Metaontology: Introduction

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While the term "metaontology" may well have been used before, one can take 1998 as the year it officially entered the lexicon of analytic philosophy. That year, Peter van Inwagen published an essay having the word as its title (see van Inwagen [1998]). Quine taught us that the fundamental question of ontology is "What is there?" Van Inwagen asked about the meaning of that very question, and wondered how we should address it—what is the correct methodology of ontology. This was for him the subject of metaontology. His "meta" prefix pointed at a higher level of inquiry: "meta-X" as the investigation of the basic notions and techniques of discipline X.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, "metaontology is the new black" (Cameron 2008, 1). Perhaps the main element of innovation in comparison to how ontology was practiced, at least in the analytic camp in the second half of the twentieth century, is that scholars pay more and more attention to metaontological issues (for surveys, see Eklund [2006]; Berto and Plebani [2014]). This issue of *The Monist* brings together cutting-edge research work on the topic.

Van Inwagen's own metaontological stance was itself Quinean. In mainstream Quinean metaontology, the notion of *being* just is the notion of *existence*, which is captured by the quantifier of formal logic. Quine's famous "criterion of ontological commitment" has it that the ontological commitments of theories are detected by looking at their quantificational structure, which is supposed to be obtained through translation into the quantifier-variable idiom of "canonical notation" (see Quine 1948). Quine was in a better position than anyone else to grant that translations may trigger subtle linguistic and conceptual issues: he notoriously defended a view he himself labelled as "ontological relativity" on this basis (Quine 1969). However, against Rudolf Carnap, he took ontological questions, *qua* quantificational questions, as generally perfectly meaningful and substantive queries concerning reality as such. Variants of this metaontological

view have been subscribed to by well-known philosophers like David Lewis (1986). Much recent work in metaontology, however, calls into question the Quinean view in a number of ways. A main aim of the present collection of papers has been to adequately represent the variety of these ways.

According to *neo-Meinongians*, existence is a substantive, real feature that some things have and others lack. Given that some things just do not exist, we should deny the Quinean thesis that the notion of existence is captured by the quantifier. A prominent neo-Meinongian is Graham Priest (his view has been called *noneism*, following Richard Routley's [1980] terminology). In "*Sein* Language," the paper opening our collection, Priest goes through one of the most classical metaontological moves: to address the question of being by examining the behaviour of the verb "to be." Using considerations from logic, linguistics, and metaphysics, he points out that the verb occurs in a multitude of constructions, many unconnected to notions of existence and quantification. This multiplicity of uses also reveals that there is no single answer to the question of which property it picks out. It can mean the property of existence, but it can also mean the property of being an object (and, relatedly, being something with properties) where the first, existential meaning is appropriate to the grammatically intransitive use of 'is' and the second to the grammatically transitive use (one that he thinks maps on to Heidegger's use of 'being'). Priest concludes, drily, that "things are slightly more complicated than" Quine's "to be is to be the value of a bound variable."

In "Freeing Talk of Nothing from the Cognitive Illusion of Aboutness," Jody Azzouni also rejects Quine's criterion of ontological commitment: his "neutralist interpretation of the quantifiers" has it that quantifiers impose no ontological (he says: "metaphysical") commitment and constraint by themselves. However, the metaontology Azzouni gets out of this, called Pure Metaphysical Deflationism, is directly opposed to the neo-Meinongian one. According to Azzouni we can do justice to our ordinary talk of what does not exist without supposing such talk to be *about* nonexistent things that act as its truthmakers. In place of such an "Aboutness Meinongianism," Azzouni's pure Metaphysical Deflationism teases aboutness apart into genuine relational aboutness and a spurious aboutness in the case of the nonexistent, where the appearance of aboutness in the latter case is explained as a kind of cognitive illusion.

A natural way to expand the idea that we have genuine relational aboutness in only some cases is to espouse another non-Quinean metaon-

tological view: the one proposed by *grounding theorists* like Kit Fine, Jonathan Schaffer, and Fabrice Correia (see Correia and Schnieder 2012). Advocates of the grounding approach see reality as an ontologically hierarchical structure. In the mainstream version of their view, they take *grounding* as the key ontological dependence relation providing such structure, and claim that it has a noncausal but explanatory nature. Consequently, they hold that the most important question about things of a given kind is not whether they exist, taken in the Quinean sense as a quantificational question. What we want to know instead is whether they are grounded in more fundamental entities to which we should resort while in the business of understanding and explaining the former. We also want to know if there are absolutely fundamental entities which ground and explain everything else without being themselves grounded in anything else—and if so, which are they. This approach has been seen by some of its proponents as a form of Aristotelian metaphysics, in that Aristotle supported the view that, while "Being is spoken of in many ways," one of these ways—being as *ousìa* or substance—was more fundamental than the others, and investigating what substance is makes for the core of the "science of being *qua* being."

Against this approach, "In Defense of Existence Questions," by Chris Daly and David Liggins, reaffirms the Quinean view that existence questions are in general substantive and should be at the core of ontology. Daly and Liggins stay neutral on whether questions about "what grounds what" are worthy of philosophical attention, focusing instead on the arguments of those (like Fine and Schaffer) whose advocacy of grounding goes hand-in-hand with the view that the kind of existence questions raised by ontologists in the Quinean tradition are for the most part trivial. They argue that neo-Aristotelians have given us no good reason for this impatience with existence questions, and in the final section they address Schaffer's specific responses to attempts like their own to defend the importance and nontriviality of Quinean metaontology.

