

Issues in Contemporary Metaphysics

Lecture 1: Ontology and Ontological Commitment

1. Ontology

This module concerns *ontology*. An ontology is a list of things that there are. Compare to the following.

Biologists may have a list of things that exist.

- Different animals.
- Different species.

Physicists may have a list of things that exist.

- Different particles
- Different stellar objects

Some weird guy may sit at home just making lists of things.

Sure these things are lists of things that are, but it's not what metaphysicians are interested in when they do ontology. They are interested in broader questions. There may be material objects (like particles and stellar objects) – that isn't contentious. But are there things like *numbers*? What about *events*? What about propositions; possibilities; works of music; holes; properties; organisations; species and so on. These are questions whether entire *categories* of things exist.

Metaphysics is a subject with issues. Some worry that metaphysics is still a load of nonsense – including some professional metaphysicians! Call these concerns *metametaphysical* concerns (or metaontological concerns). Time is limited, and you can't do metametaphysics without first understanding the current state of metaphysics. So this course will layout the current way most metaphysicians see things, and only gesture at metametaphysical problems. So this course isn't 'telling you how it is' and mocking you as not understanding if you don't 'get it'

2. The Two Stage Process

So these are very abstract, almost esoteric, questions. How do we settle them? Two stage process:

- Figure out what *ontological commitments* a theory has.
- Figure out which theory is correct.

This two stage process is not ontology specific. Science has such examples.

- Theory A may say that a certain phenomena, say the passage of light from the sun, is explained by *phlogiston*.
- Theory B may say it's explained by the existence of *photons*.
- Theory A is *committed* to phlogiston. Theory B is *committed* to photons.
- You then figure out that theory B is the best theory, and so come to believe that photons, not phlogiston, exists.

Religion has similar examples.

- Theory A says God exists and this is what explains, say, moral conscience.
- Theory B says God doesn't exist and something else (social pressures, evolution, whatever) explains moral conscience.
- Theory A is committed to God. Theory B isn't.
- We can weigh up the theories, and then accept the commitments.

3. Ontological Commitment

'Blue is a colour'

Seems to explicitly commit to colours – ergo properties.

'The average man has 2.4 children'

An average man? That'd be weird.

'My pocket has a hole in it'

Seems to say that there *is* something that my pocket has. But aren't holes *absences*? The *lack* of something rather than something *in addition* to the pocket?

'There is something you and I both believe'

Commitment to propositions

'World War II took place between 1939 and 1945'

Commitment to events.

'Scottish HydroElectric are incompetent and oafish'

Commitment to organisations/groups.

'Arcade Fire wrote My Body is a Cage'

Commitment to works of music.

If you believe such sentences are true, and they have such commitments, you are a *realist*. If you believe such sentences are true, and they don't have such commitments, you are an *anti-realist* (alternatively, that you are a *nominalist* about that type of thing). Standardly ontologists take it to be an open question whether we should be realists about X or anti-realists about X. But before that...

4. Prima Facie Challenge One: It's obvious these things don't exist

Those who think there are only material objects are often called nominalists.

Terminology confusion: You can also be said to be a nominalist *about* a particular category of entities.

Let's see *why* someone might say there are only material objects.

Reason one: Intuition

We've already seen this reason. Isn't it a little weird to think that holes exist? Or the average man? These are nominalist intuitions. You may, or may not, have them.

Reason two: Naturalism

If there are numbers, properties, works of music etc. where the hell are they? What is the location of 2, or blueness, or *My Body is a Cage*? If you think everything must be in space and time, these are tough questions. The intuition that everything *is* in space and time is called *naturalism*. And one way to avoid awkward questions about where 2 is, is to be a nominalist and say there just *isn't* such a thing. Connected to a die-hard commitment to science – that only scientists get to tell us what exists.

Reason three: Causal issues

If these things are *abstract*, if they're outside space and time, surely they don't causally effect the material world? The number 2 won't be pushing me around anytime soon. If they're not causally efficacious how can they exist?

Reason four: Epistemological issues

If they're outside space and time, and they don't have causal powers, how the heck do you know they exist? To explain how you know $2+2=4$, you don't talk about how the number 2 and the number 4 reach out from Platonic Heaven and play with your noggin.

Reason five: No Difference

If they're causally inactive, outside space and time, and the reason why you think sentences are true has nothing to do with numbers (or works of music etc.) existing, then what difference does it make if they do? For instance, imagine a world *without* numbers. What difference would there be? We'd still say $2+2=4$, and still use mathematical principles to erect buildings which would stand just as well. They don't seem to *explain* anything. If they make no difference, and they don't explain anything, then you've got a theory *with* numbers versus a nominalist theory *without* numbers. They've got the same explanatory power, except the second theory has less *things* in it. It's more *parsimonious*. So if both theories have the same explanatory power, except one is more parsimonious, Ockham's razor (or a variant thereof) dictates we take the nominalist theory.

5. Realism

There are problems for the nominalist enterprise. If there are no numbers, how is it that sentences that seem to quantify over such things are true?

'There are prime numbers'

$\exists x (x \text{ is a prime number})$

'Some pockets have holes in them'

$\exists x \exists y (x \text{ is a pocket} \ \& \ y \text{ is a hole} \ \& \ y \text{ is a part of } x)$

'Some songs written by Nine Inch Nails are excellent'

$\exists x (x \text{ is a song} \ \& \ x \text{ is written by Nine Inch Nails} \ \& \ x \text{ is excellent})$

'Some colour is brighter than dull grey'

$\exists x (x \text{ is a colour} \ \& \ x \text{ stands in the 'brighter than' relation to dull grey})$

If you're existentially quantifying over these things *don't they exist?* If you say 'There are' isn't that the *same* as saying 'There exists'? This is what Quine thought so, and was the dominant theory of ontological commitment. We figure out what the logical form of a sentence is, and the ontological commitments of the sentence are whatever it quantifies over.

