

Metametaphysics

*New Essays on the Foundations
of Ontology*

EDITED BY

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Introduction: A Guided Tour of Metametaphysics

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Metaphysics is concerned with the foundations of reality. It asks questions about the nature of the world, such as: Aside from concrete objects, are there also abstract objects like numbers and properties? Does every event have a cause? What is the nature of possibility and necessity? When do several things make up a single bigger thing? Do the past and future exist? And so on.

Metametaphysics is concerned with the foundations of metaphysics.¹ It asks: Do the questions of metaphysics really have answers? If so, are these answers substantive or just a matter of how we use words? And what is the best procedure for arriving at them—common sense? Conceptual analysis? Or assessing competing hypotheses with quasi-scientific criteria?

This volume gathers together sixteen new essays that are concerned with the semantics, epistemology, and methodology of metaphysics. My aim is to introduce these essays within a more general (and mildly opinionated) survey of contemporary challenges to metaphysics.²

I Worrying about Metaphysics

When one is first introduced to a dispute that falls within the purview of metaphysics—or perhaps even after years of thinking hard about it—one can experience two sorts of deflationary intuitions. First, one may sense that nothing is really at issue between the disputants. The phenomenology here

¹ For the first ‘meta’, we are following the meaning of the prefix in ‘meta-ethics’ and ‘meta-semantics’ (i.e., foundational semantics).

² There is no canonical taxonomy of the available views in this burgeoning subdiscipline, and one suspects that any taxonomy will reflect the biases and priorities of its author. For some alternative taxonomies in this volume, see Bennett pp. 39–42, Chalmers pp. 77–99, and Sider pp. 384–97.

resembles that of encountering merely ‘verbal’ or ‘terminological’ disputes in ordinary conversation. Eli Hirsch suggests the following experiment to induce this kind of intuition:

Look at your hand while you are clenching it, and ask yourself whether some object called a fist has come into existence ... The first thought must come to mind when we ask this question is this: There can’t be anything deep or theoretical here. The facts are, so to speak, right in front of our eyes. Our task can only be to remind ourselves of relevant ways in which we describe these facts in our language[;] to ‘command a clear view of the use of our words’, as Wittgenstein put it, that is, a clear view of how the relevant concepts operate. (Hirsch 2002: 67)

Some English-speakers might describe the hand-clenching situation as one in which a new object—a fist—comes into existence; others might describe it as a case in which an old object—your hand—takes on a new shape and temporarily *becomes* a fist. But it is easy to feel that there is no disagreement—or still less any mystery—about *how things are* in front of your face. Your hand and fingers are in a certain arrangement that we are perfectly familiar with: call this situation whatever you like.³ There is nothing more to know about it through ‘metaphysical inquiry’, and any residual disagreement must be somehow non-factual or terminological.

Some metaphysical disputes are less apt to elicit this intuition than others. For example, a paradigmatic question of metaphysics is whether there is a God: but in that case, there really seems to be a disagreement about how things are. The phenomenology of shallowness does not arise, and very few thinkers today would deny that the debate over the existence of God is perfectly substantive and has a correct answer.⁴ In contrast, consider the contemporary debate about composition. If we have some objects, what does it take for there to be a further object that has those objects as parts? On Cian Dorr’s view, composition never takes place. There may be partless particles (simples) arranged in the shapes of teacups and turkeys, but there are no teacups or turkeys. On David Lewis’s view, composition always takes place. So, not only are there teacups and turkeys, but also teacup-turkeys: spatially scattered objects consisting of one-part dishware and one-part bird. And on Peter van Inwagen’s view, simples compose a larger object only when their activity constitutes a life. This gets us turkeys but not teacups.⁵ Faced with this kind of dispute, many philosophers claim to detect the whiff of superficiality. Everyone agrees

³ As Wittgenstein might have put it: things are like *this* [here one demonstrates].

⁴ There may be a few, in the grip of a malingering verificationism, who would disagree.

⁵ For more on these views of composition, see Dorr 2005; Lewis 1986; van Inwagen 1990).

that there are bits arranged ‘teacup-wise’; so do we not agree on the relevant facts? It can seem that this is only a disagreement about how to *describe* certain situations, rather than about how things really *are*.

We come now to the second type of intuition that is elicited by metaphysical disputes. Even when we sense that something might really be at issue when it comes to a question of metaphysics, we may still get the impression that the answer is more or less *trivial*—it can be known by drawing out consequences of truisms that we all accept or by reflecting on a conceptual framework that we all share. This sort of reaction might be triggered, for example, by noticing that:

There is at least one number

follows from

The number of my fingers is finite

which in turn can be known from a simple inspection of my hands.⁶ Insofar as this proof appears trivial, one is apt to feel suspicious of the methodology behind any theoretical defense of the thesis that numbers do not exist. Likewise, the inference from ‘There are many bricks piled on top of one another’ to ‘There is a pile of bricks’ can seem licensed entirely by one’s understanding of the concepts at issue. The more obvious this transition seems, the more difficult it is to see how one could be dissuaded from it by any metaphysical argument.

These two deflationary intuitions threaten the robustly realist approach that is dominant today—at least among analytic philosophers who specialize in metaphysics.⁷ Most contemporary metaphysicians think of themselves as concerned, not primarily with the representations of language and thoughts, but with the reality that is represented. In the case of ontology, there are deep and non-trivial—but still tractable—questions about numbers, sums, events, and regions of space, as well as about ordinary objects like turkeys and teacups. And the preferred methodology for answering these questions is quasi-scientific, of the type recommended by W. V. O. Quine, developed by David Lewis, and summarized by Theodore Sider in this volume:

Competing positions are treated as tentative hypotheses about the world, and are assessed by a loose battery of criteria for theory choice. Match with ordinary usage and belief sometimes plays a role in this assessment, but typically not a dominant one. Theoretical insight, considerations of simplicity, integration with other domains

⁶ See (Yablo 2000), (Hofweber 2005).

⁷ As Chalmers points out in his contribution, there is likely a selection effect here: those apt to find metaphysical debates shallow or trivial are less likely to devote much time to metaphysics.

(for instance science, logic, and philosophy of language), and so on, play important roles. (p. 385)

I will call this approach *mainstream metaphysics*, with the caveat that it has only come to ascendancy lately, and is still widely challenged. In this volume, it is articulated and defended by both Sider and van Inwagen.

