Metaontology

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Ontology studies being and existence. It asks questions like 'Are there any tables, or just particles arranged in a table-like pattern?'; 'Do immaterial minds exist?'; and so on. Meta-ontology studies ontology. It asks questions like 'What do ontologists mean when they ask "Do immaterial minds exist?", and how could they ever hope to answer such a question?'

In the analytic era, debates about metaontology burst on the scene as an outgrowth of the positivist's attempts to eliminate metaphysics and Quine's attempts to eliminate positivism. Carnap articulated a fully positivistic meta-ontological framework, according to which the sorts of ontological questions philosophers ask were either meaningless or trivial. Quine rejected that picture as being bound up with the positivist's analytic-synthetic distinction. As a matter of historical fact, Quine's arguments carried the day, and the Carnapian program was all but abandoned.

By and large, contemporary ontologists have operated with the sense of a shared legacy inherited from Quine; but recent broadly Carnapian resistance has arisen to challenge the received view. Here I review the debate between Carnap and Quine (§1) and identify several elements of the inherited Quinean legacy (§2), before going on to examine one broadly Carnapian line of thought and some contemporary resistance to it (§§3–4).

1 The Carnap-Quine Debate

1.1 Frameworks, Analyticity, and All That

Carnap's (1950) meta-ontological picture made heavy use of *linguistic frameworks*. A linguistic framework consists essentially of a syntax — a vocabulary plus rules for making sentences from it — and some linguistic rules. These rules give, in effect, the truth-conditions for the framework's sentences. The rules will make some sentences in the framework true automatically; these are the *analytic* sentences. But the rules will make other sentences in the framework true only if certain extra-linguistic conditions are met. These are the *synthetic* sentences.

An example might help. Carnap considers one framework, 'the framework of things,' which lets us talk about medium sized goods (1950: 206–208). This framework (we can suppose) contains, among others, the terms 'table' and 'furniture', and lets us form the sentences

(1) There are tables.

(2) All tables are furniture.

The thing-framework rules will say that (1) is true if some extra-linguistic condition is met — in particular, if a certain series of observations or experiments would give rise to certain experiences. On the other hand, the rules of the thing-framework make (2) true all by themselves.

According to Carnap, there are two kinds of questions we might try to ask. First, we might ask an *internal* question. For instance, we might adopt the thing-framework and then ask 'Are there tables?' These internal questions are meaningful, and the methods for answering them are implicit in the framework's rules. (To answer this question, we need to do the experiments that the rules tell us are related to (1)'s truth.) Or we might instead try to stand 'outside' the framework and ask whether or not the world really works the way the framework says it does. We might say, 'Yes, I see that (1) is made true by the rules of the framework plus the results of some experiences. And yes, I have had those experiences. But are there *really* any tables? Is the framework right to say that these experiences guarantee the existence of tables?' These questions, says Carnap, are meaningless. To ask the question we must use a language with 'there are' and 'tables'; but to do that we need a linguistic framework that gives these terms meaning, making them internal once again. (1950: 207, 209)

Philosophers tend to ask ontological questions as though they were external questions. For instance, some philosophers debate about whether there are any composite objects, and thus implicitly about whether there are any tables. But they do not disagree on the experiences various experiments given them, so their disagreement can't be about whether (1)'s truth-conditions, as given by the thing-framework, are satisfied. Their debate is rather about whether the thing-framework gets the relationship between experiences and the world *right* — a question that Carnap insists makes no sense.

Other traditional ontological debates are no better off. Consider, for instance, debates about whether there are numbers or properties. On Carnap's view, these debates only make sense once we adopt a framework that lets us use the terms 'number' and 'property'. The rules for sensible frameworks using these terms will guarantee that 'there are numbers' and 'there are properties' are true on their own, independent of experience (1950: 208–213). (What kind of experiment would you to do find out whether there are numbers?) As a result, these sentences will be analytic. Since it's silly to debate about analyticities, we can't make sense of philosophers having a debate within any such framework. But we can't make sense of their debate outside a framework, either, and so we can't make sense of it at all.

(We can, according to Carnap, simply *refuse* to use the number- or property-framework (1950: 207–208). But this does *not* amount to insisting that there are no numbers or properties, any more than refusing to talk about the *Star Wars* prequels makes them go away. We can only insist that there are no numbers or properties by adopting a number- or property-framework and insisting within that framework; but then we will be insisting on analytic falsehoods.)

Carnap's system of linguistic frameworks is deeply bound up with the ana-

lytic/synthetic distinction, so when Quine attacked that distinction, he implicitly (1951*b*, and explicitly, in Quine 1951*a*: 210–11) attacked Carnap's metaontological picture as well. Notice that, on Carnap's view, answering any factual question has two components. First, we identify the linguistic framework the question is asked in, and the rules that govern that framework. Those rules then tell us what (if any) empirical investigations settle the question. If we are able, then, we undertake the investigations and combine the experiences they give us with the framework's rules to get our answer.

Quine denied that any such clean divide was possible, or that it represented anything like what happened in the sciences. Granted, we use rules to take us from experiences to claims about those experiences — claims such as (1). But those rules aren't themselves mere conduits, shielded from experience; they too are up for revision in the face of surprising evidence. If we first settle on the electron-framework and then do experiments, the results can give us evidence for or against the existence of electrons, but they can't give us reason to doubt that certain sorts of experiences *count* as evidence for the existence of electrons. According to Quine, this is wrong: the 'rules' relating experiences to electrons are as much up for revision in the face of experimental results as are beliefs in the existence of electrons (1951*b*: 43–44).

Moreover, if we revise the rules, we don't thereby change the subject. On Carnap's picture, the rules are *constitutive* of meaning: the meaning of 'electron' or 'table' or 'number' is settled just by the rules governing its use in its respective framework. According to Quine, though, if we revise the 'rules' in light of recalcitrant evidence, we don't thereby change the meanings of our terms — which we would if the rules were constitutive of meaning.

