'real'. But there is no strict reason why we should accept such a definition.

2.4. The evidential argument

Let us sum up our discussion so far. Carnap claims that certain questions – theoretical external questions – are meaningless. These questions tend to be the ones philosophers ask about what *really* exists. According to Carnap's delineation argument, no one has yet managed to separate such questions from internal or practical external questions. In response, I invoked Thomas Hofweber's argument to the effect that we can delineate such questions by differentiating between different senses of 'exist'. On this account, theoretical external questions are just those questions that use a particular sense of 'exist'.

We then considered Carnap's category argument. In this argument Carnap proposes that we understand theoretical external questions to be questions about the existence of entire domains. He then argues that domains cannot be real by definition. In response, I rejected Carnap's definition of 'real'. Carnap's arguments have so far not undermined the worth of ontology.

Carnap does, however, have one final argument. We can call it 'the evidential argument'. The evidential argument states that, on the assumption that we can delineate theoretical external questions, there is still no agreement as to what sort of evidence would suffice to answer such questions. Carnap's example here is of two philosophers engaged in a (theoretical external) debate over the existence of numbers. With respect to their debate, Carnap states:

> "I cannot think of any possible evidence that would be regarded as relevant by both philosophers, and therefore, if actually found, would decide the controversy or at least make one of the opposite theses more probable than the other . . . Therefore I feel compelled to regard the external question as a pseudo-question, until both parties to the controversy offer a common interpretation of the question as a cognitive question; this would involve an indication of possible evidence regarded as relevant by both sides." (219)

Note first what Carnap is not saying. He is not saying that the answers to theoretical external questions are unverifiable. Thus Carnap is not endorsing

some form of verificationism.[21] Nor is Carnap simply stating that *some* purported evidence is in dispute. Rather, Carnap is making the stronger claim that he cannot think of *any* possible evidence that both parties would agree is relevant.

Should we accept this final argument? As with the other two, I think not. This is because the argument is invalid. Carnap assumes that if there is no universally agreed-upon evidence for the (non)existence of *a*, then the question 'Does *a* exist?' is meaningless. But this does not follow. Suppose a psychoanalyst claims that you dislike the Dutch. You protest his diagnosis, claiming that it lacks evidence. In fact, you furnish him with plenty of evidence to the contrary: the Dutch have always been kind to you, your favourite artist is Dutch, and so on. The psychoanalyst retorts that this evidence does not count, for your dislike of the Dutch is subliminal. For him, the real evidence is found in the absence of all things Dutch from your most persistent childhood memories.

In this scenario, it does not seem as if the psychoanalyst and you will agree on some piece of evidence that would (dis)confirm his diagnosis. Still, it does not follow that the questions 'Do you dislike the Dutch?' or 'Does there exist in you a dislike of the Dutch?' are meaningless. All we have is a case of significant disagreement as to what should count as evidence. And it is still possible that one party is mistaken. For instance, the psychoanalyst's appeal to certain childhood memories might not support his diagnosis at all. We must

[21] This is contrary to Stroud's (1984) reading of ESO. For a response to Stroud, see Bird (2003: 124-126).

conclude, therefore, that the presence of genuine disagreement over what should count as evidence does not entail that ontological questions are meaningless. It just shows that one of the disputants is making a mistake, or that our knowledge is so impoverished that we do not even know how to answer the question. Carnap's evidential argument, then, does not give us reason to abandon ontology.

3. Schaffer's Aristotelian approach

3.1. Overview

We have so far considered Carnap's reasons for denying the worth of ontological questions. As we have seen, Carnap rejected ontological questions as being meaningless. But there are other possible reasons for denying their worth. Jonathan Schaffer, for instance, does not think that ontology, traditionally conceived, should be rejected as meaningless. Instead, ontology should be rejected because it is too easy. Given the ease with which ontological questions can be answered, Schaffer thinks that philosophers should stop being preoccupied with them. Note that we have already examined versions of 'easy ontology' in chapter 1. In particular, we examined the work of Matti Eklund and Amie Thomasson. There are, however, two key differences between Eklund's

and Thomasson's views on the one hand, and Schaffer's on the other. First, Eklund and Thomasson claim that their revisionary versions of ontology render ontological questions easy. Schaffer, by contrast, claims that traditional Quinean ontology is itself easy. Second, Eklund and Thomasson both think that existence questions, despite their relative easiness, are worth pursuing. Schaffer thinks not.

Here, then is an overview of what Schaffer does think. According to Schaffer, the "Quinean view" of metaphysics (or ontology) consists of both a task and a method (2009: 348):

> *Quinean task*: The task of metaphysics is to say what exists.
>
> *Quinean method*: The method of metaphysics is to extract existence commitments from our best theory.

Schaffer rejects the Quinean view on the grounds that its questions are easy. As Schaffer claims, there is no need to ask whether properties, meanings, and numbers exist; the proper response is "Of course they do!" (347). Consider, for instance, Schaffer's argument for the existence of numbers (357):

1. There are prime numbers.
2. Therefore there are numbers.

Though simple, Schaffer believes that the argument is sound. The premise is a mathematical truism. It commands Moorean certainty, for it is more credible than any philosopher's argument to the contrary (357). And the conclusion follows from an adjective-drop inference. The premise is not about the fiction of numbers, nor has the sense of "are" shifted from the premise to the conclusion (357-358). Rather, the premise is about numbers themselves, and the sense of "are" remains unequivocal throughout.

Schaffer gives an equally simple argument for the existence of Sherlock Holmes (359):

1. Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes.
2. Therefore Sherlock Holmes exists.