In opposition to mainstream metaphysics, there is a broad range of views. Consider an arbitrary dispute in metaphysics that gives rise to deflationary intuitions. At one end of the spectrum will be those who dismiss the dispute as entirely misguided, on the grounds that nothing substantive is at issue. Motivated in part by intuitions of shallowness, they argue that the dispute is merely verbal, or that the disputants are not making truth-evaluable claims at all. This approach, which I will call *strong deflationism*, has a very impressive pedigree: versions of it have been defended by, among others, Carnap, Wittgenstein, Austin, Rorty, Ryle and Putnam. And although it has often been linked to fading programs like verificationism, many of its contemporary defenders have severed these old ties. In its new forms, strong deflationism poses as serious a challenge to metaphysics as ever.⁸

In the middle of the spectrum are *mild deflationists*, who admit that there is a genuine dispute at issue, but believe that it can be resolved in a relatively trivial fashion by reflecting on conceptual or semantic facts. Thus, nothing of substance is left for the metaphysician to investigate, and it is in this sense that the view is metaphysically deflationist. As one would expect, mild deflationists tend to be motivated more by intuitions of triviality than by the intuition that nothing is really at issue in the dispute.

Even further along the spectrum, we find the *reformers*. They hold both that there is a genuine dispute at issue, and that the answer is far from trivial. Indeed, pursuing the answer is an appropriate task for metaphysics. But in response to the concerns of deflationists, reformers reject various details of mainstream metaphysics—whether about how to understand the questions of metaphysics, or how to go about answering them.

Here is the plan for the remainder of the Introduction. I will begin with the influence of Carnap and Quinean metametaphysics. I will then organize the contemporary discussion around three general ways that a dispute can be misguided:

1. The dispute is ‘merely verbal’—somehow due to differences in the way the disputants are using certain terms.

⁸ For some contemporary defenses of deflationism, see (Peacocke 1988), (Putnam 1987), (Sosa 1999), (Sidelle 2002), and (Hirsch 2002).

2. Neither side succeeds in making a claim with determinate truth-value.
3. The right answer is much harder or easier to reach than the disputants realize, and as a result, the way in which they attempt to reach it is misguided.

The key question is whether any metaphysical disputes are misguided in any of these ways. The first two challenges lead to serious deflationism about a given dispute, while the third may leave open the possibility of reform. After considering these challenges in sections 3 to 6, I will turn to some responses on behalf of mainstream metaphysics in section 7, and some proposals for reforming metaphysics in section 8.

2 Themes from Carnap and Quine

Most of the essays in this book focus on the contemporary debate, but a significant number of them attend to the history of metametaphysics. As we will see, Jonathan Schaffer's paper discusses themes from Aristotle, and Kris McDaniel engages ideas from Heidegger. But the two historical figures who have had the most influence on the contemporary debate are clearly Carnap and Quine.

In his contribution, Peter van Inwagen explicates five 'broadly Quinean' theses about meta-ontology, and defends them against a variety of antagonists, including Heidegger, Sartre, Meinong, Ryle, and Putnam. All five theses are central to mainstream metaphysics, which is therefore in one sense Quinean—though it repudiates the more pragmatist elements of Quine's approach to ontology.⁹ The first four of van Inwagen's theses are about being and the word 'being'. First, being is not an activity: it is not something we *do*. In fact, the expressions 'to be' and 'to exist' can be eliminated in favor of quantifier expressions like 'something' and 'everything'. Second, being is the same as existence. Thus, there are no creatures of lore or objects of thought that do not exist: to say that they *are* just is to say that they *exist*. Third, 'being' and 'existence' are univocal: when we say 'numbers exist' and when we say 'people exist', we are not using different senses of 'exist'. To help motivate this claim, van Inwagen argues that number terms like 'three' are univocal, and that claims of number and claims of existence are closely tied. (See McDaniel pp. 300–1 for a response to this argument.)¹⁰ Van Inwagen's fourth thesis is that

⁹ I mean 'pragmatist' only in the sense characterized at the end of 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' (1951).

¹⁰ We will not be in a position to discuss the semantic framework employed by McDaniel until later: see section 8.

the single sense of 'being' and 'existence' is adequately expressed by the formal first-order existential quantifier. In support of this claim, he offers an account of the way that formal quantifiers regiment ordinary expressions like 'all' and 'there are'.

The fifth and final thesis is about how to pursue ontological disputes. Here, van Inwagen is at pains to clarify what is known as 'the Quinean criterion of ontological commitment'. It is not, he argues, a technique for revealing the 'more-or-less hidden but objectively present' ontological commitments of things called 'theories'. Instead, it is a dialectical strategy. Insofar as one's opponent is willing to accept the progressive introduction of quantifiers and variables into true English sentences, one can point out the formal existential consequences of the resulting sentences. Of course, one's opponent may resist these attempts at regimentation, but this resistance can often be shown to be unreasonable. The resulting discussion is the best way to make clear which objects a person must reasonably accept as existing.

Because of Quine's association with these theses, he is sometimes invoked as a champion of mainstream metaphysics. But the contributions of Scott Soames and Huw Price put things in a different light. Soames situates the Carnap–Quine dispute about ontology within the context of their respective views about analyticity and meaning. In the background is a shared commitment to whole-theory verificationism that sets both philosophers at odds with contemporary mainstream metaphysics. Both Carnap and Quine held that if two theories differ only in their 'non-observational statements', they do not differ on any facts of the matter. Soames calls this 'the stunningly counterintuitive bedrock of ontological agreement between Carnap and Quine' (pp. 441–2), and argues that it weakens Quine's famous critique of Carnap's position on ontology.

Huw Price's essay also aims to set the record straight about Quine. While recent philosophical lore sometimes credits Quine with saving metaphysics from the positivists, Price contends that this idea involves two serious misconceptions. First, it is often thought that Quine's rejection of the analytic–synthetic distinction successfully undermined Carnap's deflationist arguments. But Price maintains that the analytic–synthetic distinction is largely irrelevant to the anti-metaphysical force of Carnap's deflationism. Second, it is often thought that Quine bolstered traditional metaphysics with his essay 'On What There Is' (1948); but Price argues that this idea involves a serious misreading of Quine, who is at bottom a thoroughgoing pragmatist. In short, while inflationary metaphysics died with Carnap, its resurrection by Quine is a myth.¹¹

¹¹ For a related discussion, see section 1.1 of Schaffer's contribution.