If Quine is right, then even so-called 'analytic' sentences — sentences that the rules entail automatically — may be up for revision, because the rules themselves are up for revision. And revising the rules does not amount to a change in meaning. But then the philosophical debates about numbers, properties, or tables can be made sense of after all. They are debates about whether we have rational reason to revise the rules.

1.2 Disagreements

It's worth summarizing the main points of disagreement between Quine and Carnap. The first is *methodological*. Carnap thought there were essentially three types of questions we might try to ask. One is pragmatic: Is it *useful* to use thus-and-so linguistic framework? Another was *scientific*, asking within a framework whether there were such-and-such entities. A third was what Carnap would have (pejoratively) called *metaphysical*, asking externally of a framework whether the things it presupposed really existed. Only the first two were in good standing. And they led to a twofold method in ontology: first settle, on pragmatic grounds, which frameworks to use, and then settle scientifically, using those frameworks, what exists.

Quine rejected this methodology and its attendant tripartate distinction. On his *confirmational holism*, we first develop entire theories and then settle on a single 'best' one using a combination of experimental and pragmatic considerations. Best theories make existential claims about electrons and tables as well as about numbers and properties, and nothing in the holistic method distinguishes one kind of claim from another. If our best theory says that there are numbers, that gives us just as 'scientific' a reason to believe in numbers as we get if our best theory says that there are electrons. In a slogan, (philosophical) ontology is continuous with science (cf. e.g. Quine 1948: 16–17, 1951*b*: 44–46, and 1951*a*: 211).

This disagreement naturally leads to another about the *cognitive significance* of ontology. Carnap thought that ontological questions of the sort philosophers tend to ask (Are there numbers? Are there properties?) were either meaningless (because external) or trivial (because analytic).

There are two ways to describe Quine's rejection of this. First description: He rejects the trivializing method Carnap would use for 'internal' questions. For Carnap, analytic claims are trivial because they result automatically from meaning-constitutive rules; to reject an analyticity is either to reveal linguistic incompetence or to switch language. Quine's rejection of analyticity insists no claim has that status: any claim can in principle be rationally denied without linguistic skulduggery. (This is the burden of Quine 1951*b*.) So even if there were an internal/external distinction, the internal questions wouldn't thereby be trivial. Second description: Through his conformational holism Quine gives typically philosophical questions the same status as scientific ones. If ontology is continuous with science, questions about whether there are numbers cannot be any more trivial or less meaningful than questions about whether there are electrons.

The second description of Quine's position naturally suggests a third disagreement between him and Carnap. Carnap's attitude towards ontology was explicitly *deflationary*. According to deflationary attitudes, the answers to ontological questions are, in some sense or another, *not deep*. Coming to (correctly) believe that there are such-and-such properties or numbers is not a *discovery* — or if it is a discovery, it's not a discovery about some self-standing Platonic realm that had been hiding in the wings before we shone our light of pure reason on it. At best, it's somehow a discovery about us: about our conceptual scheme, or about our language, or about how we can best reason about the world. For Carnap, it's a discovery about what our linguistic framework's rules entail.

It's possible to be deflationary about scientific ontology as well. Such a deflationist thinks that coming to (correctly) believe that there are electrons is not a discovery about some self-standing microphysical realm that had been hiding in the wings before we shone the light of rational enquiry on it. At best, it's a discovery in large part about us: about how our conceptual scheme can best make sense of and predict experiences.

Our naive attitude towards science is *inflationary*. Although some strands

of scientific anti-realistm demur, the naive attitude is that, long before anyone started theorizing, the world was as it was — either with electrons, or without. Were God to glance at a region of the world way back when, the divine sight would either land on some negatively charged things buzzing about in that region, or it wouldn't. When we discovered that there are electrons, we didn't just discover that it's useful for us to think *as though* there were electrons. We discovered that there really were little tiny bits buzzing around that we couldn't see.

An inflationary attitude towards more philosophical ontology is similar. Long before anyone started theorizing, reality was as it was — either with numbers, or without. Were God to glance over at the right (non-spatiotemporal) chunk of reality, the divine sight would either land on an omega sequence, or it wouldn't. When we discovered that there are numbers, we didn't just discover that it's useful to us to think *as though* there were numbers. We discovered that there really was an omega sequence out there in Plato's heaven.

The inflationary attitude towards science is natural. Anyone who holds that attitude and is convinced by Quine that philosophical ontology is continuous with science should also have an inflationary attitude towards philosophical ontology. As a matter of fact, most contemporary self-styled Quineans in metaphysics *do* endorse inflationism, both about science and about ontology. Whether *Quine* held such a view, however, is less straightforward. There reason to think Quine was more deflationary about science — and so about ontology in general — than the average self-styled Quinean (cf. Price 2009 and Soames 2009: 438–42). But whether or not there is a genuine disagreement between Carnap and Quine here, there is a genuine disagreement between Carnap and the contemporary Quinean orthodoxy.

1.3 Agreements

We shouldn't let the disagreements between Quine and Carnap blind us to their agreements, though. First, they agree that there is no conceptual distance between *existing* and *being*. What exists is just what there is, and whatever there is, exists.[1] Furthermore, they both agree that, in symbols, 'there is' is captured by the existential quantifier '$\exists$' from first-order logic. Thus, asking whether so-and-so's exist is just to ask whether

(3) $\exists x(x \text{ is a so-and-so})$

is true.[2]

Second, they agree that being is *univocal*. That is, neither of them has any truck with the thought that there are different 'kinds' or 'ways' of being or

[1]For Quine, this is explicit in his 1948; for Carnap, implicit in his examples of 'existence' questions including e.g. "Is there a prime number greater than a hundred?" (1950: 208–209).

[2]This is again explicit in Quine 1948; Quine 1951*a*: 205–206 reports agreement with Carnap on this.

existence. What there is, is — and there's an end on't. We can ask what various existents are *like*, but it makes no sense to ask *in what way* they exist.