According to Schaffer, the premise expresses a literary fact (359). Moreover, the conclusion follows from the premise. This is because "to create something is to make it exist" (359). Given the ease with which such arguments can be constructed, Schaffer believes that existence questions are trivial (356, 357, 359, 361, 366). The philosopher should not spend her time answering such trivial questions. Instead, she should maintain a permissive attitude about what exists. As Schaffer puts it, his preferred type of philosopher "will not toss many candidate entities into the rubbish bin" (354, footnote 6). Anyone who denies

the existence of a particular entity is just restricting her quantifier to a certain domain (360). For example, the nominalist who denies that numbers exist is just restricting her quantifier to mind-independent entities (360). The same is true for the atheist. According to Schaffer, the proper response to the question 'does God exist?' is "a trivial *yes*" (359, emphasis in original). What the atheist should claim is that God exists as a mind-dependent fictional character (360).

It is plain why Schaffer denies the worth of Quinean ontology. As we have seen, Schaffer believes that Quinean existence questions are trivial. He therefore openly doubts that there are many important existence questions (363). But Schaffer does not rest at criticizing the Quinean view. Instead, he suggests a replacement. According to Schaffer, philosophers should shift their focus from the "shallow" question of what exists to the "deep" question of what is fundamental (361). Philosophers should try to discern which entities are grounded in which other entities. Schaffer calls this the "Aristotelian view" of metaphysics (347). Like the Quinean view, the Aristotelian view consists of both a task and a method (351):

> *Aristotelian task*: The task of metaphysics is to say what grounds what.
>
> *Aristotelian method*: The method of metaphysics is to deploy diagnostics for what is fundamental, together with diagnostics for grounding.

For the Aristotelian metaphysician, certain entities will be grounded in other entities, all of which are arranged in a hierarchical chain of ontological dependence. This chain terminates at a collection of fundamental entities.[22] As Schaffer puts it:

> "[T]he neo-Aristotelian will begin from a hierarchical view of reality ordered by priority in nature. The primary entities form the sparse structure of being, while the grounding relations generate an abundant superstructure of posterior entities. The primary is (as it were) all God would need to create. The posterior is grounded in, dependent on, and derivative from it. The task of metaphysics is to limn this structure." (351)

We can visualize the Aristotelian view as follows. Let x_1, x_2, x_3, . . . x_n be all the entities that exist. x_3 is grounded in x_2, which is grounded in x_1. The fundamental ground of the whole chain is x_1. For the Aristotelian metaphysician, the task of determining the identity of x_1 will be of great interest. She will not, however, be particularly interested in asking existence questions. The point is rather to distinguish between which entities are fundamental, and which are derivative. As Schaffer characterizes them, fundamental entities are "independent, brute, irreducible, sparse, and primary" (2010: 309-310). Derivative entities, by contrast, are "dependent, explicable, reducible, abundant,

[22] Schaffer (2010) adheres to the monistic thesis that there is only one fundamental entity, namely the entire cosmos. Schaffer's monism is not essential to his Aristotelian view.

and secondary" (309-310). Schaffer believes that everything that exists is either fundamental or derivative (2009: 374).

Despite his interest in grounding, Schaffer does not spend much time discussing the grounding relation itself.[23] In fact, Schaffer claims that grounding is a primitive and unanalyzable notion (364).[24] But he does believe that the notion is "natural and intuitive" (375). For example, certain holes may be grounded in Swiss cheese. Moral features may be grounded in natural features. And truths may be grounded in truthmakers (375). The Aristotelian philosopher will be interested in these examples of grounding at work.

3.2. An objection

Despite their elegance, I believe that Schaffer's arguments for the existence of numbers and Sherlock Holmes are both unpersuasive. This is because the arguments only show that numbers and Sherlock Holmes exist in

[23] The grounding relation may in fact be too coarse-grained, and in need of replacement by finer notions such as supervenience, the determinate/determinable distinction, and so forth. See Wilson (MS).

[24] This point is controversial. Kit Fine, for example, defines 'grounding' as "Its being the case that *S* consists in nothing more than its being the case that *T*, *U*, …" (where *S*, *T*, and *U* are individual sentences) (2001: 15). In previous work, Fine discusses the notion of 'ontological dependence', where an "object e *ontologically depends* upon f if e requires f" (1991: 270, emphasis in original). Alternatively, Fine claims that ontological dependence occurs when it is an "essential property of x that it exists only if y does" (1995: 272). It is not clear whether Fine takes ontological dependence to be synonymous with grounding, though Schaffer indicates that it is (2010: 309-310).

Hofweber's 'internal' sense of the word.[25] [26] But, for the sake of argument, let us grant that Schaffer's arguments establish that such entities exist in the 'external' sense. I shall instead argue, using an argument that is logically parallel to one of Schaffer's own, that there are no fundamental entities. If my argument is successful, then the Aristotelian has cause for concern. For if there are no fundamental entities, then there is no point in trying to distinguish the fundamental from the derivative. Yet distinguishing the fundamental from the derivative was supposed to be the bread and butter of the Aristotelian metaphysician.

To begin, recall the chain x_1, x_2, x_3, . . . x_n. This chain represents all the entities that exist. Each member of the chain is grounded in a prior member; the fundamental ground is x_1. But if there is a more fundamental ground than x_1, then x_1 is not actually fundamental. Let x_0 be that ground. If we can show that x_0

[25] Briefly, Hofweber's 'internal' sense is the sense in which something can exist without being any part of reality. For example, it is the sense used in 'There is (or exists) someone whom Fred admires', when the object of Fred's admiration is Sherlock Holmes. Contrast this sense with the 'external' sense, which is used to refer to the contents of reality. For example, it is the sense used in 'There is (or exists) something that fell on my head'. For an elaboration on these examples of Hofweber's, as well as a more detailed description of his distinction, see chapter 3, section 2.3.