For contemporary purposes, the crucial question is whether Carnap's critique of metaphysics can be articulated without verificationist assumptions—or perhaps even without any strong assumptions about analyticity. Contemporary deflationists are still inspired by his idea of linguistic frameworks, as well as his distinction between internal and external questions (Carnap 1950). A *framework* is something like a set of terms in a language along with rules or 'ways of speaking' that govern their use. So, for example, in making arithmetical claims like 'There is a prime number between eleven and twelve,' we employ the framework of numbers. Ordinary questions within arithmetic are *internal* existence questions; they can be answered 'by logical or empirical methods, depending upon whether the framework is a logical or a factual one'. But we can also ask *external* existence questions, which concern 'the existence or reality of the system of entities as a whole'. Answers to such questions lack 'cognitive content', and it is a mistake to think they must be answered in order to justify working within the framework of those entities.

As intuitive as this may sound, the notion of a framework and the internal/external distinction are somewhat resistant to rigorous clarification, and their implications for ontology are far from obvious. In his paper, Matti Eklund suggests that a framework is simply a language fragment, and that the internal/external distinction is fairly straightforward. An internal question is simply one about whether a sentence is true in a given language: for example, whether 'There are numbers' is true in English. Meanwhile, external questions—insofar as they are legitimate—are about what kind of language to speak: for example, whether to speak a language in which a certain kind of existence claim comes out true. But, according to Eklund, Carnap takes traditional metaphysics to be attempting to ask a second, *non-pragmatic* sort of external question. Such a question asks, in effect, whether there are Fs, regardless of whether 'There are Fs' is true in the language being employed by the question. And this clearly involves a confusion.

Eklund notes that on this reading, the internal/external distinction does not have clear implications for meta-ontology. In particular, it does not obviously lead to the thesis that there are a number of different languages we could speak, such that (i) different existence sentences come out true in them, and (ii) they can all 'somehow describe the world's facts equally well and fully' (p. 137). Only accompanied by something like this latter thesis, which Eklund criticizes, does Carnap's distinction lead to deflationism about ontology. I will discuss one of Eklund's objections and his proposed alternative in section 6.

David Chalmers' paper reconstructs Carnap's distinction between internal and external questions in terms of a distinction between 'ordinary' and 'ontological' existence assertions, and explores the Carnapian view that the

latter sort lack a determinate truth-value. He then sets out a contemporary version of Carnap's strongly deflationist view of ontology, along with a formalized way of making sense of Carnap's notion of a framework. He introduces the notion of a 'furnishing function': a contextually determined function that in effect supplies a possible world with a domain of entities that are taken to exist in that world. I will return to Chalmers' paper in section 4.

3 Verbal Disputes

Ordinary verbal disputes are accompanied by a distinct odor of superficiality, an odor that some philosophers claim to detect in the ontology room. Of course, it would be helpful to go beyond this phenomenological similarity if we want to discover whether metaphysical disputes are in fact merely verbal. But it is surprisingly tricky to say, in general, what counts as a verbal dispute and why.

At a first pass, it seems that a dispute is merely verbal when the interlocutors think they are disagreeing but are not, because they mean different things by a key term. For example, consider this exchange between an English child and an American child:

John: Footballs are round and usually black and white.

Ted: No, footballs have two points and are usually brown.

Here it seems the disputants are 'talking past each other'—not really disagreeing—because they mean different things by 'football' in their respective idiolects. John is speaking UK English and Ted is speaking American English. If the speakers were aware of this difference in meaning, they would abandon the dispute. Any residual disagreements would have to be meta-linguistic: for example, they might be inclined to disagree about which idiolect it is more appropriate to use in this setting, or which kind of ball better deserves to be named after the foot. But nothing meta-linguistic was being claimed in the original exchange quoted above, in which the word 'football' is *used* and not *mentioned*. So John and Ted's *actual* claims are not about words at all. They are about balls; and both claims are literally true. Despite appearances, they are not disagreeing.¹²

¹² Assuming, again, that they mean different things by 'football'. One could imagine scenarios where both end up meaning the same thing because of the public nature of language; for example, they are in the UK and even Ted intends to be using the term 'football' in the way that UK speakers do. Then our original supposition, that Ted and John are not really disagreeing, is false.

Simple context-dependence can also give rise to the mere appearance of disagreement. Consider the following sentences uttered in Los Angeles on a February afternoon:

One tourist to another: It's warm outside.

One native to another: It's not warm outside.

If the native overhears the tourist, she might take herself to disagree with him. But if the two tourists hail from Alaska and have in mind February temperatures that are ordinary for them, the tourist's claim and the native's claim are not inconsistent. There is no disagreement here because 'warm' expresses different properties in the two contexts.¹³

Some verbal disputes, then, involve a mere appearance of disagreement, due to variance in what is meant by certain terms. But are ontological disputes like that? Consider what Lewis and van Inwagen say concerning a region with two simples in it:

Lewis: There are three things there.

van Inwagen: No, there are not three things there.

It would certainly help to explain the intuition of shallowness if somehow one of the terms at issue meant one thing in Lewis's mouth and another thing in van Inwagen's mouth. But we then face two questions. First, what leads to the difference in meaning? The tourist and the native were in different conversational contexts, but Lewis and van Inwagen appear to be in one context—that of their conversation. And in the football case, two idiolects were at play, but Lewis and van Inwagen appear to be speaking exactly the same language. (Even if we speak a special variant of English in the ontology room, it still seems that *both* disputants are speaking it.)

The second question we face is: *which* term (or terms) allegedly have two meanings in this exchange? It has been suggested that the word 'thing' is the culprit: there are three satisfiers of the predicate 'thing' as Lewis uses it, and only two satisfiers of the predicate as van Inwagen uses it. (Amie L. Thomasson's contribution discusses—but does not endorse—this way of interpreting debates between 'serious ontologists': see her section 5.1.) One initial complication is that van Inwagen and Lewis also differ concerning sentences

¹³ Things are more complex if the native and the tourist are talking to each other, and each is confused about what sorts of temperatures the other considers normal. We must then decide: are there two contexts at play, one on each side of the conversation? In that case, there is no disagreement. Or does one context usurp the conversation? In that case, there may be disagreement, but the dispute still seems verbal. Or is it indeterminate which context governs? In that case, the claims being made may have no determinate truth-value.

that don't contain the word 'thing', such as 'There is a mereological sum in the region' and 'There are only simples in the region.' Perhaps these sentences are somehow elliptical for 'There are only simple things in the region' and 'There is a thing that is a mereological sum,' but it is unclear how one would spell out (or justify) this claim in terms of a compositional semantics.¹⁴

A more popular proposal is that quantifier phrases like 'there are', 'everything', and their artificial counterparts mean something different in each interlocutor's mouth. (This idea, though qualified in a way that I will discuss below, is defended in Hirsch's contribution to this volume.) Lewis himself argues that in ordinary contexts we usually restrict our quantifiers to range over commonsense objects. Why should he not interpret van Inwagen as speaking with quantifiers restricted to simples and organisms? Of course, the restriction involved could not be a contextual matter. It would be hard to suggest that van Inwagen is caught permanently in a conversational context where only simples and organisms are at issue, in part because he is arguing with an opponent who is vocally concerned about mereological sums. So, perhaps Lewis should understand van Inwagen as employing quantifiers that, as a matter of meaning, are invariantly restricted to simples and organisms. Things get trickier if we try to provide a way for van Inwagen to express the propositions that Lewis takes himself to express, but I will return to that type of worry in section 7.