Third, Quine and Carnap both implicitly treat ontology as being, in Jonathan Schaffer's (2009: 354) phrase, 'flat'. The *job* of ontological inquiry is simply to come up with a list of what there is. Once the list is done, ontological inquiry is done.

2 Quinean Orthodoxy and Axes of Discontent

2.1 Quinean Theses

The received view among most practicing metaphysicians is Quinean, with an added inflationary commitment.[3] More precisely, I take the received view to endorse all of the following theses:

Thesis 1: There is no distinction between being and existence.

Thesis 2: Being is univocal.

Thesis 3: Ontology is 'flat': it's job is just to come up with a list of what there is.

Thesis 4: Ontological methodology is broadly Quinean: find the best theory and see what it says there is.

Thesis 5: Ontological inquiry is not trivial.

Thesis 6: We should take an inflationary attitude towards ontological inquiry.

Thesis 7: Ontological questions are at least epistemically tractable enough to license ontological debate.

These theses each enjoy some independence from the others, but there are crucial interrelations, too. For instance, it is extremely difficult to deny Thesis 5 while accepting Thesis 6. The converse isn't true, though — we can think ontology non-trivial without thinking it inflationary. (Arguably, that's what Quine thought.) Thanks to these connections, while a line of resistance to orthodoxy might focus mainly on one thesis, it may very well spill over into other disputes.

And orthodoxy has been resisted on each of these fronts. *Neo-Meinongians*, such as Richard Routley (1980, 1982) and Graham Priest (2005), reject Thesis 1, arguing that there are some things which do *not* exist.[4] *Ontological Pluralists*

[3] See van Inwagen 1998 for an endorsement of (his variant of) what I'm calling the 'received view'. More precisely, he explicitly endorses Theses 1, 2, and his own version of Thesis 4; Theses 5–7 seem presupposed by his treatment of Thesis 4. Thesis 3 isn't mentioned at all, but its foes would think it implicitly endorsed by the fact that van Inwagen says nothing about the *other* things they think are part of the ontological project.

[4] von Solodkoff and Woodward (2013) discuss the relationship between this rejection and the issue of egalitarianism raised in the next section.

(McDaniel 2009, 2010, Turner 2010) defend the view that there are different ways or modes of being. Jonathan Schaffer (2009) and L. A. Paul (2012) argue that there's more to ontology than just listing the existents: the ontological project includes tracking priority relations or categorical distinctions as well.[5] And Joseph Melia (1995, 2000), Stephen Yablo (1998, 2005), and David Manley (2009) argue against the Quinean methodology, insisting that we need not believe in everything that our best theory quantifies over.

Most practicing ontologists accept Thesis 7; if they didn't, they'd drop the practice. But routes for resistance have been explored here, too, by Karen Bennett (2009) and Jessica Wilson (2011: §2).

The lion's share of resistance, however, has borne down on Thesis 6 (and, to a lesser extent, Thesis 5). It represents a central and recurring theme in philosophy: the perennial debate between metaphysical realists and anti-realists. *That* debate, of course, is far too large to canvass here. But in §§3 and 4 I outline recent Carnap-inspired moves on the anti-realist front and recent attempts to resist them.

2.2 Egalitarianism

A final thesis divides contemporary orthodoxy. To understand the thesis, we should consider an additional feature of Quinean methodology: the importance of *paraphrase*.

As part of his rejection of analyticity, Quine held that there are no such things as 'meanings'. Given his methodology, this means he held that our best theory would have no need to quantify over meanings (or intentional entities of any sort). But he concedes that those who say

(4) The predicate 'red' has a meaning,

(which is equivalent to 'there is a meaning the predicate 'red' has') aren't completely off their rocker. That's because, although there are no meanings, those who utter (4) can be understood as getting at a truth in the neighborhood, namely

(5) The predicate 'red' is meaningful.

In Quine's terminology, (5) is a *paraphrase* of (4).

Contemporary orthodoxy continues in Quine's footsteps here. Ontologists often make surprising claims: that there are no numbers, or composite objects, or features. These claims seem to contradict various platitudinous claims that ontologists seem unfit to comment on: that there are infinitely many prime numbers, or that there is a comet visible from earth every 75 years, or that some

[5]Some might worry that, so long as priority relations and categorical distinctions are being tracked, it's a mere terminological dispute as to whether to call this 'ontology'. On the other hand, the resisters may insist it's a terminological dispute that matters: Whether or not we call this activity 'ontology' might, for sociological reasons, affect how much attention we give it.

skyscrapers share some architectural features with some houses. The ontologists try to avoid the contradiction by paraphrasing the platitudes in number-, comet-, or feature-free claims they accept.

Much first-order ontology looks at the viability of these proposed paraphrases. But for our *metaontological* purposes we want to know: if a paraphrase is successful, what is the relationship between the paraphrased sentence and the claim it's paraphrased into?

Tatjana von Solodkoff (2014: §2) identifies two ways of thinking about this relationship. One is *revisionary*. On this way of thinking, if Quine is right about meanings, then (4) is simply *false*. But although it is false, (4) is better-off than most run-of-the-mill falsehoods, because the truth of (5) can do a lot of the work that we would have otherwise relied on (4) to do. People who believe (4) are believing falsehoods, but they're not as bad off as those who think the earth is flat or that aliens control parliament, because although (4) is false it's very close to a truth in the neighborhood, namely (5), and they can be forgiven for running the two together. (Cf. e.g. Merricks 2001: 162–86)

On the other *conciliatory* way of thinking about this relationship, paraphrase is something like analysis, and paraphrased sentences are simply true. If Quine is right to paraphrase (4) as (5), then (4) is true simply because it's a disguised way of saying (5).