[26] Schaffer swiftly denies that there are different senses of 'existence' (2009: 357-358). He claims that (i) there is no linguistic evidence to support such an ambiguity; (ii) other languages do not use distinct terms for distinct existence claims; (iii) sentences such as "there are numbers" and "numbers exist" make the same claim; (iv) such an ambiguity would deny the validity of adjective-drop inferences. We can respond, briefly, that (i) begs the question against Hofweber (2005), who claims to present a good deal of linguistic evidence; (ii) is not necessarily true, for there is no reason why the evidence Hofweber presents is restricted to English; (iii) is actually compatible with Hofweber's view, in that both "there are numbers" and " numbers exist" could be using the quantifier in the same way (i.e. internally or externally); (iv) is false, given that one can always make adjective-drop inferences when the quantifier is being used in the same way in both the premise and the conclusion.

exists, then x_1 is not fundamental; it would be derivative instead. Now I believe that we can show that x_0 exists. We can do so by advancing an argument that is logically parallel to Schaffer's argument for the existence of Sherlock Holmes. Here, again, is Schaffer's argument (359):

1. Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes.
2. Therefore Sherlock Holmes exists.

Here is my argument:

1. Owen Pikkert created x_0.
2. Therefore x_0 exists.

Because Schaffer believes that his argument is sound, he must believe that my argument is sound as well. Schaffer claims that his premise is true because it is a fact about the history of literature that Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes (359). Likewise, I claim that it is a fact about the history of thesis writing that Owen Pikkert created x_0. Schaffer also claims that his inference is sound because "to create something is to make it exist" (359). I too claim that, if creation (however Schaffer understands that concept) is indeed sufficient for existence, then my inference is sound as well. So Schaffer must believe that x_0 exists. But if x_0 exists, then x_1 is not the fundamental ground – x_0

is. The problem now is that we can use the same style of argument to show that the ground of x_0, namely x_{-1}, also exists:

1. Owen Pikkert created x_{-1}.
2. Therefore x_{-1} exists.

If x_{-1} exists, then x_0 is not fundamental – x_{-1} is. A regress ensues. For any x_n that is supposedly fundamental, we can show that x_{n-1} exists. So for any ground that is supposedly fundamental, we can show that it is not. There are therefore no fundamental grounds. Consequently, the role of the philosopher should not be to sort the fundamental from the derivative. For if nothing is fundamental, then one cannot do much sorting in the first place.

3.3. Two responses

It may be objected, however, that the denial of fundamental grounds entails the denial of a unified explanation for all existing entities. While each entity may be explained by its ground, there is no one entity (or collection of entities) that explains everything else. Consequently, by denying fundamental grounds we lose the benefit of a unified explanation. Ross Cameron agrees with this line of reasoning. According to Cameron, we can appeal to the benefit of a

unified explanation as reason to posit fundamental grounds. It is worth quoting Cameron's argument at length:

> "If we seek to explain some phenomena, then, other things being equal, it is better to give the same explanation of each phenomenon than to give separate explanations of each phenomenon. A unified explanation of the phenomena is a theoretical benefit. This seems to provide some evidence for the intuition under discussion [that descent is finite]. For if there is an infinitely descending chain of ontological dependence, then while everything that needs a metaphysical explanation (a grounding for its existence) has one, there is no explanation of everything that needs explaining. That is, it is true for every dependent *x* that the existence of *x* is explained by the existence of some prior object (or set of prior objects), but there is no collection of objects that explains the existence of every dependent *x*. This is a theoretical cost; it would be better to be able to give a common metaphysical explanation for every dependent entity. We can do that only if every dependent entity has its ultimate ontological basis in some collection of independent entities; so this provides reason to believe the intuition against infinite descent in metaphysical explanation." (2008: 12)

As it stands, Cameron's argument is fallacious. Cameron claims that because the existence of a fundamental ground would be a "theoretical benefit", we therefore have "some evidence" that such a fundamental ground exists (12). But this is just an argument from wishful thinking. The fact that a fundamental ground would provide a unified explanation does not by itself make the existence of such a ground more probable. What Cameron needs is an argument for the conclusion that the prior probability of a unified explanation is greater than that of a non-unified one. Yet Cameron has given us no such argument; he

simply assumes that it is true.[27] Still, and only for the sake of argument, let us grant Cameron his assumption. Even so, Cameron's argument does not work as a response to my objection against Schaffer. For if my objection is sound, then there is no unified explanation to be had in the first place. The only way around this is to find some flaw in the objection itself. As I have argued, if Schaffer claims to find a flaw in my objection, then he cannot maintain his own argument for the existence of Sherlock Holmes. This is presumably not something that Schaffer would want to do.

There is, however, another response available to Schaffer. This is to accept that my objection does demonstrate that all the entities in the infinite regress exist, but only in a difference sense of 'existence'. So, for instance, Schaffer could say that my objection only shows that the entities in the chain . . . x_{-2}, x_{-1}, x_0 exist in Hofweber's internal sense, whereas the entities in the chain x_1, x_2, x_3, . . . x_n would still exist in the external sense. Thus while the entities in the regress would exist, they would not exist in the same sense as tables and atoms.

Now if Schaffer were to endorse this response, then he would have to give up his claim that 'existence' is univocal (357-358). This may be a compromise that Schaffer is willing to make. But the response requires an even greater concession: a reinstatement of the Quinean ontologist. With a distinction between two senses of 'existence', the Quinean ontologist can busy herself with

[27] Thanks to Brian Garrett for re-convincing me that Cameron's argument is indeed fallacious.

determining which entities exist in which sense. She can seek to determine whether certain entities only exist in a loose, everyday sense of the word, or whether they exist in a more ontologically robust sense as well. As we saw in the introduction, Quine agreed that we often say things like "there are [Fs]" in ordinary language. But while this may be sufficient for everyday communication, such talk will need "dusting up" when our thoughts turn "seriously ontological" (1969: 100). With a distinction between two senses of 'existence', the Quinean ontologist is empowered, not dismissed. She will have plenty to do as she distinguishes between what exists according to loose talk, and what exists according to our best scientific theory. The invocation of an ambiguity in 'existence', though promising, compromises Schaffer's rejection of Quinean ontology.

