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Getting off the Inwagen: A Critique of Quinean Metaontology

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Much contemporary ontological inquiry takes place within the so-called 'Quinean tradition' but, given that some aspects of Quine's project have been widely abandoned even by those who consider themselves Quineans, it is unclear what this amounts to. Fortunately recent work in metaontology has produced two relevant results here: a clearer characterisation of the meta-ontology uniting the aforementioned Quineans, most notably undertaken by Peter van Inwagen, and a raft of criticisms of that metaontology. In this paper I critique van Inwagen's Quinean metaontology, finding that certain challenges, supplemented by pressure to reflect more closely Quine's work, should drive Quineans to adopt a stronger metaontology incorporating more of Quine's radical views. I conclude that while van Inwagen's Quineanism is problematic there are prospects for a viable, more wholeheartedly Quinean, metaontology.

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1. The Advent of Metaontology

The key aim for this inquiry is to critique Peter van Inwagen's account of Quinean metaontology. To understand what this amounts to, it is necessary that we first achieve a clear view of what metaontology is.

   The term 'metaontology' was coined by van Inwagen and described—conditional on the question of ontology being 'What is there?'—as the question 'What are we asking when we ask "What is there?"?' (1998, 233). A plethora of explicitly metaontological work followed this with some, such as the dialogue between Eli Hirsch and Theodore Sider concerning whether ontological questions are verbal or substantive (see Sider 2011; Hirsch 2013; Sider 2014), roughly fitting the pattern of van Inwagen's question. For them the primary question has been semantic: what does it mean to ask, or answer, an ontological question? However, van Inwagen's description won't do as a definition of metaontology, not least because it is a conditional with an unestablished antecedent. Even in the aforementioned dispute it is not just the question 'What is there?' that is addressed but more often, for various problematic cases, 'Are there Fs?', and it is debatable whether the conjunction of all such questions is equivalent to 'What is there?'. A more radical departure is found in the neo-Aristotelian approaches of Kit Fine (2009) and Jonathan Schaffer (2009), both of whom reject the afore-mentioned identification of the ontological question because of concerns about superficiality and instead privilege questions of ground.

   One might transform van Inwagen's description into a definition-schema, so that if the question of ontology is '(Question)' then the question of metaontology is 'What are we asking when we ask "(Question)"?', but the range of literature widely considered metaontological is too great for this to be acceptable. For instance, a notable change in the field in recent years has been an increased focus on epistemology. Jessica Wilson (2011) argues that epistemological questions are more informative than semantical questions when critically assessing ontology. In fact even van Inwagen's writings on this matter outstretch his description, being primarily methodological, and a later reference to his starting point both re-phrases the question and adds the further component 'What methods should be employed in the investigation of what there is?' (2014, 200). It is best therefore to leave aside any search for a definition, not least because such projects in philosophy or its subdisciplines typically fail. As such the best description (not definition!) of metaontology is simply as evaluating the practice of ontology: asking, e.g., what methods one should use, how one could acceptably answer an ontological question, and what the significance of such an answer is.

   With this in place it is easier to see the potential for W. V. Quine to be considered important for metaontology. Quine's work has a clear focus on methodological issues, and has been described by various parties as 'the epistemology of ontology'.[1] Having noted the scope of material relevant to the inquiry we can now examine van Inwagen's account of Quinean metaontology to see what, according to him, it comes to.

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[1]Quine himself does so informally in Quine and Fara (1994), and more seriously in Quine (1983, 500).

2. Van Inwagen's Quinean Metaontology

The work in which van Inwagen introduced the term 'metaontology', thereby clarifying a domain of ontological inquiry that had been prone to confusion by virtue of being implicit, also articulates what he is then boldly 'willing to call . . . an exposition of Quine's metaontology' (1998, 233), though he later hedges by describing it as 'essentially Quine's' (2009, 475). Van Inwagen takes Quine's metaontology to be best expressed as five theses of varying complexity:

(Non-activity) 'Being is not an activity.' (2009, 476)

(Being) 'Being is the same as existence.' (2009, 480)

(Univocity) 'Existence is univocal.' (2009, 482)

(Formality) *Existence* is captured by the existential quantifier (2009, 492–99).[2]

(Criterion) *The Quinean criterion of ontological commitment* (2009, 500–506).[3]

These principles together constitute van Inwagen's Quinean metaontology. In the remainder of this section I explain van Inwagen's advocacy of the theses. Critical examination of his position will be left until §§3–4.

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[2]I have paraphrased here: the precise statement of (Formality) is 'The single sense of being or existence is adequately captured by the existential quantifier of formal logic' (van Inwagen 2009, 492). I have removed the part of the thesis that follows as a corollary and italicised 'existence' to loosely denote the concept expressed by, or role played by, existence-terms. I don't think that van Inwagen would have cause to object to either modification.

[3]All labelling of claims throughout this paper is my own, in aid of internal cross-referencing.

2.1. (Non-activity)

'Being is not an activity.'

While this is unstated in Quine's work, van Inwagen considers it important to stress that one cannot usefully understand being as an activity. (Non-activity)'s implicitness makes precise analysis difficult so he clarifies it by briefly considering what its opposite might be. We understand the idea that entities engage in activities, and van Inwagen further supposes that we could stratify the activities in which something engages, ordered by generality: I might engage in *playing sports* and *playing football* in virtue of the same behaviour, but the former is a more general activity. *If* being is an activity it is naturally thought of as the most general activity, which everything does in virtue of being anything: for what could anything do without *being something*? On some variants of this view there is more than one most general activity, providing an easy route to pluralism about being. For example, what artifacts do in virtue of being artifacts may differ from what organisms do in virtue of being organisms. Van Inwagen attributes variants of such a view to Heidegger and Sartre, whom he sees as obvious foils for Quine.

Van Inwagen has two grounds for rejecting the above picture and endorsing (Non-activity). The first is that the doctrine seems to miss a difference in role between being-verbs and other verbs. (This point is somewhat re-constructed as van Inwagen just quotes with approval Austin's insistence (1962, 68) that 'exists' 'is a verb, but it does not describe something that things do all the time, like breathing, only quieter'.) The second is that while van Inwagen thinks it plausible that there *is* a most general activity, he considers *enduring* the best candidate.[4] There isn't any particularly strong conceptual link between enduring,

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[4]This argument may not be important to van Inwagen. He endorses it in his (1998) but abandons it in his (2009). Nonetheless, it seems to be his only justification that does not rely on a sweeping linguistic generalisation. I suggest an alternative defence of (Non-activity) in §4.3.

which everything is supposed to do, and existence. That is, although existence is related to all properties in some sense, it appears to bear no more of a special relationship to enduring than to any other property.

2.2. (Being)

> 'Being is the same as existence.'

> *Corollary:* From (Non-activity) and (Being), existence is not an activity.

This thesis is easier to engage with. Against (Being), such thinkers as Meinong (1960/1904) and in certain moods Russell (1912) claimed that there were reasons to include certain things within the domain of *being* but exclude them from the domain of *existence*. Intentional objects are a paradigm case: under the view that to have a thought about something the thought must have an object, thinking about, e.g., Pegasus seems problematic without accepting some entity to be thought about. Clearly the word 'Pegasus' is meaningful, yet how do we maintain a distinction between *being thinkable* and *being real* without a weaker and a stronger sense of being? On such a view Pegasus *is/has being/subsists*, but does not *exist*.

Van Inwagen's central argument for (Being) is that denying it results in misleading equivocation. For instance, if I say 'There is a white elephant in the next room,' it is no defence on my part to blame your failure to find it on its non-existence while maintaining that it nevertheless *is* because otherwise you could not have looked for it. Uttering that statement in such circumstances would be obviously unhelpful. A related persuasive factor in the case for (Being) is the availability of satisfying paraphrases of apparent reference to non-existent objects. If you say that Pegasus does not exist but subsists because it figures in 'Pegasus does not exist,' I can say instead that nothing fits the predicate 'is Pegasus' though the predicate is meaningful in virtue of the role of its implicit descriptive components, e.g., 'is winged', 'is a horse', in other statements. This is just one of many strategies to resolve the worry.