If the conciliatory picture is right, then (4) is true, in which case we might wonder in what sense there *aren't* meanings. One common answer is that there are different uses of 'there are'. There is something like a 'heavyweight' use, where the truth of 'there are *F*s' implies that the 'there are' can't be analyzed away. Then there is something like a 'lightweight' use which is consistent with the quantifier ultimately disappearing under paraphrase or analysis. (4) is true when 'there is' has a lightweight use, but not when it has a heavyweight one. The sense in which there aren't meanings is the sense in which 'there aren't' has the heavyweight reading.

This heavyweight/lightweight distinction can be further cashed out in several ways. It may be that only the 'heavyweight' quantifier is *really* a quantifier, with the 'lightweight' one as some other piece of language that happens to sound the same.[6] Similarly, 'lightweight' quantifiers might disguise a hidden, non-logical quantificational form.[7] It may be that both are genuine quantifiers, communicatively distinct parts of the language used for different purposes (Hofweber 2005). Or it may be that the 'heavyweight' quantifiers have some distinct *metaphysical* privilege lacked by their 'lightweight' counterparts (Sider 2009).

However we cash out the distinction, by recognizing such a distinction we will be *inegalitarian* about quantifiers, or at least apparent uses of quantifiers. Quantificational language can be used in several different ways, but only one

[6]Compare Argle's apology for using a predicate that 'sound[s] like an idiom of existential quantification' in Lewis and Lewis 1970: 206.

[7]Thanks to an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

use is of particular interest to ontologists. The revisionary view is, on the other hand, egalitarian. There is just one use of the quantifier: the one that makes (4) false and (5) true.

3 Semantic Deflationism

Deflationism comes in several varieties, but I'll focus here on primarily *semantic* deflationism. This variety holds that ontological debates are, in some sense or another, more about our rules for thinking and talking about the world than about the world itself. In a metaphor, our thought and talk doesn't aim to *match* a realm of self-standing objects in reality, but rather has the job of *carving* reality into object-sized bites.

This flavor of deflationism has upshots for other tenets of Quinean orthodoxy. For instance, it suggests that proper ontological method should involve conceptual analysis or socio-linguistics, rather than theoretical-virtue balancing.

Consider an example. In the last twenty years or so, ontologists have debated about the material world. In particular they have debated about the conditions under which some things make up a further whole, of which they are all parts.[8] Presumably, if there are tables, they are made up of further parts (table-tops, table-legs, and so on). Call table-parts arranged in a way that makes them look and act functionally as though they make up a table *arranged tablewise*. Then the composition debate naturally shows up as a debate about, *inter alia*, the truth of:

(6) If there are some things arranged tablewise, then there is a table that they are parts of.

Parties to these debates bring in often *recherche* considerations to support various views: considerations having to do with arbitrariness (Rea 1998: 354–5, Hawthorne 2006*a*: 53–4), causal overdetermination (Merricks 2001: ch. 3), vagueness (Lewis 1986: 212–13, Sider 2001: 121–32), and so on.

Deflationists about this debate think the debaters, and the considerations they appeal to, are misguided. This might be for one of two reasons. First, it might be because the debaters are simply *talking past* each other. The parties might be using certain terms in subtly different ways, so that (6) is true in the mouth of one participant but false in the mouth of another. Then they both speak truly, but they fail to disagree. (Cf. Putnam 1987) On the other hand, perhaps they are not talking past each other. Still, their disagreement may be verbal in the sense that it may stem primarily from one (or both) of them simply making a *semantic* error: given how words get their meanings, in English (6) is guaranteed to be true. Any party arguing for its falsehood isn't confused about

[8] Van Inwagen (1990) provides the *locus classicus*; Korman (2011) provides a good guide to the literature.

how the world is, but about how our words are to be used in describing the world. (Hirsch 2005: 69–70; cf. Bennett 2009: 50)[9]

This second diagnosis is Carnapian in spirit, if not in letter. Carnap's idea was that the truth-conditions of sentences about tables were settled by a linguistic framework. We could argue about what experiences we had, but it was no use arguing about whether certain experiences made 'there are tables' true, because that was settled by the framework's rules, not deep metaphysics. The second diagnosis rejects Carnap's linguistic frameworks with their reliance on analyticity; (6) isn't *analytic*, and its truth isn't guaranteed by any 'linguistic frame'. Still, it's truth *is* guaranteed by boring socio-linguistic factors about English, and while those who deny it may not be denying analytic truths, they are denying obvious ones that owe their truth not to deep metaphysics but instead boring semantics.

Whether we interpret the debaters as talking past each other or as ignoring relevant facts about ordinary language, they will be doing something wrong with some of the words in (6). Which words? Really, there are just two candidates: the quantifiers ('there is...') and the predicates ('...a table'). Amie Thomasson (2007, 2009), for instance, argues that conceptual analysis of the term 'table', combined with a proper metasemantic story about how 'table' gets its meaning, is enough to show that (6) is true. On her view, a concept like *table* comes read-made with 'existence conditions' — conditions under which the concept counts as being instanced. For the concept *table*, the existence of tablewise-arranged parts fulfills the conditions.

Eli Hirsch, by contrast, places the blame on the quantifiers (e.g. 2002, 2005). According to his *quantifier variance*, there are different things we could potentially mean by 'there is'. Some of them produce a truth when attached to 'a table' in the presence of particles arranged tablewise. Others don't. If ontologists want to stipulatively use quantifiers in a way that vindicates their theories, one can truly utter (6) and the other its negation, but only by talking past each other. But the only *interesting* question is whether (6) is true in the mouths of ordinary English speakers — those not corrupted by philosophy — and to find *that* out, we need to do socio-linguistics, not philosophy.