As we have seen, it is natural to hold that ordinary (and ontological) verbal disputes involve claims that are not really contradictory. But this idea faces a problem if we accept a public language semantics of the sort made famous by Putnam and Burge. Take two quibblers pedantic enough to engage in the following argument:

Alf: This glass is a cup.

Betty: No, it isn't—cups are not made of glass.

This has the odor of a verbal dispute. But while the interlocutors have a different conception of what falls under the predicate 'cup', it is not obvious that 'cup' means something different in their mouths, or that their claims are compatible. After all, 'cup' is a shared commodity whose meaning is settled by community-wide dispositions. The fact that our quibblers are inclined to apply the term 'cup' to different objects will not by itself induce ambiguity in the term.¹⁵ Let us

¹⁴ Likewise, why van Inwagen is unwilling to accept 'There is a non-thing in the region.' Rather than appealing to ellipsis as in the text, it might be claimed that some contexts presuppose that a sortal or other domain-specifying term is in play; and in this case, the term 'thing' is in play. (Note that, if we are to treat Lewis and van Inwagen as in the same context, it must be the *term* 'thing' and not its meaning that is somehow presuppositionally in play.)

¹⁵ It may be tempting on this view to think there is no determinate resolution to the glass/cup debate, because the facts of use that settle the community-wide extension of 'cup' are insufficiently

suppose, then, that Alf and Betty are really disagreeing: their claims are incompatible. Nevertheless, their dispute seems merely verbal and therefore misguided. Thus, we need an account of verbal disputes that allows for real disagreement.

The same point can be made against the idea that Lewis and van Inwagen are not really disagreeing. Proponents of the no-disagreement thesis are apt to appeal to considerations of semantic charity: the idea is that the right semantics should make both Lewis's and van Inwagen's claims come out true. But the right semantics must attend to more than the intention of the speaker to speak truly; amongst other things it should give weight to the speaker's intention to be using a shared language.¹⁶ Surely the fact that Lewis and van Inwagen intend to mean the same thing by the relevant sentences, and thus take themselves to be genuinely disagreeing, ought to have semantic significance. And they take themselves to be engaging in a larger debate within a community that shares a language, which suggests a community-wide pattern of use and dispositions that forms the semantic supervenience base for the meaning of their quantifiers.¹⁷ In short, there is a case to be made that they should be interpreted as meaning the same thing by their quantifiers, whether that is what is meant in ordinary English, or in a shared 'Ontologese'.¹⁸

The glass/cup dispute is clearly a verbal one even though it involves genuine disagreement. So what makes it a verbal dispute? Consider three tempting replies:

(i) 'In a verbal dispute, the correct answer is *true in virtue of meaning*; while in a substantive dispute the correct answer is *true in virtue of facts about the world*.' This claim is notoriously tricky. The sentence 'This glass is a cup' is—like every other true sentence—true partly because of what it means and partly because of the way the world is. (In particular, it is true partly because it means that this glass is a cup, and partly because this glass is a cup.)

Perhaps a better way to put this idea is that verbal disputes are disputes *about* words, and not *about* the way the world is. But this claim is also not without its

robust when it comes to glasses. (I consider the idea that ontological disputes are like this in section 4.) But it is implausible that this is always at the heart of the phenomenon of verbal disputes. For the debate feels shallow even if we suppose that there is sufficiently widespread conformity of usage, so that (say) glasses are determinately in the extension of 'cup'. (I am assuming, in the spirit of this general semantic picture, that in such a case someone who thinks glasses are not cups could still be sufficiently competent with 'cup' to express and entertain propositions about cuphood.)

¹⁶ Cf. Chalmers, section 4. Also note that Lewis and van Inwagen have no trouble reporting each other's beliefs and utterances in a disquotational fashion.

¹⁷ Deference to a group of experts is unlikely to apply in the case of quantificational expressions. (Perhaps ordinary folk *should* defer to ontologists; but for better or worse, they don't.)

¹⁸ The ontology room may simply remove contextual restrictions from ordinary English quantifiers whose invariant meanings remain the same.

problems. Alf and Betty may indeed be disposed to disagree about what ‘cup’ and ‘glass’ mean in English, or what these words ought to mean. But as a matter of fact they keep their dispute entirely at the ‘object level’: taken at face value, their dispute is about whether this glass is a cup, not about the meaning of any terms at all. Formally, it is just like a deep or empirical dispute, such as one we might have about whether an object hidden in the shadows is a cup. (‘This thing in the corner is a cup’; ‘No, it isn’t—cups are not kept in the corner’ ...)

We might try characterizing verbal disputes as those that are *accompanied* by a disagreement about words, or a disposition to disagree about words. But Alf and Betty would be having a verbal dispute even if they had no meta-semantic thoughts on the matter, or lacked meta-semantic concepts entirely. Moreover, perfectly substantive disputes might be accompanied by a disposition to disagree about how words are used. So, while this proposal might be on the right track, it does not provide a rigorous way to identify verbal disputes.

(ii) ‘In a verbal dispute there is no disagreement about *fundamental* facts.’ Here, the idea is that two sides in a genuine dispute about whether the object in the shadows is a cup will also be disposed to disagree about the arrangement of matter in the shadowy region; while in a verbal dispute, the two sides will not disagree about any such fundamental facts.¹⁹ We can flesh out this idea by appealing to a canonical language suitable for describing fundamental facts that does not contain the word ‘cup’. The idea is that verbal disputes do not survive translation into such a language. And if everything worth saying about regions containing cups can be stated in such a language, it follows that the glass/cup dispute is not worth having.