Van Inwagen's claims might seem ultimately circular, unconvincing unless we already accept (Being), but we can reconstruct a clearer argument from his claims as follows. Some contend that we have (primarily linguistic) reasons to distinguish statements of the form 'There are *F*s' from '*F*s exist', e.g., 'There are many things he believes in that don't exist.' The infelicitous case of the white elephant constitutes compelling counter-evidence, leaving the opponent of (Being) in need of a clear account. The proponent of (Being) can offer interpretations that apparently accommodate everything significant in apparently referring statements about non-existent objects, so the *onus* is on others to demonstrate a failure to do so.

Aside from the historical conflict with Meinong, opposition to this thesis is found in Fine (2009), who takes existence (which he sometimes terms 'reality') to be a property possessed only by those things which are fundamental parts of the world. Broadly speaking (Being) reflects a commitment to a 'flat' ontology, where objects are simply accepted or repudiated; on this view there is no room for levels, or degrees, of being.

2.3. (Univocity)

> 'Existence is univocal.'

> *Corollary:* From (Being) and (Univocity), being is univocal.

We can understand the key question here as whether there is a unified sense to the concept *existence*. The tempting thought going against (Univocity) is that for some predicates '*F*' and '*G*' one could say 'There are *F*s' at one time and 'There are *G*s' at another and, while both statements would be quite in order, their conjunction would be absurd. This obviously depends on what properties '*F*' and '*G*' designate: no one would resist the move

from 'There are tables' and 'There are chairs' to 'There are tables and chairs', but 'There are tables and numbers' strikes us as odd and not necessarily because of doubt about numbers. This thought is developed by Ryle (1949), who argues that 'exist' is ambiguous. To demonstrate the thought, the invalid argument below trades misleadingly on two senses of 'rise':

> The tide is rising.
> Life expectancy is rising.
> * Therefore, at least two things are rising.

According to Ryle analogous arguments with existence would look similarly odd, e.g.:

> There exists at least one number.
> There exists at least one table.
> ?? Therefore, there exist at least two things.

In counter to this intuition van Inwagen notes that apparent 'cross-category' quantification is in perfect order under the right circumstances, citing as an example:

> The Prime Minister had a habit of ignoring the existence of things he didn't know how to deal with, such as public opinion and the Navy. (van Inwagen 2009, 487)

If we pick plausible instances of 'There are *F*s' (he criticises Ryle for selecting statements like 'There are Wednesdays' which look bizarre even alone) there will be some acceptable combinations, with infelicity increasing proportionally with complexity, which is no surprise, as sensible contexts will be harder to find.

Van Inwagen also finds an opponent of (Univocity) in Putnam (2004), whose dissent stems from a different argument. Rather than appeal to use, Putnam claims that one could choose to apply 'exists' in any one of multiple ways. In the well-known toy case of two philosophers confronted with a universe of three simples, Putnam holds that one could adopt a convention on which that universe contains three objects, while the other could adopt a convention on which that universe contains seven objects (all mereological sums of those three simples). Debate about which of these is right is, for Putnam, wrongheaded. Provided both speakers can express what they need to, the two conventions are mutually incompatible but individually acceptable.

In response van Inwagen says simply that Putnam is viewing the situation backwards. If one decides to 'extend' the domain of one's quantifiers, that is rational only if one *already* believes that there are objects not covered by one's current quantifier-terms. In that case, one was simply not aware of all that there was beforehand. Putnam denies that 'there is, somehow fixed in advance, a single "real", a single "literal", sense of "exist"' (2004, 84), but van Inwagen retorts that the 'fixed in advance' sense is *required* to make it possible even to coherently claim that the extension to the domain of quantification is non-empty (2009, 491).

2.4. (Formality)

> '*Existence* is captured by the existential quantifier.'

> *Corollary 1:* From (Formality) and (Non-activity), the existential quantifier does not denote an activity.
> *Corollary 2:* From (Formality) and (Being), *being* is captured by the existential quantifier.
> *Corollary 3:* From (Formality) and (Univocity), the existential quantifier is univocal.

Van Inwagen defends (Formality) with a demonstration of how, using ordinary English words and simple modifications thereof, we could introduce formal quantification into our language, following a similar method demonstrated by Quine (1940). Natural-language pronouns allow us to refer back to things introduced by 'there is' or 'for all' in a sentence, and once we eliminate ambiguity using subscripts and regimentation we effectively have variables bound to quantifiers. I will rehearse this

in shortened form.[5]

On one version of this method, we start from count-nouns and observe two different (stilted) natural-language sentences:

(1)   Tibbles sees a dog and Tibbles chases that dog.

(2)   If Tibbles sees a dog, Tibbles chases that dog.

In (1) I use 'a dog' and 'that dog' *referentially*, i.e., there is some particular dog I refer to, and in (2) I use them *generally*, i.e., there need be no particular dog I refer to. Suppose I substitute 'it' (I demonstrate only for the general use, but an comparable procedure is available for the referential); I then get

(3)   If Tibbles sees a dog, Tibbles chases it.

Some sentences cause problems of ambiguity, so for clarity we introduce subscripts attaching 'it' to count-nouns. To consider a variation:

(4)   If Tibbles$_x$ sees a dog$_y$, it$_x$ chases it$_y$.

Here a simple switch of subscripts substantially alters sentence-meaning. To render this more systematic we attach each subscripted pronoun so that 'it$_\alpha$' references the closest suitable count-term preceding it (the 'true of' construction aids this systematicity):

(5)   It is true of Tibbles that it$_x$ is such that it is true of a dog that it$_y$ is such that if it$_x$ sees it$_y$ then it$_x$ chases it$_y$.

This effectively introduces variables to our language (note that (5), (4), (3), and (2) are equivalent), and to introduce quantifiers we need only consider general and referential sentences not restricted to Tibbles. We then add the phrases 'it is true of everything that it$_x$ is such that . . . ' and 'it is true of at least one thing that it$_x$ is such that . . . ' and introduce brackets to resolve further ambiguities. At this point, substituting quantifier-phrases

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[5]The examples and numbering are my own, but the structure broadly follows van Inwagen's method (2009, 492–98).

for quantifiers and variable-pronouns for variables generates Quine's canonical notation apparently without any controversial departure from ordinary language; thus finally (assuming a simplistic account of names) we can say

(6) $\forall x(x$ is Tibbles $\to \forall y(y$ is a dog $\to (x$ sees $y \to$
$$x \text{ chases } y))).$$

The utility of the existential quantifier for expressing *existence* finds its opponents in ordinary language philosophy and again in Fine (2009), for whom '$\exists x(Fx)$' only says that *there are F*s while the existence of Fs is expressed by '$\forall x(Fx \to Rx)$', where 'R' denotes *is real* or *exists*. Again speaking broadly, (Formality) reflects a commitment to what has previously been described as 'ideal language' philosophy (e.g., in Rorty 1967), where statements' significance is assessed via their role in a formal theory rather than in natural language. Van Inwagen just lets his account of the ordinariness of quantification speak in favour of (Formality).

2.5. (Criterion)

According to van Inwagen, this thesis cannot be stated simply. However it will be helpful for us to reproduce Quine's two most compressed statements of the criterion of ontological commitment:

> To be is, purely and simply, to be the value of a variable. (Quine 1948, 32)

Or:

> . . . a theory is committed to those and only those entities to which the bound variables of the theory must be capable of referring in order that the affirmations made in the theory be true. (Quine 1948, 33)

I return in §4 to the question of why van Inwagen neglects to pick up on either as a statement of (Criterion).