4. Chapter summary

In this chapter we examined Carnap and Schaffer's arguments against the worth of ontology. Drawing on Bird's interpretation, we identified four categories of Carnapian existence questions. Carnap rejects one of these categories, namely that of theoretical external questions, as meaningless. In fact, Carnap claims that such questions cannot even be delineated as a distinct category. My response was to appeal to Thomas Hofweber's delineation:

theoretical external questions are just those questions that use a particular sense of 'existence'. We next considered Carnap's category argument. According to the category argument, questions about the reality of entire domains are misguided. For domains cannot be real by definition. In response, I suggested that we reject Carnap's overly restrictive definition of 'real'. Finally, we considered Carnap's evidential argument. Even if we can delineate theoretical external questions, Carnap argues that they would still be meaningless. This is because no one can agree on what should count as evidence. I claimed that Carnap's evidential argument is invalid. Disagreement over evidence does not entail the meaninglessness of the dispute.

Having responded to Carnap, we turned to the contemporary work of Jonathan Schaffer. According to Schaffer, existence questions are not worthwhile because it is easy to show that almost anything exists. Schaffer urges philosophers to instead focus on distinguishing the fundamental from the derivative. I objected that, if Schaffer's arguments are sound, then we can construct a parallel argument to show that no fundamental entities exist. I then considered two responses. The first response is to reject my objection because it precludes a unified explanation. But if my objection is sound, then we cannot expect a unified explanation in the first place. The second response is to claim that my objection only demonstrates that a regress exists in a lightweight sense of 'exists'. Yet this response provides a significant role for the Quinean ontologist

to fulfill. I conclude that our second Quinean thesis withstands both Carnap and Schaffer's arguments to the contrary.

Chapter 3

Does ontology suffer from an ambiguity in 'existence'?

1. Introduction

Our third and final Quinean thesis is that ontologists should only be concerned with the Quinean sense of 'existence'. According to Eli Hirsch (2002, 2005, 2008, 2009), this thesis is false. This is because there are other meanings for 'existence', and not one of them states what *really* or *ontologically* exists. As I indicated in the introduction, I will not try to defend this third Quinean thesis as it presently stands. For I too think that it is false. That is, I agree with Hirsch that there are multiple meanings of 'existence'. I also agree that it is arbitrary to pick one of them as the ontologically privileged sense. However, I do believe that Quinean ontology can still be pursued. So I will defend the following more modest thesis:

III*. Ontologists may be concerned with the Quinean sense of 'existence'.

This thesis might seem so modest that it needs no defense. But Hirsch rejects this more modest thesis as well. According to Hirsch, ontologists should only use the ordinary English sense of 'existence'. I think that this insistence on

ordinary English is mistaken. Ontologists might in fact have good reason to abandon ordinary English. At the end of this chapter I will provide some such reasons. For most of the chapter, however, I will consider whether 'existence' is in fact ambiguous. I will argue that it is by presenting three lines of evidence. The first is that Peter van Inwagen's argument to the contrary is a failure. The second is that various unified analyses of 'existence' are also failures. And the third is that Thomas Hofweber provides us with some good linguistic evidence to think that 'existence' is equivocal. With this evidence in hand, I will turn to consider Hirsch's view that the ambiguity of 'existence' spells trouble for Quinean ontology. Hirsch believes that such ambiguity results in verbal disputes, and that ontologists should therefore agree to speak ordinary English. I will argue that neither claim should cause the Quinean ontologist much concern.

2. Is 'existence' ambiguous?

2.1. van Inwagen's counting argument

Before considering positive evidence for the ambiguity of 'existence', let us consider an argument for the conclusion that 'existence' is actually univocal. Here is Peter van Inwagen's 'counting argument':

> "[E]xistence is closely allied to number. To say that unicorns do not exist is to say something very much like this: the number of unicorns is 0; to say that horses exist is to say essentially this: the number of horses is 1 or more. And to say that angels or ideas or prime numbers exist is to say – more or less – that the number of angels, or of ideas, or of prime numbers, is greater than 0. The univocacy of number and the intimate connection between number and existence should convince us that there is at least very good reason to think that existence is univocal." (2009: 482; cf. 1998: 236)

This is certainly a very interesting argument, and merits a response. One such response is given by Jason Turner. According to Turner, those who deny that 'existence' is univocal can reject van Inwagen's argument by also denying that 'the number of' is univocal. Thus if Fs exist$_1$, then they number$_1$ some particular number. And if Fs do not exist$_2$, then they number$_2$ 0. In Turner's view, this response preserves both the intimate connection between existence and number and the ambiguity of 'existence' (2010: 24-25).

I will not comment on Turner's response. For I believe that there is another response that does not concede as much. That is, I believe that those who maintain the ambiguity of 'existence' can refute van Inwagen's argument without conceding that 'the number of' is equivocal. We can first observe that, for those who believe that 'existence' is ambiguous, to say 'unicorns do not exist' is often *not* like saying 'the number of unicorns is 0'. I deny that unicorns exist. But I believe that the number of unicorns is at least 7, for there are at least 7 unicorns depicted in the Metropolitan's tapestry collection. There exist 0

unicorns in one sense of 'exist'; there exist 7 unicorns in another sense of 'exist'; the number of unicorns that exist in some sense of 'exist' is 7. So the fact that unicorns do not exist in one sense of 'exist' has very little to do with the number of unicorns. van Inwagen's other claim, however – that to say that x exists is to say that the number of x's is 1 or more – has more pull. It is indeed hard to conceive of an existing entity the number of which is 0. At the same time, I do not think that this fact alone establishes that 'existence' is univocal. I will first provide an example to illustrate this claim. Then I will advance my objection to the counting argument itself.