On this view, we could test whether ontological disputes are merely verbal by seeing if they survive translation into a ‘neutral’ canonical language without quantifiers that is capable of providing a complete fundamental description of the world. (See the related discussion in Chalmers, section 12, second subsection.) We are left with the question whether such a language is possible, and if so, whether it would be capable of expressing everything worth saying about the world. Metaphysical realists are sure to resist on both points.

(iii) ‘In a verbal dispute, the correct answer is always knowable to the disputants by accessing their own linguistic intuitions.’ This proposal faces complications in the public-language framework we are considering. For suppose that Betty is wrong: cups can be made of glass. Nevertheless, she may have been led astray precisely by her linguistic intuitions, which are unreliable

¹⁹ We are here considering their dispositions to agree or disagree in idealized situations where they grasp the connection between surface-level and fundamental facts.

on this point. We might try ‘... the correct answer is knowable by anyone who *fully grasps the meaning* of the relevant terms’. But while Alf has all the right linguistic intuitions, he may now be worried that they are unreliable—he may have met several speakers like Betty—and such a state of uncertainty cannot sustain knowledge.²⁰ Perhaps we should try ‘the correct answer will be *intuited* under the right conditions by anyone who fully grasps the meaning of the relevant terms’. This helps, but it still hangs a lot on a primitive notion of ‘fully grasping the meaning’.²¹

As we have seen, it is tricky to characterize verbal disputes if we allow that participants may mean the same thing by all the relevant terms. Recently, David Chalmers has suggested that a dispute is terminological when ‘an apparent first-order dispute arises in virtue of a meta-linguistic difference or dispute’.²² Intuitively, Betty and Alf *do* use their terms differently, and their dispute arises because of this difference. Moreover, their dispute would be resolved by somehow eradicating this meta-linguistic difference. But we still face the question of what is sufficient, within a public language framework, for a ‘meta-linguistic difference’. (For example, it can’t be enough that a term conjures up different images in the minds of the disputants.) Chalmers notes that in some cases it helps to bar the use of the term at issue—and any cognates—and see if the dispute arises in its absence. If so, the dispute is not due to a meta-linguistic difference about that term. However, he also notes that when it comes to ‘bedrock’ terms and concepts, this test is inapplicable: sometimes barring terms simply exhausts the vocabulary, which is why the dispute cannot be stated any more.

How can we make more rigorous the idea that Alf and Betty are using the term ‘cup’ differently? One is tempted to say that they *would* both be making true claims in their own languages if it were not for the public nature of language. In his contribution, Eli Hirsch defines a verbal dispute as one in which ‘each party ought to agree that the other party speaks the truth in its own language’—but to avoid the issue of a shared language, he adds that ‘the language of side X in any dispute is the language that would belong to an imagined linguistic community typical members of which exhibit linguistic behavior that is relevantly similar to X’s’ (p. 239). This approach captures the intuition that the dispute is caused by the two sides using certain terms differently, while granting that as a matter of fact they mean the same thing by those terms.

²⁰ Even if Alf continues to be certain, in certain linguistic environments he may face near danger of being wrong, and this would undermine his knowledge as well. See (Manley 2007), section 3.

²¹ It could be spelled out as ‘not semantically deviating from one’s community’, in the sense of ‘semantic deviance’ sketched below.

²² ‘Terminological Disputes’, unpublished talk.

This correctly classifies the glass/cup dispute as merely verbal. Even though the semantic value of ‘cup’ in Betty’s mouth is *cuphood*, a property consistent with being made of glass, if an entire community of speakers like Betty in their dispositions to use ‘cup’, the term would express a different property that is not consistent with being made of glass. And this seems intuitively correct. Likewise, Lewis and van Inwagen may be engaged in a verbal dispute even if they are actually contradicting each other. What matters is that there are two communities—one whose members speak the way Lewis does when he is in the ontology room, and one whose members speak the way that van Inwagen does—whose claims do not contradict each other. And considering the example of two communities who speak Lewish and Inwegian, respectively, many philosophers report the intuition that we should interpret the relevant sentences in each community as coming out true.

Note the contrast with substantive issues in philosophy, such as the question whether there is a God. If we imagine a community of people who act and speak like theists, and another community of people who act and speak like atheists, we are not tempted to interpret each side as speaking the truth ‘in their own language’. As Hirsch argues, there are limits to this kind of interpretive charity (see the end of his section 2 and especially n. 11), even if it is unclear exactly what those limits are.²³

We can now explicate a sense in which two speakers in a verbal dispute ‘use a term differently’ even if they are both minimally competent with it and mean the same thing by it. Let us say that two speakers *semantically deviate* from each other with a term just in case distinct semantic values are assigned to that term when we consider two communities that have their respective linguistic dispositions and patterns of use. The proposal is this: a dispute is verbal just in case the speakers only disagree because they semantically deviate from each other. Put differently: if we hold fixed the facts about which they are actually disputing (e.g., whether glasses are cups), the closest world where they do not semantically deviate is one in which they agree.

²³ For example, suppose we know that God does not exist and we are considering a whole community that speaks the way utterly committed theists actually do. It is difficult to interpret ‘God exists’ as meaning (say) ‘Beauty exists’ if members of the community expect supernatural intervention in the world of a sort that it would be irrational to expect from beauty. Moreover, sentences like ‘If God exists, God is all-powerful’, are taken as (something like) meaning-constitutive truths: that is, speakers find them primitively compelling and undefeatable by non-linguistic empirical data, perhaps accompanied with the phenomenology of a linguistic intuition. (‘That’s just part of what it means to count as “God”!’) So there is a good deal of interpretive pressure to treat such sentences as true. But members of the community also use the terms ‘knowing’, ‘loving’, and ‘powerful’ to describe ordinary people, so there is also considerable pressure to treat these words as meaning what they do in English. But then there is not much room to maneuver, semantically speaking, so that ‘God exists’ in their mouths can be interpreted as coming out true.

So far, so good. But here is a preliminary objection to this sort of metaphysical deflationism. The idea rests on the notion of a whole community that uses words just as Lewis does in the ontology room (for example). But it can be argued no such community is possible. For one thing, an important part of the linguistic practice of metaphysicians is their intention to be engaged in an investigation about the fundamental structure of reality along with thinkers in their community who have opposing views and therefore have different patterns of use. Moreover, some metaphysicians are self-consciously intending to employ the quantifiers of ordinary English—albeit in the strictest and most unrestricted possible way. It is not obvious that either feature of a metaphysician’s use could be enlarged to form the practice of an entire community, because they presuppose that others in his community do not use the quantifiers just as he does.²⁴

Perhaps we can avoid this problem with an alternative understanding of semantic deviance. We are assuming that the right semantics for a term of English considers the uses and dispositions of all English speakers, and supplies a meaning. But why not imagine the same algorithm applied to the dispositions and use of a single speaker? Restricting the supervenience base in this way does not allow deference to pull any semantic weight: everything is settled by other aspects of the speaker’s use. (I take it that Hirsch has something like this in mind when he writes, ‘We can, if we wish, think of [each side in a dispute] as forming its own linguistic community,’ p. 239).²⁵

We will look at other objections to this approach in the next section and in section 7.