There are difficulties for the view that the predicates alone are to blame. Here, in rough form, is why. Imagine a linguistic community of cave-people before the invention of tables; we'll suppose they have no concept of *table*. Suppose for the first time they have placed a large, flat stone on top of a tree stump for eating on. This 'base' and the flat surface are (we can suppose) all there is in a given cave. We can ask one of the cave-people how many things there are in the cave. Presumably they will say 'two'. Soon thereafter, they coin the *table* concept. Now when we ask them how many things there are, they will presumably say *three*: the two table parts, plus the table that makes them up.

[9]See Chalmers 2011 and Jenkins 2014 for further discussion of what makes a dispute 'verbal'. Chalmers (2009) defends a deflationary picture of ontology according to which ontological debates are *not* verbal, which I won't consider here.

We can capture 'there are (exacty) two things in the cave' using only quantifiers, truth-functional connectives ('and,' 'or', and 'not'), the identity predicate, and a predicate C which means 'is in the cave', as follows:

(7) $\exists x \exists y(Cx \wedge Cy \wedge x \neq y \wedge \forall z[Cz \rightarrow (z = x \vee z = y)])$

Before the cave-people coined the *table* concept, they accepted (7), but after, they denied it. So one of three things must have happened:

(i) The meaning of the quantifiers, the truth-functional connectives, the identity predicate, and/or the predicate C (which means 'in the cave') has changed.

(ii) The community brought something new into existence when they coined the new concept.

(iii) The cave-person did not speak truly both times.

If we go for option (i), we will have to say which terms changed their meaning, and it seems pretty clear that the quantifiers are the obvious suspects: it is difficult to see why coining a new concept would change what we mean by 'identity,' 'room', or truth-functional connectives. So this leads us to quantifier variance.

Can we avoid quantifier variance by going one of the other two routes? Perhaps. Option (ii) is, on its face, not quite what the deflationist is looking for: coining new concepts is supposed to let us *recarve* the world, not create new occupants for it.[10] Option (iii) looks likewise unattractive. If we rate the cave-person's first utterance true and his second false, we entirely give away the game of securing the existence of tables via conceptual analysis. So it looks like we need to plump for his speaking falsely the first time around. But what explains its falsity, in that case? Presumably the fact that *there was a table there*, even if he did not yet have the concept to pick it out. But in that case it appears that the existence of tables 'predates' our concept of them, in which case it looks like we're back to a picture where our concepts are trying to *track* reality's inventory rather than recarve it.

A deflationist who accepts (iii) might be what Matti Eklund (2007: 391–2) calls a *maximalist*: essentially, someone who thinks that, for every possible concept, there is something that falls under it. Eklund thinks of maximalism as a form of deflationism. This view may have independent troubles (Eklund 2006), but for my money I don't see why it counts as deflationary at all, rather than a specific, maximally permissive first-order ontological thesis. (Very similar views, at least as pertains to *material* ontology, have been sympathetically discussed by Bennett 2004: §4 and Hawthorne 2006*b*, both of whom treat them as

[10] Lynne Rudder Baker (2000, 2004) endorses a view according to which one may bring something new into existence by simply deciding to use it in a way that makes it fall under a previously coined kind concept (cf. her 2004: n. 12). But she strenuously resists charges of deflationism.

alternatives to deflationary maneuvers. See Hawley 2007: 246–8, however, for a deflationary take on maximalism.)

Thomasson (2009: §§5–6) favors a different response to this argument. We assumed that the only predicate in (7) was 'R'. Natural language isn't like this: we read '$\exists x \exists y(x \neq y)$' as 'There are two things', and 'thing' looks an awful lot like a kind-term, similar to 'table' or 'bear' or what-have-you. It might simply *be* a kind-term, meaning something like 'interesting chunk of matter', or it might instead be a kind of place-holder for any other kind-term, meaning roughly 'table-or-bear-or-…'. But we don't get to say that the change in truth-value of (7) is thanks to the *quantifier* if '$\exists$' is smuggling in an unrecognized predicate. Either way, the change in (7)'s truth-value is thanks to a change in meaning of a kind terms — those of 'thing', if it is intended as a kind term, or instead those for all the different kind terms, if 'thing' is being used as a place-holder.

We do in fact read '$\exists$' as 'something'. To get the argument against the predicate-first view to stick, we need the 'thing' in 'something' to not be associated with any existence-conditions at all. We need 'thing' to mean something like 'whatever's out there waiting to be quantified over', where some of what's out there may very well not be covered by any kind-term at all. Thomasson calls this a *neutral* use of 'thing', and she denies that it is coherent.

If she is right, predicates may be to blame for the shift in (7)'s truth-value after all. Many philosophers have found it hard to part company with the neutral use of 'thing', however. Deflationists who haven't been able to give it up have opted instead for quantifier variance, which will occupy us for the balance of this chapter.

4 Quantifier Variance

4.1 The Metasemantic Argument for Deflation

4.1.1 Interpretation and Charity

Disagreements about composition, recall, show up as disagreement about the truth-value of

(6) If there are some things arranged tablewise, then there is a table that they are parts of.

The idea driving Hirsch and Putnam's deflationism is that the truth of (6) depends only on how we use words like 'there are', and not on anything any deeper. Here, roughly, is the idea. There is a community of language-users — call them the *tablers* — who confidently and unhesitatingly say (6), utter 'There are tables' in the presence of some things arranged tablewise, and so on. Another community of language-users — call them the *no-tablers* — unhesitatingly utter (6)'s negation, refuse to say 'There are tables' in the presence of things arranged tablewise, and so on.

Meaning is fixed by use; a word means what it means thanks to how its linguistic community uses it. One way to flesh out this thought proceeds by way of an attractive *interpretationist* view of metasemantics (cf. Davidson 1978, Lewis 1974). Imagine an ideal interpreter, omniscient of all non-semantic facts, observing a linguistic community for its entire existence. At the end, the ideal interpreter will *interpret* — that is, assign meanings to — the community's words. The interpretationist picture holds that the words in fact mean whatever the ideal interpreter would say they mean when she interprets them.