This thesis certainly plays the most central role in van Inwagen's Quineanism and whereas the others are primarily about the *explananda* of ontology this is clearly methodological. He describes it as identifying 'the best way—the only reasonable way—to attempt to answer [the ontological question]' (1998, 241). It is wrong, van Inwagen says, to take (Criterion) as assuming that there are well-defined things called 'theories' which by being changed into quantifier-variable form can reveal hidden, objective, ontological commitments. It is unclear how to pick out well-defined theories, and nor can we provide unique translations into 'canonical notation'. The first problem can be dealt with passably by simply taking a theory to be a class of sentences, pushing the problem back to how we choose between theories, but the second is more significant. Translation into canonical notation can deviate more or less from ordinary-language structure depending on certain salient findings. Consider the following statements:

(7) Every planet is at any time at some distance from every star.
  a. $\forall x$(if x is a planet, x is at any time at some distance from every star).
  b. $\forall x$(x is a planet $\rightarrow \forall y$(if y is a star, x is at any time at some distance from y)).
  c. $\forall x$(x is a planet $\rightarrow \forall y$(y is a star $\rightarrow \forall t$(if t is a time, then x is at some distance from y at t))).
  d. $\forall x$(x is a planet $\rightarrow \forall y$(y is a star $\rightarrow \forall t$(t is a time $\rightarrow \exists z$(z is a distance $\wedge x$ is at t separated from y by z)))).

Conditional on benefits and costs any of these could be considered the canonical translation of (7), depending on whether any analysis requires accepting as an entity something problematic, e.g., something with unclear identity conditions. Van Inwagen thinks this holds for (7d), which reifies distances, so favours analysing the statement using a relation. We thus see that (Cri-

terion) is a pragmatic proposal. It cannot give a well-defined procedure but only methodological guidelines. These guidelines help to clarify the inquiry because for any ontological position plausible translations into canonical notation can be sought for typical statements: then (i) anyone who refuses the translation owes an explanation of their apparent failure to explain the phenomena, and (ii) if an accepted translation straightforwardly entails the existence of *F*s there is, unless a better translation is constructed, a commitment to *F*s. This clarification of the method for disputing ontology shows why Putnam, despite himself rejecting it, says that 'it was Quine who single-handedly made Ontology a respectable subject' (2004, 78–79).

3. Too Hard, Too Easy: Rejections of Quineanism

We have now completed our brief review of van Inwagen's Quinean metaontology. However, since the explicit introduction of the subject many, indeed most, philosophers writing in this vein have criticised Quineanism. Of course non-adherence to the Quinean tradition is not confined to the past decade. There have always been opponents to Quine's approach to metaphysics. However, it is within the context of explicit focus on metaontology that dissent from this tradition has been articulated most clearly. In this section I select and outline two key criticisms that ground rejections of Quinean metaontology,[6] and diagnose the underlying problems making the arguments possible as *implausibility* and *irrelevance*—accusations to which van Inwagen's Quineanism cannot respond.

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[6]Many challenges to Quinean metaontology are not addressed here, both for reasons of space and because they are not so easily accommodated into the diagnosis. For instance, Jody Azzouni (1998; 2004) argues against (Criterion) that there is no reason to select it over competitors, and Stephen Yablo (1998) claims that the Quinean approach falters because it relies on a distinction between literal and metaphorical talk that cannot be made precise. A full defence of Quinean metaontology (whether van Inwagen's version or my proposal) would need to respond to these and other arguments.

3.1. Easy Ontology

An intuition frequently cited by metaontologists is that there is something strange about puzzling over ontological questions. 'It seems', some think, 'that the issues in ontology that interest philosophers the most … have completely trivial answers' (Hofweber 1999). In some cases the question of *F*s' existence is certainly difficult—take for instance *F* as 'Higgs boson'—but the characteristic problems of ontology involve questions about the existence of things whose existence-conditions seem to some to be obviously met. Versions of this challenge can be found in, e.g., Stephen Schiffer (2003) and Hirsch (2005), but as each individual proceeds somewhat differently, I will focus on the clearest: Amie Thomasson's 'easy ontology' argument, developed initially in defence of ordinary objects (2007) and later extended to ontology in general (2014).

Consider the question whether there are non-organic complex objects: the existence of things like tables, according to this argument, should never come into question. We understand what the world is like sufficiently to understand, were there such a thing as a table, when the conditions for a table's existence would be met. Very roughly, for wood or a suitable substitute to be arranged so that a flat surface is fixed to a relatively small number of vertical supports would be for there to be a table, if there were such things. But such conditions do seem to be met, and there are no obvious special conditions. Doesn't that just mean that there are tables? For Thomasson it is clear that there are 'analytic entailments' from states of affairs described without explicit ontological commitments to states of affairs described with commitments (e.g., if there are some particles arranged tablewise, then there is a table), and this is sufficient to demonstrate the acceptability of reference to the relevant objects. Thus, Thomasson thinks, 'a theory does not avoid commitment to any *entities* by avoiding use of certain *terms* or *concepts*' (2007, 167), and as she sees (Criterion) as founded on denying this, she rejects Quinean metaontology.

As Thomasson acknowledges (2014, 80), this strategy closely resembles the neo-Fregean account of mathematics (see e.g., Hale and Wright 2001; 2009) as epistemological considerations are used to suggest that it doesn't take much to fulfil numbers' existence-conditions. Fine employs similar reasoning to say that 'John and Mary are "together" and that is reason enough to suppose that they are a couple; the object over there has a certain form and function and that is reason enough to suppose that it is a chair' (Fine 2009, 160).

As far as those offering this argument see it, the Quinean approach keeps digging further when an acceptable answer has already been reached, arguing out of existence perfectly respectable entities by applying a method that is ill-suited to inquiry about them: given that ordinary conditions are met, how could metaphysical considerations encourage us to doubt something's existence? This argument is consistent with several approaches to ontology quite different from Thomasson's. Most are deflationary, like Hirsch's approach, on which there is no empirical difference between theories accepting terms like 'table' as referring terms and those that eliminate them so the dispute must be verbal and won easily by an ontology cribbed from ordinary language. We will now examine a very different criticism of Quinean metaontology—that it ignores important questions of grounding and fundamentality—but we will revisit the question of who can endorse arguments like Thomasson's.

3.2. Missing Questions of Ground

Not motivated by Thomasson's deflationary approach, another group are instead inclined to say (as touched on in §1) that the Quinean is preoccupied with superficial issues that are not of genuine importance to metaphysics. On this view 'contemporary metaphysics, insofar as it has been inspired by the Quinean task, has confused itself with trivialities' (Schaffer 2009, 361) because the project has been focussed on what there is instead of

what is *fundamental*.[7] A key difference between these cases is that while the former is conceded as involving linguistic analysis, the latter can only be done by engaging in 'first philosophy'. Again, though there are many versions of this challenge, I will focus on one case: Schaffer's 'grounding' challenge.