So the nominalist has to say (i) that this theory of ontological commitment is false; or (ii) that the sentences are false; or (iii) the sentences are true but *don't* quantify over the things they appear to.

Denying (i) is a metaontological issue we won't really look at, namely whether Quine is right about ontological commitment. Some people say you can quantify over things without those things existing. That it is, in a sense, true to say that there are some things such that there aren't those things. They are *Meinongians*. Denying (ii) is *really* strange.

6. Paraphrases

Denying (iii) is possible given *paraphrases*. We might say that the sentences have a *grammatical* form that *appears* to quantify over holes, properties and works of music. But *actually* they express a totally different proposition that doesn't quantify over these things.

Imagine you live in the dark ages. You say 'The sun has moved behind the elms' That appears to assert of the sun that it has moved behind the elms. But that's false! Yet the people in medieval times still communicated successfully and got by quite happily. VI says they *appear* to be expressing a false proposition (about the sun moving) but are *actually*, without knowing it, expressing a *true* proposition:

'The rotation of the earth is such that the earth has now moved so that the elms are now in-between my eyes and the sun'

VI is offering a *paraphrase* of what they say. We *might* be able to do the same for the problematic sentences.

'There is a hole in my pocket'

Realist interpretation: $\exists x (x \text{ is a part of my pocket})$

Nominalist interpretation: Let F be the predicate ' is perforated'. We then get $\exists y (y \text{ is perforated} \ \& \ y = \text{my pocket})$

No quantification over holes! But will it work on all hole talk? Compare 'Your handout has a hole in it' with 'Your handout has two holes in it'. They clearly describe two different states of affairs. So they must have different paraphrases. But in both cases the handout is perforated! So they can't be represented by the same paraphrase!

Easily solved. We'll say that one handout is *singly perforated* and the other handout is *doubly perforated*. Got three holes in it? *Triply perforated*. And so on. Those predicates are certainly understandable. Does this work? Well, there's problems even there.

Can we provide paraphrases for everything?

We'll need an infinite number of 'perforated' primitives [next lecture we'll explain why that's a problem]

This is enough to return to the challenges that we began with. *That* challenge isn't a challenge at all. To have those kinds of intuitions, and to defend them, *just is to do what standard ontologists have been*

doing. Trying to be a nominalist is a straightforward position in standard ontology. It's exactly the kind of topic that ontologists discuss.

7. *Prima Facie* challenge two: Ontological questions are trivial

You may be unmoved by nominalist concerns. You might wonder why you should *bother* paraphrasing. You might buy into the Quinean theory of ontological commitment – that what you quantify over exists. But you might think that no paraphrases are needed – what you appear to quantify over when talking about holes, properties, works of music etc. *do exist!* So ontological questions are *trivial*.

For instance, you might say '3 is a prime number' is a true statement. It follows that if 3 is a prime number, something is a prime number. It follows that if something is a prime number, prime numbers exist. Easy! Ditto for everything else. All *kinds* of things exist! Only *silly* people like overpaid philosophers think they don't exist.

8. The Paradox of Non-Self Exemplification

Here's a reason for thinking the trivialists are wrong. Imagine we have two oranges.

'This is an orange, and that is an orange'

It trivially follows that:

'There is something those two oranges have in common'

Presumably the property of *being an orange*. So properties trivially exist. The orange bears a certain relation to the property of *being an orange* that it doesn't bear to *being a tiger*. It *instantiates* or *exemplifies* the former, and not the latter.

But what about these properties? *Being an orange* and *being an apple* have something in common. They're both properties! That's the same allegedly trivial move we made above. They will have the property of *being a property* in common. The property *being a property* is, itself, a property. So it *exemplifies* itself. It has the property of *self exemplification*.

The property *being an orange* is not, itself, an orange. You can eat oranges, but you can't eat properties. So it doesn't exemplify *being an orange*. It doesn't *self exemplify*. The property *being an orange* and *being an apple* therefore have something in common. The property of *being non self-exemplifying*. So the property of *being non self-exemplification* exists if we keep making these trivial moves.

There can be no such property. Trivially, either P or not P (the law of excluded middle) So either NSE exemplifies itself or it doesn't.

Assumption: It *does* exemplify itself. In the same way that anything that exemplifies *being an orange* is an orange, anything that exemplifies NSE can't exemplify itself. So, on this assumption, it *doesn't* exemplify itself. But that's a contradiction!

Assumption: It *does not* exemplify itself. In the same way that anything that doesn't exemplify itself has the property of *being non-self exemplifying* NSE must therefore exemplify that property. But it is that property. So it exemplifies itself. So, on this assumption, it *does* exemplify itself. But that's a contradiction!

The upshot is this: if we think these intuitively true sentences that apparently quantify over properties trivially entail that such things exist, we can lead ourselves to believing in the property of *non-self exemplification*. But it entails a contradiction to say such a property exists. By *reductio* thinking that things from other categories trivially exist must be false

9. *Prima Facie* challenge three: Ontology is gibberish

If you think it's *gibberish* to say these things don't exist, then surely you think such sentences are false? So aren't you just a nominalist? Just a *very extreme* nominalist who can't even make sense of such things existing. But so what? You still have to explain how to get by without such things, and how to explain the apparent existential commitment to such things when we quantify over them.