In interpreting us, the ideal interpreter is supposed to treat us *charitably* — to make us speak truly more often than not, for instance, and make our mistakes understandable. Since the tablers confidently and unhesitatingly assert (6), the ideal interpreter should interpret their uses of 'there are' in a way that makes it true. And since the untabled confidently and unhesitatingly deny (6), she should interpret their uses of 'there are' in a way that makes it false.

What goes for the tablers and no-tablers goes for us. Whether (6) is true depends, by and large, on how English speakers use it. If most of us confidently assert (6) (at least in our unphilosophic moments), then the ideal interpreter ought to interpret 'there are' in a way that makes it true. So we should do socio-linguistic research to figure out whether it's true; abstract concerns about overdetermination or arbitrariness just aren't to the point.

4.1.2 Translation Equivalence

The fact that we confidently and unhesitatingly assert a sentence gives an ideal interpreter some reason to interpret us so as to make it true. But there are other pressures. Suppose, for instance, that if the ideal interpreter interprets the no-tablers so as to make (6) true, there will be some propositions that the tablers can express that the no-tablers can't. Suppose further that, if she interprets the no-tablers so as to make (6) false, they will be able to express every proposition the tablers can. In that case, the interpretation which makes the no-tablers right to deny (6) might be *less* charitable, because it might mean they're missing lots of important truths about the world.

Hirsch takes this worry seriously, but holds that it doesn't undercut the argument: a charitable interpretation of the no-tablers won't miss anything the tablers have access to. This might seem surprising on its face. After all, the tablers can *talk about tables*, and (it seems) the no-tablers cannot. But Hirsch points out that, whenever the tablers say 'There is a table here', the no-tablers will say 'There are particles arranged tablewise here'. Plausibly, then, 'There is a table here' in the mouths of the tablers will express the same proposition as 'There are particles arranged tablewise' does in the mouth of the no-tablers. (Cf. Hirsch 2005: 77–9)

Call some languages *translation-equivalent* if and only if there are translations between each that preserves the propositions expressed. If two languages are translation-equivalent, then neither is expressively impoverished relative to the

other. In that case, there is no pressure from expressiveness that would keep an ideal interpreter from interpreting two different linguistic communities as speaking each of the two languages.

4.1.3 The General Argument

Hirsch thinks that many typical metaphysical disputes — whether about composition, temporal ontology, or personal identity — are like this.[11] The various positions come out true in their own possible languages, and the possible languages are translation-equivalent. As a result, any of those languages could *in principle* be the one we speak, and the only question left — to be settled by socio-linguistic investigation — is which one we *do* speak.

Here's the argument in premise-conclusion form, as adapted to the debate about tables:

(i) The tabler-language and the no-tabler-language are translation-equivalent.

(ii) If two languages are translation-equivalent, there is no in principle reason an ideal interpreter should prefer interpreting a community as speaking one rather than the other.

(iii) So, the ideal interpreter will interpret 'there are' so as to make (6) true in a community's language if and only if, in the community, they confidently and unhesitatingly assert it.

(iv) If (iii), the truth-value of (6) is settled by boring socio-linguistic factors.

(v) The ontological question asks after the truth-value of (6).

(vi) Therefore, the ontological question is settled by boring socio-linguistic factors.

Since the conclusions (iii) and (vi) each do seem to follow from their respective premises, resisting the argument will require denying a premise. Premise (iv) is hard to deny; the other three, however, have each been objected to. We'll see how in the next section.

4.2 Resisting the Argument

4.2.1 Denying Premise (i)

Are the tabler-language and the no-tabler-language *really* translation-equivalent? The idea is supposed to be that, every time a tabler says 'There is a table where . . . ', the untabler can translate it as 'There are some particles arranged tablewise

[11] Interestingly, he does not think disputes about mathematical objects are like this; see Hirsch 2009: §5.

where . . . ', and every time the untabler says 'There is something where. . . ' the tabler can translate it as 'There is something that is not a table where . . . '.

So far, so good. But there are some ways this might go wrong. Suppose, for instance, that the world is *gunky*: made of things with proper parts, each of which has proper parts. There simply are no particles in a world like this: matter is decomposable without end. It's parts all the way down. The tabler may well think there is a table in this world, and so reckon 'There is a table here' true, even though there are no particles and so 'There are particles arranged tablewise' is false. (Cf. Hawthorne 2009: 222–3)

Here's a second way it might go wrong. For two languages to be translation-equivalent, there have to be translations between the two that *preserve propositions*. Plausibly, if we set aside worries like those just raised, a sentence in the tabler language ('there is a table here') will be *necessarily equivalent* to its translation in the no-tabler language ('there are things arranged tablewise here'). But does that mean they express the same propositions? There are reasons to think that propositions — units of cognitive significance — are more fine-grained than that. If so, then the mere necessary equivalence of the translation isn't yet reason to think that the languages are translation-equivalent. (Cf. Bennett 2009: 53–4, Eklund 2007: §3, Hawthorne 2006*b*: §4, 2009: §3)

Here's a third way it might go wrong: the tablers and the no-tablers might each endorse *semantic* theses about what the other is saying. Suppose, for instance, that the tablers say

(8) Whenever a no-tabler says 'There is an x which is F', they speak truly if and only if there is something which satisfies 'F''.

Under the translations that are supposed to demonstrate translation-equivalence, (8) in the tabler-language will become, in the no-tabler language,

(9) Whenever I say 'There is an x which is F', I speak truly if and only if there either is something which satisfies 'F' or are some things arranged tablewise which satisfy 'F'.

If the languages really are are translation-equivalent, then (8) and (9) express the same proposition, and so have the same truth-value. But the no-tablers will *deny* (9). According to it, when a no-tabler says 'There is a table', they speak truly because there are some things arranged tablewise. But the no-tabler thinks she speak *falsely* when she says 'There are some things arranged tablewise.' (Cf. Eklund 2007: §2, Hawthorne 2006*b*: §3; see McGrath (2008) and Koslicki (2007: 94–97) for related objections to translation-equivalence.)