Here is the example. Suppose that by signing a form, your name is automatically entered into a database. And suppose that there are two senses of 'signing the form': handwriting your name, or hitting a computer key. So if someone asks you 'Did you sign the form?' you can very well reply 'What do you mean – are you asking whether I handwrote my name, or whether I hit the computer key?' Now it is true that 'Smith signed the form' entails 'Smith's name is in the database'. And it is also true that 'Smith's name is in the database' entails that Smith signed the form. So there is an "intimate connection" between signing the form and having one's name in the database. But this is so despite the fact that 'signing the form' is equivocal, whereas 'having one's name in the database' is not. We can have van Inwagen's intimate connection between x and y even though x is univocal, whereas y is equivocal.

Let us now respond to van Inwagen's counting argument. Suppose that ordinary English actually contains two senses of 'existence': existence$_1$ and existence$_2$. Is there still an "intimate connection" between numbers and existence? I believe that there is. We can grant that 'unicorns exist$_n$' entails 'the number of unicorns is 1 or more'. Notice that the number of unicorns is 1 or more regardless of whether unicorns exist$_1$ or exist$_2$. Moreover, 'the number of unicorns is 1 or more' entails 'unicorns exist$_1$ or exist$_2$'. If we know that the number of unicorns is 1 or more and that there are exactly two senses of 'existence', then we know that unicorns exist in at least one of these senses.

What this shows is that we can still have van Inwagen's intimate connection between numbers and existence despite the ambiguity of 'existence'. The fact that there are a number of things just tells us that those things exist. What it does not tell us is the sense in which those things exist. That is why it is perfectly coherent to say 'I know that you believe that the number of unicorns is 1 or more, but in which sense do you believe that unicorns exist?' Having a number of things tells us nothing about the sense in which those things exist, only that they exist in some sense. Therefore, the fact that number expressions are univocal is perfectly compatible with 'existence' being either univocal or equivocal. We can conclude that van Inwagen is wrong to appeal to the univocity of number expressions as proof for the univocity of 'existence'.

2.2. Four proposed analyses of 'existence'

In this section we shall examine four different analyses of 'existence'. These include what I shall call the 'causal analysis', the 'spacetime analysis', the 'explanatory analysis', and the 'naturalness analysis'. If exactly one of these analyses is successful, then it would suggest that 'existence' is univocal. If more than one, then we have reason to believe that 'existence' admits of more than one meaning. First, let us consider the causal analysis. One of the inspirations for the causal analysis is Alexander's dictum, which is that to exist is to possess causal powers (see Kim 2005: 159). Alexander's dictum suggests the following analysis of 'existence': x exists iff x possesses causal powers. This, I believe, is the weakest of the four analyses under consideration. There are many counterexamples of entities which, though causally inefficacious, could still exist. Epiphenomenal mental properties, for example, lack causal powers. But we would not want to rule out their existence by definition. The same goes for platonic moral forms.

A more promising approach is provided by the spacetime analysis. Here we can look to David Armstrong for inspiration. According to Armstrong, "reality consists of nothing but a single all-embracing spatio-temporal system" (1981: 149). Armstrong's statement suggests the following analysis: x exists iff x is part of spacetime. Still, as with the causal analysis, we can think of counterexamples.

Any abstract, non-physical entity would fail this criterion. But suppose we grant that, for whatever reason, abstract entities cannot exist. Yet counterexamples persist. Consider the following example, drawn from contemporary cosmology. According to a number of cosmologists and philosophers, our universe is part of a multiverse (Smart 2003, Tegmark 2004, Bostrom 2007, Carr 2008, Gribbin 2009). This multiverse consists of a great many causally isolated universes.[28] On the multiverse hypothesis, however, other universes are not part of our spacetime. So according to the spacetime analysis, other universes cannot exist. But this is absurd. Other universes could easily exist. And this is so even if, contrary to much informed opinion, we could never have good reason to (dis)believe in the existence of other universes. It is still quite possible that other universes exist, even if we are never justified in believing that they do.

The causal and spacetime analyses of 'existence', then, are unsuccessful. Perhaps we should look instead to our explanatory practices. Generally, we only claim that something exists if it explains something else. Hence, barring certain instrumentalist views, we accept that electrons exist because they explain certain subatomic facts. Likewise, we deny that phlogiston exists because it does not explain anything that cannot otherwise be explained. This provides us with another analysis of 'existence': x exists iff x explains some y. Once again, though,

[28] The motivation for postulating a multiverse was originally due to Everettian quantum mechanics, and is now sometimes invoked as an explanation for the apparent fine-tuning of our universe's physical constants. I am not referring to the modal realist's multiverse.

we can identify a counterexample. Consider a causally isolated universe that consists of one atom. On a causal theory of explanation, this atom does not explain anything in our own universe. After all, the atom's universe is causally isolated from our own. Moreover, the atom does not explain anything in its own universe. This is because there is nothing in its universe to serve as the explanandum. But the atom could still exist, even though it does not explain anything.

The failure of a unified analysis is becoming apparent. There remains, however, one final proposal. Instead of defining 'existence' in terms of explanation, we can define it in terms of what David Lewis called "natural" properties and relations (1983, 1984). Here then is the naturalness analysis of 'existence': x exists iff x is natural in Lewis' sense. By "natural" Lewis meant those properties and relations that are causally efficacious and productive of resemblances between entities (1983: 347). According to Lewis, natural properties and relations are revealed by physics (356-357, 364-365; 1984: 228). For example, consider heat. One candidate property for heat is that of molecular motion. Another candidate property is just whatever it is that causes heat. This second property is really one long disjunction of all the particular properties that could fulfill the heat role. Lewis claimed that the first property is more natural than the second (1983: 369-370). According to the naturalness analysis, molecular motion would exist, whereas the long disjunctive property would not.