The intention here is to resurrect a more 'traditional' view of metaphysics on which the project is to investigate what things ground the existence of other things, and thereby what the fundamental constituents of reality are. For Schaffer existence-questions are uninteresting. If we determine that tables exist and that numbers exist, Schaffer thinks, we have not achieved much, and it is misleading to leave things there because it suggests an unlikely parity between these kinds. Whereas one might think that tables' existence is derivative of certain facts about the arrangement of microphysical particles and human practices, numbers' existence is not derivative of these and is plausibly not derivative of anything at all. What we are interested in, he then thinks, is not the *existence* of numbers, tables, etc., but their *natures*. If one is seeking explanation, the right route proceeds via explaining what numbers are grounded in. If numbers are grounded in facts about physical arrangements of particles, then nominalism (of a kind different from the Quinean gloss on it) is true, and if they are not grounded in anything more fundamental, then Platonism is true. One cannot settle questions like this using

the Quinean method, Schaffer says, because it does not concern itself with stuctures of dependence and grounding. Where the Quinean primarily goes wrong, according to those who invoke this idea, is in focussing on language. 'With sufficient perversity, every branch of human inquiry can be characterized as inquiry into what exists' (Schaffer 2009, 365) by exploiting quantifier-variable form. E. J. Lowe provides a similar diagnosis, more explicitly finding fault with the linguistic aspect of the approach. 'The linguistic, or semanticist, approach to questions of metaphysics inevitably leads to a doctrine of extreme ontological relativity' he says, adding that 'it collapses into . . . relativism' (Lowe 1998, 8).[8]

A striking feature of this criticism is its contrasting attitude toward Quineanism, compared to the first challenge. While by one camp the Quinean approach is regarded as too inflationary, by the other it is seen as concerned with trivialities, too language-relative. The examples of the challenges examined here are more-or-less compatible: Schaffer thinks that we do in fact easily determine the existence of all sorts of entities via Moorean arguments, and takes that as evidence of the failure of Quineanism to capture the difficult metaphysical problems he believes there are. However, one could reject Thomasson's position and still make this second argument. One could, instead of being permissive about ordinary existence claims, say that only fundamental things exist and that other existence-claims are false, or true only in a loose manner of speaking. The focus would then be squarely on fundamentality as there would not really be derivative entities to participate in grounding-relations, but the resistance to any 'linguistic' approach would remain. It is irrelevant to our current inquiry which way of proceeding is more promising, as they are premised on the same rejection of the Quinean method.

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[7]One might be inclined to object that there is a shift here from metaontology to metametaphysics, because ontology just *is* the study of what there is. As was hopefully clear from §1, I don't think that attempts to *define* philosophical disciplines are helpful. However, I will make two further points. First, as Schaffer (2009, 363n20) indicates, the term 'ontology' has its roots in Aristotle as the study of being *qua* being, a characterisation which rules out neither the Quinean approach nor Schaffer's alternative. Second, it seems to me clear that the topics discussed in this debate form a set of issues that are collectively more similar to each other than any case is similar to some areas of metaphysics, most obviously the problem of free will. I therefore persist in using the term 'metaontology' to denote that area where we might reasonably expect some unity in methodological inquiry.

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[8]This comment is particularly salient given the account I go on to propose. It is not within the remit of this paper to comprehensively answer the charge that ontological relativity leads to full-blown relativism.

3.3. Diagnosis: Implausibility and Irrelevance

I don't think that either the easy ontology argument or the grounding argument is ultimately compelling; that is, we should not be led to adopt the approaches that naturally develop from them. However, I also don't think that the Quinean as characterised by van Inwagen can respond to them. Understanding why will set us up to propose a stronger account in §4.

The central issue here is language, specifically, the conception of how it relates to metaphysics. Ontological issues are often explained in van Inwagen's writings alongside a description of utterances as having a fixed, 'ordinary', content that is prior to metaphysical conclusions. When an individual utters statements of a certain type, those following van Inwagen's lead can either claim that the content of these utterances is neutral or that it is committing. If it is committing it might turn out that our best account of reality proves those individuals wrong, but then they have been guilty of misspeaking when using their language and should strictly switch to a better language (or apply stricter rules to their current language).[9] If it is neutral, on the other hand, ordinary speakers have no stake in resisting ontological 'revisions' because they are not genuine revisions but forays into novel content. Either the community is prone to all-encompassing error, or the metaphysical theory changes the subject. This reveals why van Inwagen's Quineanism is in trouble: opponents can pursue different slants on a basic tension in how the Quinean understands the language-ontology relationship which makes possible two forms of accusation: *implausibility*, and *irrelevance*.

This tension, between providing an account of linguistic behaviour and providing an account of mind-independent, basic issues, manifests when van Inwagen's Quinean juxtaposes meta-

physical language-use and ordinary language-use, with the former accorded definite content prior to the construction of a theory. This treats ordinary speakers as occupying an undesirable epistemic position with regard to describing the world. On the other hand, they are part of a community with shared interests and beliefs that must inform any theory that purports to account for that community's behaviour. If we think of the content of speakers' utterances as pre-theoretically fixed there is an immediate challenge that is hard to answer: *why should speakers defer to the recommendations of ontology?* That is, how can a 'revisionary' ontology provide a good account of what speakers are doing that fits with their obvious communicative success?

To fail to answer this challenge is to fall victim to implausibility. Consider the following admonition to philosophers willing to pronounce confidently on the non-existence of numbers:

> If we philosophers are sorely puzzled by the classes that constitute mathematical reality, that's our problem. We shouldn't expect mathematics to go away to make our life easier. (Lewis 1991, 58)

This forms part of David Lewis's intuitively powerful recommendation that philosophers avoid schooling experts on things about which they are experts. Suppose that people are experts regarding their utterances (which they seem to be if those utterances are assigned definite pre-theoretical content): then it looks like sheer arrogance of the kind Lewis criticises to accuse them of describing the world poorly.

The alternative to embracing the kind of error theory above while maintaining van Inwagen's Quineanism is even more problematic. This would involve supposing that we are not interested in correcting ordinary behaviour because the way that people ordinarily speak is correct, but insisting that the metaphysician is engaged in a separate task, of describing the world in a special language with concerns divorced from ordinary ones—the 'language of ontology' (Dorr 2005) that is now well-

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[9]This response is not favoured by van Inwagen when he is pressed on the matter. However, rejecting it doesn't seem required by his metaontology, so for generality I consider this alternative response that is in line with, e.g., Merricks (2003) and Sider (2011).

known as 'Ontologese'.[10] In recent work van Inwagen counsels this approach, saying that 'only metaphysicians … have ever considered—ever entertained, ever grasped, ever held before their minds—[metaphysical propositions]' (2014, 6).

This treats ontology as of no concern to ordinary speakers but of great concern to metaphysicians, so while linguistics might be sufficient for understanding everything said in an ordinary context, in metaphysical contexts—in the 'ontology room'—a different language is spoken where there are real consequences for what truly exists. To do this, I claim, is to invite the accusation of irrelevance.[11] Taking this route requires acceptance that in some sense one's activities *are* irrelevant to non-metaphysicians so some alternative explanation, not relying on common interests, must be given of why Ontologese matters. Two concerns arise here.

First, no grounds are available for such an explanation if we look at success in achieving typical goals of language (aside from blatantly circular goals like 'doing fundamental metaphysics'). Though one might consider what counts as 'achieving the goals of language' as hostage to fortune, there are good reasons to think it implausible that there could be drastic differences between Ontologese and the wider community with regard to explanatory goals, as it is consistently treated as a constraint on philosophical theories that however radical their departures from pre-theoretic intuition they avoid giving counsel in direct tension with ordinary behaviour. This plausible constraint

can be seen even in the explanatory burdens historically taken on by radical ideas—from ancient Pyrrhonism to Berkeleian idealism—and thus has bite without needing an absolute 'preserve the phenomena' principle. The worry about communication has echoes of the easy ontology argument, which challenges the Quinean to show the merits of their approach by finding a failure in ordinary language-use.

Second, it is hard to see how one should explain the merits of using a linguistic approach to ontology while cordoning off metaphysics from language. If ordinary language, and considerations of charity (which will be relevant below), are to be ignored when practising metaphysics, how is one to avoid making mistakes as a result of cross-contamination from ordinary language? This seems impossible in practice: our notion of what constitutes a suitable language for ontology is informed by the languages with which we are familiar, so constraints will be in place on Ontologese that come from natural-language considerations. I cannot see how van Inwagen's Quinean might justify the place that these constraints have in theory-construction. This thought is reminiscent of the grounding challenge, which questions how attempts to pursue fundamental metaphysics can reasonably proceed through language. Thus the same basic tension makes both challenges possible.