This by itself doesn't entail that premise (i) is false; perhaps one of these parties is wrong. But the driving idea behind the argument is one of *interpretative charity*: We doubt the cogency of the debate because we see that each side could be interpreted with equal charity. Making one of the parties wrong in their semantic views threatens this idea; if someone is going to be interpreted uncharitably, why be uncharitable about their *semantic* claims rather than their table-claims?

4.2.2 Denying Premise (ii)

David Lewis (1983, 1984) argued against (ii) on independent grounds. The idea was that an interpretationist metasemantic picture needed constraints that went beyond charity. There can be two languages that are translation-equivalent that could each equally well be our language. But if (ii) were true, then there would be no fact of the matter as to the meanings of some of our words.

Here's one way to see the idea. Let *Staria* be some star system that collapsed long before humans ever came on the scene. Now consider one language, STRAIGHT, where 'green' means *green* and 'blue' means *blue*, and another language, BENT, where 'green' means *green and outside of Staria or blue and inside of Staria*, and 'blue' means *blue and inside of Staria or green and outside of Staria*. These two languages are translation-equivalent. Replacing 'green' with 'green and inside of Staria or blue and outside of Staria,' and so on gets us a translation between either language that preserves truth.[12]

Here's the rub: If Staria is truly inaccessible to us, then nothing in how we in fact use words favors interpreting us as speaking either STRAIGHT or BENT. If (ii) is true, then it would seem that there is no fact of the matter as to which of these two languages we speak, and so no fact of the matter as to which things in Staria satisfied 'green'. Lewis thought this was implausible; if our use didn't decide whether we were speaking STRAIGHT or BENT, something else must have. He argued there was a further *naturalness* constraint: ideal interpreters are constrained to interpret us charitably, but also to interpret us in such a way that our words did a better job of carving out objective 'joints in nature'. In this case, since dividing the world into things which are green and those which aren't carves closer to its objective joints than dividing it into things which are green-and-inside-Staria-or-blue-and-outside-Staria and those that aren't, the constraint tells the ideal interpreter to interpret us as speaking STRAIGHT and not BENT.

Sider (2001: xvi–xxiv) suggested that this idea extends not just to predicates but also to quantifiers. Some interpretations for the quantifiers carve nature closer to its joints, and ideal interpreters should try to give quantifiers with these joint-carving interpretations.

In this case, even if two languages are translation-equivalent, if one of them has a quantifier that carves closer to reality's natural joints than another, an ideal interpreter will prefer interpreting a community as speaking *it*. Thus (ii) is false, and the ontological dispute can be rehabilitated. The truth of 'There are tables' will be settled not by boring socio-linguistic factors, but by whether the objective, joint-carving quantifier quantifies over tables. Since the behavior of a *joint-carving* quantifier seems a paradigmatically metaphysical issue, investigating its behavior will use the traditional methods of deep metaphysics.

Hirsch has objected to Sider's response on two fronts. First, he has raised

[12]This is an interpretationist variant of Goodman's 'new riddle of induction' (1979/1983). Similar cases can be constructed from Kripke's (1982) interpretation of Wittgenstein's rule-following problem or from Putnam's (1980) model-theoretic arguments.

some skepticism about the coherence of the very notion of a 'joint-carving quantifier' (Hirsch 2005: 92–93). Second, he has pointed out that, even if there is such a quantifier, it isn't clear it can do the work Sider has suggested for it.

In the case of STRAIGHT and BENT, the objective naturalness of meanings is being used to break a tie: Our use of English seems to underdetermine which things in Staria satisfy 'green', and naturalness is coming in to make up the difference. Sider wanted it to do something stronger, though. If the natural quantifier did not quantify over tables, Sider's suggestion had it that the ideal interpreter would make the tablers speak falsely when they said 'There are tables'. Here, the suggestion is that the naturalness of a candidate meaning *trumps* use. It isn't clear that anything in Lewis's arguments justify thinking objective naturalness can have anything like this sort of use-trumping power. (Hirsch 2005: 95–6, Hirsch 2007: 377)

4.2.3 Denying Premise (v)

Premise (v) says that the ontological question (as least as it pertains to tables) is about whether or not 'There are tables' is true. We might object to it this way: 'To think of the ontological question this way is to make it overly linguistic. Ontology isn't about the truth of *sentences* — it's about *what there is*. The ontological question isn't best thought of by semantic ascent; that's a red herring. The ontological question is about *what there is*. Premise (iv) is just false.' (Cf. Wilson 2011: §3, Wilson 2013: 156–160)

There's something right about this response: Ontologists are supposed to be interested, in the first instance, about *reality*, not about *words*. But the semantic deflationist can cause trouble by replacing the objectionable premise (v) with the following bit of reasoning:

(v.a) The ontological question is as to whether there are tables.

(v.b) There are tables if and only if 'There are tables' is true.

(v.c) Whether 'There are tables' is true is settled by boring socio-linguistic factors.

(vi) Therefore, the ontological question is settled by boring socio-linguistic factors.

The deflationist thinks that the truth-value of the sentence 'There are tables' is settled by boring socio-linguistic factors, and doesn't understand how there could be any interesting wedge between *this* and whether or not there are tables.

A second rejection of (v) is partially conciliatory. It grants that the truth-value of 'There are tables', at least as ordinarily used in English, really is settled by boring socio-linguistic factors. But it denies that ontological statements should be thought of as instances of ordinary use. 'When we're doing ontology,' the response says, 'We're not just wondering whether ordinary folk going about their lives speak truly when they say "There are tables." We're wondering

something *else*: Something along the lines of, "Does reality's ultimate structure quantify over tables?" The ontological project — the one we at least should have been doing, and maybe really were doing all along, even if we didn't realize it — is asking this deeper question."