Not only does this analysis sound scientific; it has the added benefit of denying the existence of grue-like properties.

Unfortunately, even this final analysis is a failure. An easy way of refuting it is to claim that if naturalness is restricted to properties and relations, as Lewis thought it was, then anything that is neither a property nor a relation cannot exist. Propositions and sets, for example, would be banished to the realm of the non-existent. Yet the proponent of the naturalness analysis can respond by expanding Lewis' conception of naturalness to include other sorts of entities. Still, a deeper worry remains. Naturalness, at least as Lewis conceived of it, is supposed to be a matter of degree (1983: 372; 1984: 227). For example, Lewis claimed that 'being silver' is a more natural property than 'being metal' (1984: 227). But we do not want to say that some entities exist more than other entities. Either something exists, or it does not. So we cannot simply identify what exists with what is natural. If naturalness is to serve as the criterion for existence, then it cannot be a matter of degree.[29]

2.3. The ambiguity of 'existence'

[29] It may be objected that we can just identify what exists with what is natural to some degree, even if that degree is very small (thanks to Mark Vorobej and David Hitchcock here). The problem with this response is that it allows for entities to exist that intuitively do not exist. For example, we might not have good reason to believe that a property composed out of a thousand random disjuncts exists, even though that property will be natural to a very small degree.

Given the failure of these analyses, we have some reason to abandon belief in the univocity of 'existence'. It seems that people use the word in all sorts of ways. Perhaps they may use it in one of the ways described above. Nevertheless, none of these ways provides a unified analysis. Things could exist despite being causally inert, outside of our spacetime, unexplanatory, and unnatural. As a result, it is unsurprising that a number of philosophers deny that 'existence' is univocal. For prominent examples, we can look to Hilary Putnam and Derek Parfit. Consider what Putnam has to say:

> "[T]he logical primitives themselves, and in particular the notions of object and existence, have a multitude of different uses rather than one absolute "meaning."" (1990: 97)
>
> "[W]hat logicians call "the existential quantifier," the symbol "(∃x)," and its ordinary language counterparts, the expressions "there are," "there exist" and "there exists a," "some," etc., *do not have a single absolutely precise use but a whole family of uses*." (2004: 37, emphasis in original)

And, most memorably:

> "Just saying, "By exist I mean *exist*," and stamping your foot, doesn't do it." (2004: 3, emphasis in original)

Parfit agrees that 'existence' is ambiguous. In fact, Parfit distinguishes between an "ontological" and a "non-ontological" sense of the word (2011: 480-

487). The former is the sense in which things exist in the spatio-temporal realm, or even in some non-spatio-temporal realm. The latter, by contrast, is the sense in which things can exist without being in either of these realms. In Parfit's words, they "don't have to exist in any part of reality" (749). Entities that exist in this non-ontological sense include mathematical, logical, and normative truths, as well as numbers (479, 487, 719). As Parfit explains:

> "These numbers and truths are not *less* actual, or real, than stars, or human beings. These abstract entities have *no* ontological status. They are not, in relevant senses, either actual or merely possible, or either real or unreal. When we are trying to form true beliefs about numbers or logical truths, we need not answer ontological questions. As one way to sum up these claims, we can say that, though there are these numbers and truths, these entities exist in a non-ontological sense." (481)

Still, despite their insistence on the ambiguity of 'existence', Putnam and Parfit do not provide a lot of linguistic evidence for their claims. For a thorough presentation of such evidence, we need to turn to the work of Thomas Hofweber (2005; cf. 2000). We have already discussed Hofweber's distinction between an internal and an external sense of 'existence' in chapter 2. In the remainder of this section, we will examine why Hofweber believes that such a distinction is found in ordinary English.

According to Hofweber, we can observe that there are two senses of 'existence' by examining certain cases of semantic underspecification. When a

sentence is semantically underspecified, the semantic content of the sentence is insufficient to determine the sentence's truth conditions (2005: 268). For example, consider the sentence "John's car has a flat." This sentence is semantically underspecified because it is not clear who actually owns the car. It could be the car that John himself owns, or it could be the car that John has rented (269). Or consider the sentence "Three philosophers carried four pianos." We would probably assume that the philosophers combined their efforts to carry one piano at a time. But this assumption is just based on our previous knowledge of the weight of pianos and the strength of philosophers. We would not make this assumption if, for instance, "books" was substituted for "pianos" (269).

In Hofweber's view, 'existence', or the quantifier generally, is also semantically underspecified. There are two readings of the quantifier, each of which can make a different contribution to the truth conditions of the sentence in which it is found. On the 'external' reading, one assumes that there exists some object to which the quantified term refers. For example, consider the sentence "Something fell on my head." On the external reading, this sentence is only true if "there exists an object out there in reality that is such that it fell on my head" (271). The external reading is closely connected with ontological concerns (274). After all, ontologists want to know what reality contains.