4. Toward a New Quinean Metaontology

How do we avoid the flaws highlighted in §3? The above discussion is instructive, but more work is needed. It is now incumbent on us to do two things. First we must consider whether Quine's approach is fatally flawed. This cannot be resolved satisfactorily without a great deal more work, but we can indicate whether there are grounds to think that Quine's work is valuable. I test this in §4.1 by looking at what van Inwagen's account misses. Having found that there is scope for developing Quine's views

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[10]Van Inwagen tends to favour not a language but a context: the context of the 'ontology room'. For my current purposes these are not importantly different: just as one can treat Ontologese as the language everyone should be speaking or as a language to be used only when doing metaphysics, one can say that the standards of the ontology room are the only correct standards or that they are just the correct standards for metaphysical discourse.

[11]Another way of characterising what these moves constitute is offered by (Hofweber 2009, 267), who calls them commitments to 'esoteric', as opposed to 'egalitarian', metaphysics.

more effectively, we must then find a more satsfying way to respond to the problems with van Inwagen's Quineanism while retaining a perceptibly Quinean framework; I attempt to start on this project in §§4.2–4.3.

4.1. Not the Whole Story

One might take from the arguments in §3 the moral that Quinean metaontology needs to be abandoned. Indeed that is the intention of Schaffer and Thomasson, and many other contemporary thinkers share this opinion. However I think a more constructive moral is in order: that van Inwagen's account fails to capture Quine's insights into metaontology. This is not to say that van Inwagen misses the mark entirely: the problems with his approach are closely bound up with the mismatch between the broader 'Quinean tradition' and Quine's own work.[12] As an account of the metaontology that has been described as 'the preferred methodology' (Manley 2009, 3) for ontology over the past few decades, I think van Inwagen's account is fairly accurate, though extended argument to this effect will have to be left for elsewhere. To motivate this shortfall, I will demonstrate where van Inwagen's account in particular sits ill with Quine's work.

One might worry that too much focus on exegesis will muddy the waters here. While I think that it *could* do so, especially as van Inwagen's primary goal is to articulate the foundations of his own approach to ontology, we should not leave this aside altogether for two reasons. First recall that as indicated above the five theses are advertised as at least 'essentially' an 'exposition

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[12]This notion of a contrast between the Quinean tradition and Quine has often been suggested in passing, e.g., by Eklund (2006, 96), Jenkins (2010, 884) and Thomasson (2014, 48–50). Huw Price (2009) forcefully argues that Quine has been misunderstood as resurrecting the kind of ontological project that abounds in current work, but does not develop an extensive account of what Quine *is* doing. More recently, Berto and Plebani (2015, pt. I) discuss the Quinean metaontology at length, but their introductory focus leaves only minimal room for critical consideration of this question.

of Quine's metaontology', so by checking their accuracy we are assessing an explicit claim made by their patron, and second I think it important to note that philosophical positions are not ahistorical. Following a pattern established by an earlier figure suggests reliance on shared assumptions and exposure to shared problems, so an inaccurate picture of a position's genealogy encourages errors in evaluating it.

With that in mind, a worrying aspect of van Inwagen's account is the infrequency with which it cites Quine directly. This is less worrying where the account bears no obvious tensions with Quine's work. For instance, while van Inwagen acknowledges a lack of direct evidence to justify (Non-activity) as a Quinean thesis, one would be hard-pressed to find a location in which Quine says anything that does not mesh with the claim and in fact it sits well with most of what he says. In contrast to this, there are certainly points that should be more controversial, for instance (Univocity). While Quine does insist that we should not countenance different complementary senses of 'exists', it is less clear that Quine would object to the claim that two individuals could in an appropriate sense 'quantify over everything' while their quantifiers ranged over different things—even over domains of different cardinality. What, after all, would two imagined translators of 'Gavagai', one finding rabbits and the other finding rabbit-time-slices, be doing? Their interpretations would both be quantifying in a manner that allowed them to respond appropriately to stimuli, but the time-slice translator would quantify over many more things in a typical utterance; this is seen as acceptable because 'what matters is structure' (Quine 1983, 500).

This complication in the story of (Univocity) is symptomatic of a deeper problem, despite it seeming initially to fit well with other theses like (Being). In van Inwagen's favour, for Quine an ontology consists just of those things that (according to a theory) there are, which seems to lend itself to a fixed understanding of

quantification. It also seems required to capture the difference between Putnam and Quine on ontology already discussed in §2.3. However there is in fact a vast gap between Putnam's and van Inwagen's positions on quantification, and the best interpretation of Quine situates him somewhere in this gap. Neither van Inwagen nor Putnam sees such a gulf, and the fact that Putnam clearly disagrees with Quine then creates the false impression that (Univocity) must be part of a Quinean approach, as though it were merely the negation of Putnam's position.

Van Inwagen originally named (Univocity) as part of Quineanism before increased interest in quantifier variance was engendered by Hirsch (2002; 2009), but it is worth considering this issue in terms of quantifier variance, especially considering that it is based in the work of Putnam (1987; 1994; 2004). On the doctrine of quantifier variance there are multiple candidate meanings for existence-terms, none of which is privileged. This claim is notoriously difficult to pin down, with many of its opponents confessing an inability to understand what 'quantifier variance' means. I think that part of this problem is that one *could* mean more than one thing by 'quantifier variance'. Consider the claim Putnam denies: that there is a single 'fixed in advance' sense of 'exists'. We can deny this claim without denying that there is a single sense of 'exists': if it is a *desideratum* in philosophy that we provide the most general explanation possible, it will be at best an undesirable but unavoidable result if we are incapable of unifying our most general forms of quantification. This can be the case without it being true that we need to hit a standard for quantification 'set by the world' in order to be getting things right. This idea could also be put in a counterfactual form: whatever unified sense allocated to 'exists', we *could have* assigned it a different sense, that is, we could have carved up reality differently (as misleading as 'carving' metaphors can be). We can think of this in terms of 'strong' and 'weak' quantifier variance.

Strong forms of quantifier variance, on which we would be able to truly deny claims like 'There are numbers' prior to an extension of the language and truly assert them after the extension, are hard to defend because a plausible interpretation of our shared theory would be stable regarding existence-claims so would generate pressure to view the prior statement as false.[13] In a weak form, however, quantifier variance seems to fit with Quine's metaontological views. A natural reading of (Criterion) suggests that there are multiple ways that we could have used our quantifiers. In fact thanks to the inscrutability of reference there are multiple consistent ways to treat us as using quantifiers as things stand. Thus whatever meaning we ultimately assign to the quantifier it will be univocal, but until we somehow anchor reference (more on this in §4.2) there are many acceptable options:

> Our overall scientific theory demands of the world only that it be so structured as to assure the sequences of stimulations that our theory gives us to expect. (Quine 1981, 22)

This difficulty encourages wider worries. There are difficult questions about how to reconcile what van Inwagen does say with Quine's work, but the most striking difficulty arises with what is missing from van Inwagen's account. For instance, he indicates 'Ontological Relativity' as one of the locations in which Quine's metaontology is articulated (2009, 475n6), but the thesis of ontological relativity has no place in van Inwagen's Quineanism. Furthermore, van Inwagen comments on what Quine has to say about science as follows:

> Quine assigns a special, central role to the affirmations of physical science in his discussions of ontological commitment. I would

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[13]Ultimately this is a matter of presentation for Quine: regarding whether the change leading to molecular theory involves the replacement of solids by swarms of molecules or the assertion that those solids are constituted by said swarms, he says that the choice 'is unreal' (1960, 265).

say that this was a consequence of certain of his epistemological commitments and not of his metaontology. (van Inwagen 2009, 506n53)

Given that Quine is clear about his interest in the epistemology of ontology, and how important epistemological questions have turned out to be to metaontology, it seems that van Inwagen's excluding discussion of science from Quine's metaontology is either arbitrary or illicitly serves an interest in identifying metaontology as his shared ground with Quine. I return to ontological relativity and to naturalism in §4.2.