4 No Determinate Truth Value?

Early on in the twentieth century, it was popular to claim that neither side in a metaphysical debate is really making any assertions. Instead, the function of their language is somehow *prescriptive*. For example, consider the exchange:

Christine: Let’s go to the beach today.

Melissa: No, let’s go downtown instead.

²⁴ Perhaps, when interpreting a whole community with a widespread false assumption of this sort, the semantic gods would just ignore the assumption and settle the meaning of the quantifier by paying attention to other aspects of use.

²⁵ One might complain that the intuition of non-disagreement between the claims in Lewis and Inwegian is not preserved if we appeal to a theoretical notion like that of a restricted semantic supervenience base.

Two different proposals are being put forward, but no claims are being made about what the world is like. Proposals can be wise or unwise, given our goals, but they cannot be true or false. Thus, while there is a disagreement of a sort going on here, it is not one in which any question arises of who is right. One way to understand Carnap's discussion of 'external questions' is that ontological speeches should be considered along these lines: when one philosopher says, 'Numbers exist' and another says, 'Numbers don't exist,' they can be interpreted as putting forward different proposals for how to talk. The first is suggesting that we adopt the 'framework' of numbers; the other resists that proposal. They might suggest various reasons for or against a particular way of talking, but no assertions are being made, so the question of truth does not arise.

An initial challenge for this sort of view is to provide a compositional semantics in which certain sentences that have the form of declarative, claim-making sentences are treated as of a different semantic type from ordinary declarative sentences. For example, the ontological claim 'There are no chairs,' made by Peter van Inwagen, has some important similarities to the declarative claim 'There are no chairs in the room' made in an ordinary context. (Of course, the latter sentence can be used to *convey* a proposal; for instance, if we want to find chairs, I may use it to convey the proposal that we not look in the room. But we are interested in what is actually *expressed* by the sentence, aside from the various things it could be used to convey.) In part because no plausible semantics of this sort has been offered, prescriptivist deflationism has fallen out of favor. Moreover, it is worth noting that even if this sort of deflationism were true, there would remain work for metaphysics to do in judging the various proposals for how to talk, given the goals of metaphysics. In this sense, there can be a substantial winner to the dispute, even though proposals can only be better or worse, rather than true or false.

Another way in which claims can fail to have determinate truth-value is that, although they may have the form of descriptive language, they contain a certain kind of problematic term. To use a well-worn example, imagine that the term 'domel' is introduced by the following stipulation: No cats are domels and all camels are domels. Now consider the following dispute:

Mark: Dogs are domels.

Jake: Dogs are not domels.

There are various ways to treat this case. Some might argue that the term 'domel' has no determinate meaning and so neither claim has a determinate truth-value. Others might argue that the term has a determinate meaning, but its meaning is such that in principle we cannot accept the claim that it is true,

the claim that it is false, or even the claim that it is neither true nor false.²⁶ Regardless of how we treat the case, there is clearly something wrong with the dispute. Even an epistemicist who considers one side in this dispute to be correct, would agree that the dispute is misguided because we are in principle not in a position to know whether dogs are domels.²⁷

For ease of exposition, let us adopt the first position about ‘domel’. The idea is that there are various properties that are candidate semantic values for ‘domel’, but not enough work has been done by the stipulation to select only one from among them. The candidates include a property whose extension contains all dogs, as well as one whose extension contains no dogs; but it is indeterminate which of these properties ‘domel’ expresses. As a result, ‘Dogs are domels’ has no determinate truth-value.²⁸

Are disputes about existence ever like this? Consider a dispute over whether, when I close my hand, something that is essentially a fist comes into existence. It can be tempting to treat this dispute as one in which the two sides are making claims that have no determinate truth-value. Perhaps this is because the quantifier being employed has no determinate meaning. (This would be consistent with holding that many quantified sentences come out determinately true; namely, the ones that come out true no matter which candidate interpretation we give to the quantifier.) But how can this idea be spelled out? If we follow our model for the indeterminacy of ‘domel’, we end up saying that on one candidate meaning for the quantifier, its domain contains fists, and on another its domain does not. But an initial problem with this approach is that it takes for granted that there are determinately fists in the domain of the quantifier being used in the formulation itself, which was ostensibly provided in English.²⁹ So, while we may be able to express the indeterminacy directly by saying (for example) ‘It is indeterminate whether another object is co-located with my hand,’ it seems we need another way to *explain* this indeterminacy metalinguistically.³⁰

In what follows, I will look at several ways to flesh out the idea that indeterminacy could be at the heart of some ontological disputes.

²⁶ See (Soames 1999).

²⁷ See (Williamson 1994).

²⁸ On some varieties of this view, the dispute will still count as genuine in some sense. For example, on a supervaluationist treatment, it will be that on every precisification of ‘domel’, one of the interlocutors is right and the other one is wrong. But if a genuine dispute is one in which one of the interlocutors is right and the other is wrong, then it follows that it is determinately true that there is a genuine dispute.

²⁹ See the related point in van Inwagen’s paper pp. 490–1.

³⁰ Of course, if there were two existential quantifiers with different meanings (whether in separate languages or not), linguistic indeterminacy in one might be expressible in this way using the other. (In effect, this is the point exploited by the appeal to possible languages below.)

In section 3, we encountered the idea that there is more than one meaning the existential quantifier might have had, and that there are possible languages in which the quantifier-like expressions are assigned different meanings—*exists*_{VANINWAGEN}, *exists*_{LEWIS}, and so on. Call this thesis *quantifier variance*. It may be instructive to begin by thinking of the indeterminacy thesis in the same terms.