On the 'internal' reading of 'existence', however, the sentence can be true without the quantified term corresponding to an entity in reality. Hofweber

provides the following example (271-272). Suppose that you are asked to write a psychological profile of Fred. In your discussions with Fred you learn that Fred admires Richard Nixon. The next day you sit down to write Fred's profile. However, you cannot remember who it was whom Fred admires. All that you can remember is that the person whom Fred admires is also admired by many Republicans. Although not as precise as you would like, this information is still useful to you. You might say:

> "There is someone Fred admires very much and that person is also admired by many Republicans. Who is that, again?" (272)

Now suppose that Fred also admires Sherlock Holmes. You learn this fact from your discussions with Fred. The next day you sit down to write Fred's profile, but again you cannot remember who it was exactly whom Fred admires. All that you can remember is that the person whom Fred admires is also admired by many detectives. Again, this information, though not as precise as you would like, is still useful to you. You might say:

> "There is someone whom Fred admires very much and that person is also admired by many detectives. Who is that, again?" (272)

In both cases, the role of the quantifier is to act as a placeholder for the noun phrase that you forgot. Had you remembered who it was whom Fred admires, you could have used that person's name instead. It is important to note that the quantifier acts as a placeholder regardless of whether the original term refers (272). The person whom Fred admires may be real (Richard Nixon) or not (Sherlock Holmes). Unlike the external reading, the internal reading does not attempt to state what exists in reality. Whether or not the original term refers is irrelevant to the truth conditions of the sentence. That is why the sentence "There is someone whom Fred admires …" can be true even though there does not exist, in the external sense of the word, such a person. The fact that we nevertheless accept such sentences as true suggests that 'existence' is ambiguous.

We can see the internal reading at work in other examples. Suppose someone infers that the property of being a dog exists because the sentence 'Fido is a dog' is true. Hofweber allows this to be a valid inference, but only if the property is said to exist in the internal sense of 'exist' (275). Likewise, Hofweber grants that we can infer the existence of numbers from the truth of "Jupiter has four moons" (275). But again, this inference is only valid in the internal sense of 'existence' (275). We cannot infer from these sentences that properties or

numbers exist in the external sense as well. That is, we cannot infer that they exist 'out there in reality'.[30]

3. Possible problems for ontology

3.1. The problem of verbal disputes

We have so far considered various reasons to think that 'existence' is ambiguous. The combined force of these reasons suggests that 'existence' does have more than one meaning. But why would such ambiguity pose a problem for ontology? Eli Hirsch (2002, 2005, 2008, 2009) has done the most work to answer this question. Roughly, Hirsch identifies two problems. The first is that ontologists might talk past each other by using 'existence' and its related expressions in different ways. And the second is that ontologists might abuse or even ignore ordinary English. For Hirsch, both of these problems need to be remedied.

[30] Hofweber's distinction might seem similar to the distinction between objectual and substitutional quantification. Objectual quantification quantifies over objects, whereas substitutional quantification quantifies over names and sentences. Like the internal reading, substitutional quantification allows for sentences that include names with empty references to come out true. But there are some differences. First, Hofweber is making an empirical linguistic claim, namely that ordinary English actually contains an ambiguity in its existence-like expressions. He is not simply observing that there are two possible interpretations of logical quantifiers. Second, sentences in which objectual quantification is used are made true by objects, whereas sentences in which the external reading is used are made true by whatever is out there in reality. Hofweber does not require that reality is simply the total collection of objects.

First, then, the problem of verbal disputes. If there are multiple senses of 'existence', then it is easy to imagine that different philosophers might use the word in different ways. Recall Hirsch's own example of 'incars' from chapter 1. To repeat, an incar is a car that exists only when it is parked inside a garage. Suppose now that philosopher *A* claims that incars exist, whereas philosopher *B* denies this claim. Both *A* and *B* mean the same thing by 'incar'. They might, however, mean different things by 'exist'. *A* might claim, bizarrely, that the reference of any five-letter word exists. So *A* believes that at least one incar exists. *B*, on the other hand, uses 'exist' in a more normal way. As a result, *B* denies that incars exist. Clearly, their dispute is merely verbal.

Hirsch gives a more precise formula to distinguish verbal disputes. According to Hirsch, a verbal dispute occurs when each side in the debate can plausibly interpret the other side as speaking a language in which the other side's sentences are true (2009: 231, 239). In our incar example, *A* can interpret *B* as speaking the truth according to *B*'s definition of 'exist'. Likewise, *B* can interpret *A* as speaking the truth according to *A*'s definition of 'exist'. So their dispute is merely verbal. If both *A* and *B* used 'exist' in the same way, then their dispute would dissolve.

Now the possibility of verbal disputes should be a worry for all ontologists, not just those of a Quinean persuasion. And it might seem as if ontologists can placate this worry just by agreeing to use 'existence' in the same

way. This leads, however, to the problem of just which sense of 'existence' to pick. We will discuss this problem in the next section. In the meantime, we can question the extent to which it is an equivocation in 'existence' that results in verbal disputes. There are in fact other ways in which incar-like disputes may be merely verbal. Let us consider two of them.

For one, the incar dispute may be merely verbal because of a perceived disagreement over the number of existing objects. In our example, *B* might think that *A* believes in at least two existing objects: the ordinary car, and the incar. This might be because *B* thinks that *A* intends to use 'incar' to refer to a new object that is created once the ordinary car is parked inside a garage. *A*, however, might believe no such thing. When *A* claims that an incar exists, she might only be using 'incar' as an alternative description to refer to the same ordinary car. So *A* and *B* actually agree that there is only one object in the garage. Once *B* realizes this, the debate dissolves.

There is another way in which the debate may be merely verbal. In this case, the equivocation is not in 'existence', but in 'object'.[31] Suppose that *A* defines 'object' in such a way that incars count as objects. Suppose also that *B* defines 'object' in such a way as to exclude incars as objects. Finally, suppose that both *A* and *B* agree that if something is to exist, then it must be an object. Now both *A* and *B* may use 'existence' in exactly the same way. But they will still

[31] Putnam acknowledges that there may be multiple meanings of 'object' (1990: 97).

disagree over whether incars exist. Still, their disagreement stems from different meanings of 'object', not 'existence'. Once *A* and *B* realize this equivocation, their dispute dissolves. The dispute was, after all, merely verbal. In summary, Hirsch is too quick to blame 'existence' as the equivocating term. It is quite possible that his paradigm disputes are verbal for other reasons. Of course, maybe the problem really is with 'existence'. If so, then philosophers should pick a particular sense of 'existence' and stick with it. But which sense should they pick? Charity to use would suggest the ordinary English sense. It is to this suggestion that we now turn.