The incomplete aspects of van Inwagen's Quineanism betray its implicit commitment to certain widespread views about metaphysics which, I claim, turn out to be incompatible with the success of its project. One such commitment is that ontology aims to match a language-independent way in which reality is carved up into objects. On this assumption, then, we are to suppose that there are objective, determinate answers to ontological questions and the methodology counselled is our best route to finding out which of the candidate answers is true. To take a wider view for a moment, this accords with the view that 'Quine (or at least a Quinean)' sees an answer to an ontological question as 'discovering an objective, mind-independent fact about the world' (Jenkins 2010, 884). The difficulty with such a view is that depending on what we accept as a determining factor for how the world *really is*, endorsing (Criterion), for instance, may turn out to be the wrong approach. Even the other theses could fail. For it is first of all possible that scepticism trumps linguistic analysis: there is some way the world objectively is that assessment of language cannot capture.[14] We will then be left with some degree of irresolvable indeterminacy, and

our attempts at ontology will be prone to massive error because features of human biology constrain how we individuate.[15] I contend that Quine would deny such a view because he would not assign sense to the aim of matching how the world carves itself up into objects: object individuation is something that *we* do. Someone might think of a maxim they apply in ontology as imposed by the world, but 'he would be wrong: the maxim is his own imposition, toward settling what is objectively indeterminate' (Quine 1968, 191).

This way of seeing ontology comes partly, I think, from misconceptions about how to understand the significance of the inscrutability of reference for ontology.[16] Taken as a negative thesis it suggests that in virtue of the limitations of inquiry into language-use, it is too difficult to give an appropriate translation of a language: equated terms might still be replaceable by all manner of bizarre candidates. On this conception we should not trust particular statements but rather should look at overall features of the theory, choosing the best one we have and taking that to be true (subject to modification if our theory was not as good as we thought). Note that on this view, ordinary-language ontology would be firmly rejected. The way we use words would be wholly unreliable as a guide because focussing on individual cases (which must be picked out by the language) leads us directly to the indeterminacy arguments, so we engage in analysis to determine as best we can what our beliefs entail about ontology. The idea that '[w]hether we approve or not, the

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[14]This is what Terry Horgan and Matjaž Potrč (2008) believe actually obtains, but to the extent that our analysis of language has limitations, they think that the Quinean approach is insufficient. Their adoption of a different approach serves in support of my point that Quineanism of van Inwagen's brand is open to sceptical worries.

[15]I have in mind the well-documented biases in human perceptual development regarding object-permanence and individuation, examples of which are discussed in Xu (1997).

[16]For reasons of space I will not go into detail on the relation between inscrutability of reference and indeterminacy of translation. I think that for Quine the latter is also ontologically significant, but the inscrutability of reference is more well-supported (—Quine thinks it trivially follows from using model theory to represent languages—) and is all that is required to make my case.

world has an ontology' (Heil 2003, 1) survives on this understanding, but the world's ontology is placed, epistemologically speaking, at a substantial remove.

We should instead see the inscrutability of reference as a *positive* thesis. To clarify, I mean that we should say not that it is too difficult to give a translation but that it is too easy. Quine notes that the rival translation manuals of his thought experiment are *successful* translation manuals:

> There can be no doubt that rival systems of analytical hypotheses can fit the totality of speech behavior to perfection . . . The point is not that we cannot be sure whether the analytical hypothesis is right, but that there is not even . . . an objective matter to be right or wrong about. (Quine 1960, 72–73)

It is easy to forget this, but it is relevant because it means that rather than mistrusting people's ordinary use of language and looking for the best shot at getting things right we should proceed in the manner of interpreters: by assuming that people (including ourselves) are generally right and providing an account of the significance of their utterances. It could not be determined that a community was radically wrong about its ontology but overwhelmingly successful in orienting themselves in the world through language, or that they failed to operate in the space of describing reality:[17] it is incumbent on us to provide a reasonable account of what their utterances come to, and it would be unreasonable to suppose them thoroughly disconnected from reality in either way. One cannot take oneself to be trying to describe reality more earnestly than the typical human, for whom getting this right is rather important!

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[17]Quine does however think that someone might be best understood as not operating in the conceptual space of ontology. Deviations like a language of predicate functors can be accommodated, but nevertheless 'the question of ontological commitment is parochial, though within a much broader parish than that of the speakers and writers of symbolic logic' (Quine 1983, 500). It is not clear what kind of language would be unwelcome among Quine's congregation.

4.2. Bolstering the Theses

The observations above put us in a position to offer the additions to a Quinean metaontology that are most warranted by Quine's own work. There remains the challenge of responding to the problems of §3 but it turns out, I claim, that these additions go a long way toward demonstrating how to avoid implausibility and irrelevance.

First we need an explanatory principle—that is, a principle clarifying our *explananda*—and for Quine this means thinking about science. We have already seen that van Inwagen discounts Quine's views on science because they are associated with his epistemology, but again I see no reason to think that this suggests their independence from metaontology. In fact, to make the accusation of irrelevance less attractive, we must incorporate Quine's naturalism into our metaontology.

If we want to determine something interesting in ontology, we need to be sure that it is dealing with something relevant to how we all engage with the world. This is the essence of the flaw of the Ontologese gambit for Quineanism covered in §3: if we regress to Ontologese it is unclear why the toy language developed is of any interest. It is when practising science that we are responsive to evidence in the right way, and it is thus when practising science that the import of our statements is greatest. If we were not constrained by naturalism in our methodology, we would lack strong reasons to render consonant disparate areas of our discourse, but our understanding of all areas of knowledge is interrelated, and it is this that makes ontology as a practice clarificatory: we investigate the significance of certain ordinary statements *given* the continuity of both vocabulary and use between them and serious science.

At this point I anticipate accusations of 'scientism'. Such criticisms generally allege that in privileging science we end up illegitimately casting out ordinary things with which we should be satisfied. This accusation might be levelled at, e.g., Merricks

(2003), whose eliminativist physical ontology is arrived at by treating claims about the causal sufficiency of the microphysical as trumping any concerns about the way we talk about ordinary objects and their causal roles. It might also be accurate for some of van Inwagen's work[18] but we can avoid the problem for our strengthened Quineanism by casting the net of science widely. For Quine it is science *broadly construed* that is important:

> In science itself I certainly want to include the farthest flights of physics and cosmology, as well as experimental psychology, history, and the social sciences. (Quine 1995, 251)

There are challenges in how we understand Quine's naturalism—we certainly want to avoid casting the net so wide that the thesis is not meaningful. However the use of 'scientism' as a pejorative, denoting a perspective that treats every statement as equivalent in all important ways to a statement of the behaviour of a collection of electrons, does not correspond to Quine's approach: when he explains why he privileges physics, he says that

> [t]he answer is not that everything worth saying can be translated into the technical vocabulary of physics; not even that all good science can be translated into that vocabulary. The answer is rather this: nothing happens in the world, not the flutter of an eyelid, not the flicker of a thought, without some redistribution of microphysical states. (Quine 1981, 98)

If scientism is equivalent to either of the first two answers, then Quine is not scientistic; if to the third, or something different, then it is not obvious that Quine's being scientistic would be a bad thing.

We have thus seen no reason to exclude naturalism from Quine's metaontology. We can look to Quine for a passable statement of this principle:

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[18]See, for example, the framing of the special composition question in a manner clearly giving special status to physically fundamental particles in van Inwagen (1990, secs. 1–2).