Let us begin with the fist/hand question. Consider two possible minor variants on our linguistic community, in which the members have fairly firm linguistic intuitions about the truth of ‘Something comes into existence when I close my hand,’ and so on. Suppose that due to semantic charity the sentence means something different in each community; it comes out true in the first and false in the second. Since our own intuitions about fists are somewhere in between, it is natural to suggest that in our mouths the meaning of the sentence is indeterminate between what is meant by one community and what is meant by the other. Thus, it would seem that there are two candidate semantic values of the quantifier, such that ‘Something comes into existence when I close my hand’ is true using one of them, and not using the other, but linguistic use does not determinately settle which of these is the value of the quantifier. In this case, we can state the relevant indeterminacy without specifying the domains of the various candidate semantic values.³¹

But things appear to be different in the case of the dispute between Lewis and van Inwagen. English speakers are strongly inclined to say there are two objects (rather than three) in the room with two simples. So if the meaning of the quantifier tracks use in the way this view suggests, it would seem that English is already a language in which ‘There are only two objects’ comes out determinately true, despite the misuse of the quantifier by some metaphysicians.³² But suppose we take Lewis and van Inwagen to be employing a special ‘philosophical’ sense of the quantifier that is uncommon among the folk,³³ or

³¹ This should not be surprising. When articulating the theory of vagueness for ‘domel’, we *mentioned* ‘domel’ but did not employ it.

³² Though on other issues (for example, disputes about statues and lumps) simply following the intuitions of ordinary English will get us conflicting results, and so there may be no assignment of meanings for even an über-charitable semantics that will save them all. If there is not even a single most charitable assignment, then an entirely use-based semantics may deliver the result that there is no fact of the matter what the meaning of quantificational expressions is.

³³ But there is some tension between (on the one hand) the kind of use-based semantics that often motivates this variety of deflationism, and (on the other) the idea that the folk rarely use this ‘sense’ of the quantifier. We feel owed an account of how a linguistic item can have a sense that is almost never employed. Moreover, one wonders what differences in use would have been required to make it the case that, even in its most unrestricted sense, the sentence ‘There are only two objects in the room’ comes out true. Does the English quantifier have the basic unrestricted meaning it actually has only because of the presence of ontologists?

perhaps even speaking a language with a different quantifier—*Ontologese*. The meaning of the *Ontologese* quantifier is settled by the ontologists' pattern of use, not that of the folk. Now suppose there is something highly problematic about the way that ontologists use the quantifier; then we may end up with several equally good candidate meanings that differ on the resulting truth-value of 'There are only two objects.'³⁴ And we may even be able to say—in ordinary English—that there are objects that are in the domain of one candidate semantic value of the *Ontologese* quantifier, but not another.

Why should we think that ontologists are not using the ordinary English quantifier? One way in which they differ from ordinary folk is that they are unwilling to accept seemingly trivial transitions—for example, from 'There are two objects' to 'The number of objects is two', and from 'The grains are arranged heap-wise' to 'There is a heap.' If they *do* accept these transitions, they treat them as worthy of substantive inquiry, rather than as trivial or as simply knowable by reflection on one's knowledge of how to use the language. And, clearly, whether a community treats certain inferences as trivial can be relevant to the best semantic interpretation of their terms. For instance, take a community just like that of English speakers, except that they consider the transition from 'X is a bachelor' to 'X is male' to involve substantive assumptions. Enough in the way of this sort of difference should lead us to interpret them as meaning something different by 'bachelor' than we do. (And if they were to treat *no* such transitions as trivial, we might wonder whether they mean anything determinate at all by 'bachelor.')

Along similar lines, David Chalmers distinguishes in his essay between 'lightweight' and 'heavyweight' quantification. Using the first but not the second type of quantification, conditionals like 'If there are grains arranged heapwise, there is a heap' (in which the consequent makes 'an existential claim that is not built into the antecedent') can often be trivially correct.³⁵ So it is plausible that ontologists are intending to use 'heavyweight quantification', while ordinary speakers are using lightweight quantification. As a result, according to Chalmers, we face the question whether heavyweight quantification is semantically defective; i.e. whether when properly combined with unproblematic terms, the resulting sentences may in relevant cases fail to yield a

³⁴ Given that we must employ our (by hypothesis indeterminate) quantifier to articulate the theory, it is hard to see how we could express the difference between the two candidate semantic values in the material mode.

³⁵ Here, correctness is not necessarily truth. See Chalmers, pp. 80–99 for more on triviality, correctness, the heavyweight/lightweight distinction, and the relevant type of conditional ('ampliative conditionals').

determinate truth-value. (This could happen because it fails to express a single concept, or because the concept that it expresses is somehow defective.) Chalmers argues that the quantifier of ordinary language is non-defective; but that this should not make us optimistic about the ontologists' quantifier, precisely because of the differences that led us to postulate that the former is lightweight and the latter is heavyweight. Indeed, Chalmers argues that we should be 'suspicious about whether we really have a nondefective grasp of the notion of absolute quantification' (p. 102).

One of the arguments Chalmers offers involves an appeal to the sort of triviality intuition discussed in section 1 above. Consider the two objects under discussion by Lewis and van Inwagen. We may suppose that we know everything about their intrinsic features, as well as the relations that they bear to each other and to objects other than their alleged sum. Chalmers argues that we should thereby be in a position to trivially know everything about them; there is 'no further nontrivial truth to resolve concerning whether the mereological sum of the two objects really exists' (p. 103). But if Lewis and van Inwagen are using a heavyweight quantifier and one of them is right, it follows that there is such a truth that does not follow trivially from this knowledge. So, since they are using a heavyweight quantifier, it must be that there is no fact of the matter who is right in their dispute.

Amie L. Thomasson believes the problem lies not with the ontologists' use of the quantifier, but with their use of the terms 'thing' and 'object'. Her contribution presents a dilemma for serious ontologists involved in disputes about generic existence claims like 'There is an object composed of these two particles.' On one way of understanding their apparently conflicting existence claims, their disputes are merely verbal; on the other way, there is nothing to determine the truth-values of the claims being made on either side.

The dilemma is this: either ontologists are using 'thing' and 'object' in a way that associates them with 'application conditions', or not. (Application conditions allow competent speakers to assess 'various actual and hypothetical situations as ones in which the term should be applied or refused', Chapter 15, p. 461.) In particular, the question is whether 'thing', as used by the serious ontologists, is associated with conditions that specify what it would take for a situation to be one in which there is a thing in it, etc. Suppose it is. Then, argues Thomasson, the serious ontologists' existence claims will be truth-evaluable, but there will be nothing deep about their disputes. For presumably two disputants will not associate the *same* application conditions with terms like 'thing'; otherwise their dispute would be resolvable simply by discovering

whether the application conditions are fulfilled.³⁶ But if they simply associate *different* application conditions with these terms, then their disputes would be merely verbal in the sense that they arise merely because the disputants are using the terms differently.