3.2. The appeal of ordinary English

Recall our more modest Quinean thesis: ontologists may be concerned with the Quinean sense of 'existence'. Hirsch denies this thesis. He thinks that ontologists should only be concerned with the ordinary English sense of 'existence'. After all, philosophers do usually claim to be speaking ordinary English (2002: 69; 2008: 371). More importantly, Hirsch thinks that philosophers should be charitable to both ordinary language and to common sense (2002: 62, 68; 2005: 71; 2009: 242). Philosophers should stop using words in funny ways, and speak in the manner of their fellow English speakers. This would also solve the problem of verbal disputes.

According to Hirsch, one consequence of adopting ordinary English is that it leaves very little for the ontologist to do (2002: 63-64). Provided that one has sufficient background information, anyone with a working knowledge of English will be able to tell whether or not something exists. So for Hirsch, the ambiguity of 'existence' proves fatal to the Quinean approach to ontology. What Hirsch recommends instead is a "shallow" approach to the subject (2002: 67). Unlike the Quinean ontologist, whose notion of ontological commitment "conveys an unfortunate aura of theoretical hype and pseudo-depth," the shallow ontologist will address an ontological question "either by shrugging it off with Carnapian tolerance for many different answers, or by insisting with Austinian glee that the answer is laughably trivial" (2002: 67). Such "Carnapian tolerance" is due to the ambiguity of 'existence'. And the "Austinian glee" is due to the comparative easiness of answering existence questions. After all, to determine whether something exists, one only has to determine whether it exists in the ordinary English sense of the word. One does not need to engage in a distinctive, highly theoretical discipline.

How should we respond to Hirsch's demand for ordinary English? We can begin by noting that Hirsch is right to criticize philosophers who claim to be speaking ordinary English, when in fact they are not. Any such philosopher should make his or her departure from ordinary English explicit. But we can question Hirsch's claim that ontologists must use the 'existence' of ordinary

English. There may in fact be several reasons for ontologists to use a different, more technical sense of the word. This could be the Quinean sense, or some other sense suitably defined.

Here are three reasons why ontologists might want to abandon the ordinary English sense of 'existence'. First, despite Hirsch's claims to the contrary, there may not even be an ordinary English sense of 'existence' in the first place. While Hirsch correctly observes that speakers of ordinary English may all agree that certain very counterintuitive objects, such as the object composed of Clinton's nose and the Eiffel tower, do not exist, there is no reason to think that such convergence will be present in other cases. Our previous attempts at a unified analysis suggest that, no matter which analysis of 'existence' we choose, there will always be entities that do not fulfill that analysis. And it would be arbitrary to identify one of these senses as *the* sense of ordinary English.

Second, even if there is an ordinary English sense of 'existence', it may not be very precise. Consider the following analogy. The American Society of Addiction Medicine has a technical, precise definition of 'addiction'. Such precision helps medical professionals agree on whether a person is addicted or not. Yet their definition does not conform to everyday usage. In fact, everyday usage lets us get away with saying that someone is addicted to their Sunday nap. The problem with ordinary English is that it is just too imprecise to be useful in

medical diagnoses.[32] Likewise, the ordinary English sense of 'existence' may also be imprecise. Ontologists would instead want to stipulate a clear sense, with a clear set of criteria, that will allow for common agreement as to whether something exists or not.

Third, and contrary to Hirsch's claims, the ordinary English sense of 'existence' is often not in alignment with common sense. Insofar as alignment with common sense is desirable (as Hirsch believes it is), we have reason to abandon ordinary English when it conflicts with common sense. For example, common sense dictates that Sherlock Holmes does not exist. But ordinary English will, in certain contexts at least, let us say that he does. It lets us say that he exists in the context of detective stories, movies, and as an object of admiration. In the example of Sherlock Holmes, it is actually Quine's criteria that vindicate common sense. Quine's criteria show that Sherlock Holmes does not in fact exist, regardless of the looseness of everyday conversation. Hirsch is therefore wrong to think that ordinary English is always aligned with common sense. In fact, it may be the Quinean approach that, in certain cases at least, respects common sense the most.

4. Chapter summary

[32] It also fails to convey that the problem may be a neurobiological one.

We have examined various reasons to believe that ‘existence’ is ambiguous. van Inwagen’s counting argument was not persuasive. And our attempt at providing a unified analysis was also a failure. Not one of the causal analysis, spacetime analysis, explanatory analysis, or naturalness analysis proved convincing. Moreover, Hofweber’s linguistic evidence for the ambiguity of ‘existence’ is compelling. But this should not cause the Quinean ontologist much concern. While she should give up her belief that ontologists should only use the Quinean sense of ‘existence’, she does not need to abandon Quinean ontology altogether. The Quinean should, of course, be wary of verbal disputes. At the same time, the sorts of disputes Hirsch invokes may not be verbal due to an equivocation in ‘existence’. They could instead be verbal due to a perceived disagreement over the number of objects, or over the definition of ‘object’ itself. Furthermore, there is no need for the Quinean ontologist to always give up her technical sense of ‘existence’ in favour of ordinary English. She may in fact have good reason to continue to use a more technical sense. For one, there may not even be an ordinary English sense in the first place. Or if there is, it might be too imprecise. There is also reason to think that, in certain cases at least, ordinary English actually conflicts with common sense. In short, the Quinean ontologist need not abandon her discipline – and certainly not with Austinian glee.

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