Nevertheless, Quine's account may be criticized in a further way. Another burgeoning metaontological approach is the one of *fictionalism* (see Eklund 2011). According to ontological fictionalists, claims that seem to commit us to the existence of controversial things, like abstract objects, possible worlds, properties, etc., should generally not be taken at face value and as literally true. They are, rather, a kind of fiction. A famous fictionalist motto has it that such claims can be "good without being true"

(Field 1989), where their goodness rests on their usefulness for various theoretical and applied purposes. Suppose that P is such a claim, and that it commit us to things of kind K by the application of Quine's criterion of ontological commitment. Fictionalism holds that we can keep uttering P and at the same time deny that there are Ks, even in the absence of a plan to paraphrase away talk of the Ks.

In "Fictionalist Nominalism and Applied Mathematics," however, van Inwagen proposes a new argument against fictionalist nominalism in the philosophy of mathematics: the view that reference to and quantification over abstract objects in mathematical talk results in sentences which are only fictionally true, and actually false. Van Inwagen focuses on mathematical discourse as it is applied in the empirical sciences or in engineering. He starts with an argument against fictionalism *simpliciter*, then develops it into an argument against fictionalist nominalism. Finally, he addresses the fictionalist view that mathematical discourse involving apparent reference to abstract objects is a "conservative extension" of nominalistically kosher mathematical discourse, so that its role is one of a useful but in principle dispensable shortcut from nominalistically acceptable premises to nominalistically acceptable conclusions.

Anti-Quineans in metaontology at times revitalize some of Carnap's views on ontology. Carnap thought questions on what there is to make proper sense when set against the background of a conceptual and linguistic framework only. Assuming the mathematical framework of numbers, it makes sense to wonder whether there is a largest perfect number. But traditional ontology wanted to ask about the being and nature of numbers in some absolute sense. Carnap called questions of the first kind *internal* and questions of the second kind *external* (to a framework). Questions of the latter kind have no substantive cognitive content for him. This distinction has in various ways inspired much recent work, ranging from proposals to the effect that we must distinguish an internal and an external reading of quantificational expressions (see Hofweber 2005) to so-called *quantifier variance* views. Quantifier variantists like Eli Hirsch (2011) deny that philosophical debates about what there is are, in general, substantive and concern reality as such. These debates give the impression of being about the world. But they are, rather, shallow or "merely verbal," in that quantifier phrases like "some" and "all" mean different things in the mouths of ontologists apparently giving opposite answers to such questions. Quantifier

variance is also often labelled as a kind of "deflationist" metaontology, in a different sense from Azzouni's, in that it aims at downplaying the importance of ontological questions (of the relevant kind).

In "Quantifier Variance and the Collapse Theorems," Cian Dorr presents a deep discussion of arguments against quantifier variance à la Hirsch, which use so-called "collapse results" from logic. The aim of such arguments is to show that, if linguistic communities A and B have the same logical (introduction/elimination) rules for the quantifiers, then there cannot be meaning variance between A's and B's uses of such expressions as "some" and "all." Dorr criticises such arguments at length. However, his ultimate aim is not to defend quantifier variance: on the contrary, in the final sections of his paper Dorr proposes a new argument for collapse. The argument is based on providing a novel treatment of the quantifiers as algebraic operations on concepts, properties, or relations. Dorr discusses possible responses to his argument on behalf of quantifier variantists.

Common to all forms of deflationism about ontology is the idea that metaphysical debates about the existence of tables or numbers, say, are in some sense defective and that reflection on language can help to show this. In this respect, quantifier variance is not the only popular form of deflationism. Another is the kind of deflationism defended by Thomasson (2003; 2008), which holds that there can be no substantive debate about whether tables or numbers exist since determining that the application-conditions for 'table' and 'number' are satisfied is a trivial matter. In "Pragmatism, Joint-Carving and Ontology," Kyle Mitchell defends a related form of metaontological deflationism against the objections of ontological realists like Ted Sider (2011). Mitchell sets up the dispute between deflationists and realists about ontology in such a way that it parallels the debate between deflationists and realists about truth. The variety of deflationism proposed by Mitchell, which he calls "ontological pragmatism," differs in significant ways from quantifier variantism à la Hirsch and is closer, Mitchell thinks, to a pragmatist version of Thomasson's view. It is claimed that such a new deflationism allows a revitalization of Carnap's distinction between internal and external perspectives, and that it can resist the realist's objections in a better way than quantifier variance deflationism.

Finally, in "Transcendental Disagreement," Giorgio Lando and Giuseppe Spolaore address the role played by such expressions as "thing," "entity," "object," and "exists," which are often—but not uncontroversially

—used in ontological debates as blanket terms applying to or being true of everything ("transcendentals," in this sense). They support a view to the effect that, unlike genuine ontological disagreements, disagreements on transcendentals are terminological and should be assessed on pragmatic grounds. Their view differs from that of ontological deflationists à la Hirsch: people who transcendentally disagree, for Lando and Spolaore, are in general not just talking past each other. Transcendentals actually allow the expression of general ontological theses, and different ontologies can be meaningfully compared by using them. Disagreement on the transcendentals is terminological, but terminology matters a lot in philosophy, and especially in (meta)ontology.

We began this introduction by repeating the claim that "metaontology is the new black." More than one of us, however, worried that the slogan might no longer be apt, that the interest in metaontology might have peaked. We needn't have worried. If there was any downside to organising an issue of *The Monist* on the topic, it was that as editors we had to turn down so many excellent articles, on such a diverse range of subtopics. In the end, we decided to choose articles that impressed us but that were also representative of the field of metaontology as it now stands: a field that owes its existence to the early Quine-Carnap debate but that has now taken on a life very much of its own. We hope this issue of *The Monist* will stimulate readers, impress them with the variety and abundance of ideas on offer, and enrich the continuing debates around this most central of philosophical topics.

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