(Naturalism) '[It] is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described.' (Quine 1981, 21)

Second we need a guiding principle, which for a Quinean metaontology should take the form of a principle of charity. This idea first appeared in analytic philosophy in Wilson (1959), from whom Quine adopted it. The notion came to more prominence in Donald Davidson's work, but it is central to Quine's thought in a way that is easily missed. On the conception of language underwritten by the principle of charity, it is a precondition for linguistic understanding that we treat speakers as rational. Furthermore we know roughly how statements relate to each other, even in the absence of a full picture of those statements' significance. We can see the role of the principle throughout Quine's writings, for instance where he states that 'The maxim of translation . . . is that assertions startlingly false on the face of them are likely to turn on hidden differences of language' (1960, 59). We might at a first approximation state this principle as follows:

(Charity) Interpretations should maximise, as far as possible, the truth and reasonableness of interpreted statements.

When we stress the requirement on interpretation that we understand persons as competent and combine it with the holistic, theory-wide considerations about how a statement can be understood that come with a nuanced understanding of (Criterion), we arrive at an approach that is not crudely revisionary but rather aims to *explicate* statements' significance. Quine's vision of this process is much like that of one of his greatest influences: of 'making more exact a vague or not quite exact concept used in everyday life or in an earlier stage of scientific or logical development' (Carnap 1947, 8).[19]

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[19]The explicative status of the project also immediately precludes certain

This undercuts the view of the language-ontology relation that caused such trouble for van Inwagen's Quineanism by disallowing the divide between language-use and ontological commitment and thereby precluding the accusation of implausibility. Rather than holding that there must be a fixed content and seeking to explain that in light of separately reached metaphysical conclusions, our endeavour in ontology (indeed more generally in interpretation) is to provide an account of the significance of our overall discourse on the necessary assumption that it is by-and-large successful in describing how things are.

(Charity) could get us into trouble taken alone because it counsels us to avoid treating statements as false and therefore suggests that we never offer any revisionary account of a theory. Combining it with (Naturalism), however, gets a fruitful balance. The plenitudinous excesses of (Charity), which are apt to have us consider all sorts of loose talk as ontologically committing, are held in check by the requirement to reconcile our earnestly-held beliefs with especial focus on those that most reflect our scientific investigations.

A final requirement, whose full significance I cannot capture here, is a limiting principle indicating the boundaries of what we can expect from ontology. Quine claimed in various oft-ignored passages that one cannot make sense of ontology except in a relative sense: that is, there is no way to compare ontology with 'objective reality' but only ways to evaluate an ontology against rivals or against the theory it attempts to clarify. Only by engaging in this process can we evaluate ontologies by criteria like parsimony, simplicity, etc., and thereby decide which to favour. Ontological relativity does not respond to anything in the easy ontology argument, but is key to de-motivating the

grounding challenge, which regards any linguistic approach as allowing too much input from quirks of language to be metaphysically relevant. The incorporation of (Charity) into strong Quineanism blocks the move to Ontologese, dealing with one source of perceived irrelevance, but this has not dealt with the other. For instance Sider recommends that, on the assumption that a principle of charity would cause problems for 'deep' metaphysics in ordinary contexts, 'one can partially and locally suspend the considerations of charity that govern meaning' (2014, 4) to conduct debates without letting anything but metaphysically heavyweight considerations matter. If ontological relativity is right, this move is mistaken. For now, given the difficulty in unpacking all of the implications of ontological relativity, this is a mere promissory note, but there is no sign of 'poor fit with reality' beyond failing to treat important sentences as true or comparing poorly to another ontology for theoretical virtues. This precludes protests about failure to appreciate the fundamental nature of reality because there is no way that an ontology fulfilling the various requirements on theoretical adequacy could fail to fit reality: '[s]pecifying the universe of a theory makes sense only relative to some background theory, and only relative to some choice of a manual of translation of the one theory into the other' (Quine 1968, 205).

As a preliminary attempt to state this thesis, then:

(Relativity) Describing the ontology of a theory makes sense only relative to a translation into another theory.

Typically to avoid a regress through multiple translations, this theory must be a *background* theory which we take as understood, but this is not an absolute requirement and in certain circumstances we may simply be interested in one theory's interpretation of the ontology of another theory. This principle is of course controversial but it is required to avoid the internal tensions that are picked up by the challenges of §3. Scepticism about this principle, well-founded or not, would be a worry

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use-based objections to, e.g., (Being). That our patterns of use for being-statements and existence-statements are different does not mean that an explication must continue to treat them differently, unless the difference in use turns out to serve some purpose.

about the warrant for the overall approach, which is rather different from doubting the very coherency of the approach as was possible for van Inwagen's Quineanism.

4.3. Salvaging Van Inwagen's Theses

We have found that van Inwagen's account of Quineanism is too weak to do justice to Quine's metaontology, leaving it open to attacks on its internal consistency. I have suggested, however, that it is not wholly unsuitable, so there is still the question whether, and if so how, van Inwagen's theses can be incorporated into a more wholeheartedly Quinean metaontology. We will revisit the principles in the order in which we encountered them in §2.

First, I agree with van Inwagen that Quine would accept (Non-activity). It is implausible that we should think of being as something 'done' by entities, especially on an approach involving the other theses. However we should be cautious about certain arguments to this effect, van Inwagen's among them. I reject van Inwagen's argument that endurance is the most general activity for two reasons. First it is doubtful that everything endures: one can coherently endorse abstract objects, for which we might think endurance either does not apply or means something different than for concrete objects, and if it is possible for something to exist for an instant then 'endures' cannot be true of everything unless it just means 'exists'. Second, I borrow an argument from Quine, who objects to any characterisation of conditions on what something has to do in order to be an object: 'If Pegasus existed he would indeed be in space and time, but only because the word "Pegasus" has spatiotemporal connotations, and not because "exists" has spatiotemporal connotations' (Quine 1948, 23). As the most inclusive of categories, *what it is to be an object* is given by the kinds of object that there are. The point resurfaces when Quine says:

> There are philosophers who stoutly maintain that 'exists' said of numbers, classes and the like and 'exists' said of material objects are two usages of an ambiguous term 'exists'. What mainly baffles me is the stoutness of their maintenance. What can they possibly count as evidence? Why not view ['exists'] as unambiguous but very general[?] (1960, 131)

This demonstrates an alternative defence of (Non-activity): unless 'activity' means something rather insubstantial it is an implausible restriction to place on what could count as an object. It is primarily by analysing statements held true that we can reach decisions about ontology, and this does not require us to abandon in advance a neutral stance regarding what activities are going on (e.g., we can cautiously accept that there is 'sport-playing-like' activity occurring without committing to individuative claims). Nonetheless, while (Non-activity) is defensible, I think that it ought to be accorded a marginal place in the Quinean metaontology: it is a conception of being that informs the aims of ontology, but it functions as a presupposition in Quineanism, accepted by virtue of engaging in an analytical project at all. We might even plausibly consider it to be entailed by the adequacy of the existential quantifier, which has no connotations of activity, to capture *existence*. (It would therefore be a simple corollary of (Formality) and (Being).)

We can be brief on the second thesis. I think it clear that our justification for endorsing (Being) still stands, and that van Inwagen's arguments in its support are compelling. This is fortunate: abandoning that thesis would make 'Quineanism' an inappropriate label, given Quine's ardent advocacy especially in, e.g., his (1948).

Onto the third: our observations about (Univocity) suggest that a more helpful way of understanding the key claim is with a modified version of the thesis to reflect the weaker content it should be assigned:

(Univocity*) 'Exists' can be assigned a single, universal meaning.

Note that the above quote accords with this interpretation: Quine expresses bewilderment about the notion that someone would deny the possibility (or appropriateness) of assigning a unified meaning to 'exists'. This correctly puts Quineanism in opposition to, e.g., Putnam, while allowing what I have called 'weak quantifier variance'.