This response thus taps into the inegalitarianism discussed in §2.2. There is a 'heavyweight' use of the quantifier, which is metaphysically interesting, and a 'lightweight' use which is not. The lightweight use is what most people deploy in everyday life. Truth-values of sentences using a lightweight quantifier are very sensitive to socio-linguistic factors. The heavyweight use really only comes up when we do philosophy, and often only when we ask difficult questions about reality's ultimate structure. Truth-values of sentences using the heavyweight quantifier are much less sensitive to ordinary use.

What precisely does this heavyweight use amount to? Sider (2009) suggests one version of the inegalitarian response in reply to the objection that Hirsch ended the last section with. If 'there are' in English doesn't pick out the perfectly natural quantifier, we can retreat to the language of 'Ontologese', where we *stipulate* that 'there are' expresses the perfectly natural quantifier, and construe *that* as the interesting ontological question.

Another version of the inegalitarian response appeals to the notion of a metaphysical analysis (Dorr 2004, 2005, Turner MS; cf. Jenkins 2011). The idea here is that metaphysics is largely in the business of analyzing some claims in terms of others, where the analysis is distinctly *metaphysical*, rather than conceptual: tracking the structure of reality rather than the structure of thought. Some ordinary uses of quantifiers may be analyzed away: 'There is a table here,' even if true, may be *metaphysically analysed* as 'There are particles arranged tablewise here'. On this picture, the heavyweight quantifier is the quantifier we end up with after all the analyses are cashed in.

Other versions of this response may also be available. But the point is perfectly general: Ontologists who endorse an inegalitarian conception of ontology can respond to the metasemantic argument by granting that ordinary, lightweight uses of 'There are' are settled by socio-linguistic factors, while insisting that (perhaps by explicit stipulation) heavyweight uses are not. Egalitarians, by contrast, have no such response available. Unless they want to endorse deflationism they will need to respond to the argument by denying one of the first two premises.

4.2.4 Overgeneration Worries

A final objection doesn't' try to diagnose where the argument goes wrong. It simpy insists that the argument *must* go wrong since, if it were any good, it would prove too much. After all, the argument claims that debates about ontology are bad because each party could be *interpreted* so as to make them right. This is nothing special about ontology, though; debates about whether whales are fish or whether slavery is wrong can also be reinterpreted. Interpretations

are thick on the ground; it isn't that hard to find *some* interpretation that is charitable to almost anyone.[13]

Take any debate. According to the argument, if there is one language that makes one party in the debate speak truly, and another language that makes another party in the debate speak truly, and if the two debates are translation-equivalent, then the debate is a verbal dispute. According to the objection, most debates will be this way, and so most debates will end up being verbal. That would be an objectionable conclusion, and so the argument must be wrong.

One natural response holds that translation-equivalence, while necessary, isn't quite sufficient for an ideal interpreter to be indifferent about how to interpret a community. This response replaces the argument's premise (ii) with

> (ii′) If two languages are translation-equivalent, and some other condition *C* is met, there is no in principle reason an ideal interpreter should prefer interpreting a community as speaking one rather than the other.

It goes on to say that *C* is et for the ontological debates in question but not for the other, 'substantive' debates the objection was worried about.

If the argument is to establish anything deflationary, *C* had better be another boring socio-linguistic condition. (If *C* were something about Lewisian naturalness, for instance, this reply would concede the objection of §4.2.2.) Hirsch has, for instance, stressed that interpretative charity should include the *charity to retract*: roughly, we should interpret an utterance as false if the community, upon coming to have further evidence, would retract the utterance (Hirsch 2005: 73-74). Suppose *C* is the condition that the community would not be disposed to change what they say upon coming to learn further evidence. Then the debate about whether whales are fish would not turn out verbal; since both communities are disposed to retract 'whales are fish' upon learning more biology, an interpretation that made 'whales are fish' true would be less charitable to each party and so dispreferred.

This condition on its own may not be enough to rule out all problematic cases. (It seems clear, for instance, that the truth of 'slavery is wrong' does not depend on the fact that we were in fact disposed to retract this upon learning more evidence; communities without those dispositions would still be mistaken in thinking slavery okay.) Fans of the argument would need to bring further interpretative principles to bear. The strategy is to rule non-ontological debates substantive by finding interpretative principles that rule all but the ontological ones in; whether that can be done is another matter.

4.3 Baby and Bathwater

Strategies for resisting the argument for quantifier variance fall into two broad camps. Strategies in one camp appeal to considerations that are, in some sense,

[13]Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this objection.

'internal' to the quantifier variantist's argument, such as considerations involving expressive power. Strategies in the other camp appeal instead to some extra metaphysically important ingredient that the quantifier variantist is allegedly missing, such as the importance of 'carving the world at its joints'.

Elizabeth Barnes (2014) points out that conceptions of metaphysics which tie it too closely to 'the world's fundamental structure' or 'carving nature at the joints' run the risk of classifying lots of important metaphysical disputes as 'not metaphysics'. There are, for example, disputes about the metaphysics of race and gender — disputes, for instance, about what races or genders *are*. None of the disputants involved think that races or genders are part of the world's *fundamental structure*; they all agree that, in *some* sense or another, they arise from how people behave. They disagree about the kinds of things that arise from these structures.

As a result, responses to the argument for quantifier variance may want to tread carefully around these issues. Consider, for instance, a debate between a *gender binarist* and a *gender pluralist*. The gender binarist thinks there are only two genders: Male and Female. The gender pluralist thinks there are (at least) three. The binarist and pluralist seem to have an ontological disagreement, captured in their disagreement over the claim

(10) There is a gender other than Male or Female.

If we respond to the argument for quantifier variance by insisting that ontological questions must use 'joint-carving' quantifiers, we'll be forced to say that the binarist and pluralist's disagreement is about whether reality's ultimate joints contain two genders or more. Since neither party thinks genders are particularly close to nature's joints, this response seems to mis-characterize their debate.

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