I can imagine no reasons to reject the fourth thesis—(Formality)—that would not be mere consequences of rejecting (Being) or (Univocity*). However this close association between those three theses brings up an important modification: (Being), (Univocity*) and (Formality) should, I think, be considered sub-theses of a more general claim. As was clear throughout the discussion in §2, the three claims are highly inter-dependent and they can be seen as components of a general thesis about the aim of ontology: it ought to tell us how a language has to be structured quantificationally if it is to capture those statements whose truth we are required to preserve. (Being) and (Univocity*) now look like the ordinary-language and formal-language sides respectively of the same coin. Suppose that either failed. If statements of the form 'There are Fs' generally had content worth capturing over and above that of 'Fs exist', one could define two corresponding quantifiers, so that depending on conditions one could utter a quantified statement in a sense matching up only to existence-statements, or also to being-statements. Similarly if 'exists' could be assigned multiple complementary senses one could simply introduce terminology to generate something like a being/existence divide unless those several senses were very different from those typically proposed.

Notably in the above passage Quine clearly considers the issues intimately related, as evinced by his examples (1960, 131n2) of the view he finds bizarre: Ryle and Russell. The former denies (Univocity) and the latter (Being), but Quine considers them two of a kind. Thus I envisage a broader principle, which should be understood as at least combining (Being), (Univocity*) and (Formality):

(Formalism) Ontological questions are quantificational questions.[20]

We now move on to the final thesis. Some of van Inwagen's comments on (Criterion) are quite right: there are no determinate commitments hidden within a statement itself, and (Criterion) does indeed give clear grounds for holding a view guilty of ontological commitments. We must acknowledge the element of choice in interpretation, which is informed by considerations about how to make the overall theory most plausible. However it is not simply a matter of how far to translate into 'quantifier-variable idiom': we may be drawn to an account of certain statements as of totally misleading form, and thereby diverge from the limited flexibility of van Inwagen's proposal. Here the pragmatic aspects of our decisions are more far-reaching than he acknowledges because we might find ourselves interpreting utterances in ways that radically alter their surface form in order to account for how people make successful judgements about the world, especially in light of (Charity). Considering again 'Every planet is at any time at some distance from every star', we must decide, van Inwagen says, whether to consider it as quantifying over some or all of planets, stars, times and distances (though it would seem absurd to take quantification over stars seriously without doing the same for planet-talk), but this sells short the options available.

An important example is metaphorical talk:[21] it is open to us to interpret a statement as metaphor, allowing us to reconstrue its ontological commitments more drastically. For instance, 'There is a monkey on her back' ought not to be construed as being

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[20]I have taken this statement from Fine (2009)'s account of Quine's meta-ontology, which he sets up in order to undermine. It is often an irritating side-effect of dissecting an opponent's view that one shows them how to express it more elegantly.

[21]This presupposes a satisfactory reply to the challenge from Yablo that I put aside above (note 6).

ontologically committing to monkeys: even, one might think, taking the commitment in a metaphorical sense would be a misinterpretation. This is a toy example, but in more significant areas substantial revision could be key: if Ladyman and Ross turn out to be right to suggest that the right understanding of physics 'has nothing to do with putative tiny objects or their collisions' (2007, 44), we might counsel a radical reconstrual of parts of scientific discourse rather than requiring either the abandonment of the term 'particle' or its use as a primitive term.

Another point that is important yet understated by van Inwagen is the holism inherent to the process. Obviously van Inwagen would accept that there is something schematic about applications of the Quinean criterion (it is supposed to be applied to kinds rather than piecemeal), but this should be a greater focus. Considerations about whether a term can be considered non-committing in *all* contexts are essential to whether it can be considered non-committing in any one context. Suppose, for instance, that there is no way to make sense of mathematical statements like the axiom of infinity without accepting genuine reference to numbers, yet that we cannot abandon said axiom. It is hardly comforting to then claim that '2 is prime' can be construed in a manner that avoids reference to numbers because we will not preserve the purported benefits of interpreting the claim in this way (assuming no compelling arguments for a double-standard like finitism). We start from the assumption that most of the population's statements are true or reasonable (again showing that (Charity) is important) and analyse those statements with a view to showing how they are best understood as part of a more general theory.

A final point to add regarding (Criterion), somewhat derivative of the above, is to *what* it is applied. Van Inwagen is correct to indicate that identifying a theory is not straightforward, but he misleadingly suggests that it can be fruitfully applied to people or arbitrary sets of sentences: for him this method is 'the most profitable strategy to follow in order to get people to make their ontological commitments—or the ontological commitments of their discourse—clear' (van Inwagen 1998, 246). However, a set of statements may be isolated from the grounds for holding its members to quantify over a kind: for Quine statements cannot be interpreted in isolation from the language or the theory in which they are located. Even if we can attach some meaning to a set of statements independent of the wider theory, it will be insufficient to generate an informative ontological commitment. On a related note, it cannot be right that when *I* utter a sentence I thereby commit myself to the entities it quantifies over on the best interpretation given within my theory. First it supposes some particular set of sentences that I accept, identifiable as *my* theory. This is implausible and would run the risk of solipsism since accepted statements will almost always differ from speaker to speaker. We need instead some (vague) degree of agreement to consider sentences of a certain kind as falling within a shared theory. This is required because otherwise the claim that we should privilege the ontological commitments of the best theory is odd: we would end up with substantial scope for people to have aberrant ontologies by virtue of not fully understanding the best theory, despite their ways of speaking being dependent on this shared theory.

We have seen that several aspects of (Criterion)'s application are not fully appreciated on van Inwagen's account. Should we develop the thesis to accommodate this? I think not; instead we should treat (Criterion) as a fairly minimal principle, supplemented by the other theses. Van Inwagen is keen to see the principle as very broad, encompassing a whole range of attitudes to ontology, but this skews the content of his Quinean metaontology heavily toward (Criterion) and makes it hard to evaluate where problems reside. I mentioned in §2.5 that it was puzzling why van Inwagen had not focussed on the two succinct statements of (Criterion) in his work, and here we find an expla-

nation. Those statements reflect a sparser version of (Criterion) that simply tells us from where we get our ontological commitments once we have regimented our theory, while van Inwagen wants to make (Criterion) do far more work. It is also worth noting that the second of the two statements of (Criterion) is hard to square with van Inwagen's use of the thesis. It states that a theory is committed precisely to those things to which its bound variables 'must be capable of referring', and this 'must' relies on a sense of plasticity in interpretation that sits badly with van Inwagen's separation of metaphysics from ordinary concerns. On my account the Quinean's interest is not in creating a language with a particular domain that cuts out certain metaphysically undesirable kinds, but in giving an account of what the theory constantly operating in the background requires if it is to be right. I therefore propose we embrace a sparse statement of the principle:

(Criterion) To be is to be the value of a variable.

This provides only a sloganised understanding of (Criterion), but as has been the case throughout this project, slogans can be useful despite their tendency to oversimplify the issues.

Conclusion

I have argued that Quineanism as presented by van Inwagen is fatally flawed: its five theses mesh poorly with Quine's work on some counts, and more worryingly it leaves its proponents with no response to the accusations of implausibility and irrelevance that have been mustered by dissidents of various stripes. Incorporating considerations of charity, naturalism and ontological relativity into a tidied-up set of theses resolves these internal problems to leave us with a new set of five theses, most of which are stronger; aside from achieving a better balance between the

theses' importance, this set is more defensible than van Inwagen's Quineanism.

(Formalism) Ontological questions are quantificational questions.

(Naturalism) It is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described.

(Charity) Interpretations should maximise, as far as possible, the truth and reasonableness of interpreted statements.

(Criterion) To be is to be the value of a variable.

(Relativity) Describing the ontology of a theory makes sense only relative to a translation into another theory.

More precise exposition of the theses, sustained argument for favouring this position over other metaontologies, and investigation of the wider Quinean tradition, are three important tasks to be tackled elsewhere. For now I must rest content with having hopefully shown that Quinean metaontology need not be implausible or irrelevant, provided we are willing to commit to more of Quine's controversial, but insightful, principles.

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