For this reason, serious ontologists must be intending to use ‘thing’ and ‘object’ terms in a ‘neutral’ way, stripped of any application conditions.³⁷ But in that case, ‘it seems competent speakers would have no idea of under what sorts of conditions these terms should be applied and when they should be refused’. Indeed, Thomasson argues, ‘there seems nothing to determine whether or not these terms refer, and no way to evaluate the truth-values of existence claims that use these terms’ (p. 462).

Notably, however, Thomasson does not think that *all* existence questions within the purview of metaphysics are unanswerable. If we give up the allegedly neutral use of ‘thing’, we can ask perfectly respectable existence questions. For example, with genuine sortals like ‘table’, ‘fusion’, we can ask whether there are tables and whether there are fusions. These questions can be answered by: (i) conceptual analysis intended to elicit the corresponding application conditions of the relevant sortals; and (ii) empirical investigation into whether or not these conditions are satisfied. (The first of these steps is compared to the work of linguists in attempting to identify and understand the grammatical rules that govern natural language.) Moreover, Thomasson leaves room for genuine disputes about what sorts of terms and concepts are best suited for such legitimate metaphysical goals as providing a clear and systematic description of the world.

Earlier in this section, we encountered a problem for using a standard treatment of indeterminacy for predicates to understand how ontological claims could be indeterminate. We patched up the problem by expressing the idea of indeterminacy for quantifiers indirectly, in terms of what quantifier-like expressions would mean in imaginary linguistic communities, at least according to the thesis of quantifier variance. But it would be useful to have another analog to a kind of indeterminacy that actually shows up in natural language.

In his contribution, Stephen Yablo suggests an alternative semantic model, based on the notion of non-catastrophic presupposition failure. He begins by reminding us that some sentences containing empty descriptions—‘The King

³⁶ Presumably the ‘various actual or hypothetical situations’ when evaluated are not described in a way that includes the use of ‘thing’ or ‘object’. It remains a challenge for this view to spell out what it is for competent speakers to evaluate a situation: to visualize it? to describe it to themselves in some neutral language?

³⁷ This exposition is highly condensed. For instance, I pass over an important third horn in what is actually a trilemma: Thomasson considers the possibility that serious ontologists are intending to be using ‘thing’ in a ‘covering sense’: as a place-holder that applies just in case any sortal term (which is itself associated with application conditions) applies.

of France is bald’—seem to fail entirely to have truth-value, while others actually strike us as very like true or very like false. ‘The KoF has never held my hand’ strikes us as true, and ‘The KoF is hovering over my head’ as false. Yablo’s explanation for this difference is (roughly) as follows. All three of our sentences entail falsehoods, but only the last entails a sentence that is false ‘for reasons independent of’ the original sentence’s presupposition.³⁸ In particular, it entails that *somebody* is hovering over my head, which is false because *nobody* is hovering over my head; and this in turn is a fact independent of the existence of a KoF. Such a sentence ‘counts as false’. In contrast, the falsehoods entailed by the other two sentences are false for reasons that are not independent of the presupposition: for example, the falsehood that France has a king. Finally, what distinguishes those sentences that strike us as very like *true* from those that fail catastrophically is that the former have Strawsonian negations that count as false (and do not themselves count as false).

Yablo’s next step is to argue that what is *claimed* by a presuppositional sentence is the sum total of its implications whose truth-values are what they are for reasons independent of the truth-value of the presupposition. It follows that what is claimed by ‘The KoF is hovering over my head’ is false, and what is claimed by ‘The KoF has never held my hand’ is true. Moreover, the same can be said for sentences with abstract presuppositions. For instance, ‘The number of planets is odd’ strikes us as something like true, even assuming that nominalism is false. Perhaps this is because its assertoric content is a big disjunction about how many planets there are (either one or three or ...), that is true independently of whether there are numbers, and its negation entails a big disjunction that is false independently of whether there are numbers. The idea is that non-catastrophic presupposition failure applies to all kinds of number-involving sentences and not just those with numerical definite descriptions in primary position. If so, there is a class of sentences that presuppose the existence of numbers in a ‘fail safe’ fashion—what they *claim* will have the same truth-value whether numbers exist or not.

At this point, Yablo takes his cue from a certain kind of neoFregean argument for the existence of numbers. It begins with the uncontroversial premise that terms like ‘two’ contribute in a systematic way to the truth of the sentences in which they appear, and are functioning as names (or descriptions). The second premise is that all there is to such a term’s denoting is that it contributes in a systematic way to the truth-values of the sentences in which it appears. So ‘two’ must denote something; and for disquotational reasons this something

³⁸ The notion of *the reason a sentence is true* is tricky but key to the account. See especially footnotes 12 and 13 of Yablo’s paper and the text to which they are appended.

must be the number two. (We will be returning to this broadly neoFregean style of argument in section 6.)

Yablo's model causes trouble for the argument's second premise, because there can be empty terms that affect the truth-values of (at least) what is claimed by sentences in which they appear. However, the failure of 'the KoF' to denote will manifest itself in a distinctive pattern of semantic effects. So, there is a neoFregean idea in the neighborhood that could be salvaged, namely that whether a term denotes *is determined by* its sentence-level semantic effects. But where would this leave numerical terms? On Yablo's account, they have the same semantic effects whether they refer or not. The result is that 'the one factor that is available to determine whether numerical terms refer takes the same value whether they refer or not, then that factor is powerless to settle whether numerical terms refer ... and the matter is objectively unsettled' (p. 520). But if there is no fact of the matter about whether, for example, 'two' refers to anything, then there is no fact of the matter about whether the number two exists. We thus have a semantic model for how ontological existence questions like 'Are there numbers?' might have no determinate answer.

5 Epistemic Pessimism

Some disputes are misguided for purely epistemic reasons. For example:

Benjamin: The number of electrons in the universe is odd.

Thomas: No it's not—the number is even.

Here, the disputants are speaking the same language and making truth-evaluable claims in unambiguous terms. They simply disagree about what the world is like. Yet, there is a clear sense in which it would be misguided to argue over the facts in this case, since there is no way of making progress—no evidence can be provided either way.

In the current volume, Karen Bennett defends an epistemologically pessimistic view of this sort about some issues in metaphysics, focusing specifically on the debate over composition and the related debate over material constitution (i.e., the debate over the relationship between the statue and the clay).³⁹ Bennett contends that these debates have reached a permanent impasse—there are equally good arguments for and against each view, with nothing to break the tie. For example, one might try to argue for nihilism about composition on the grounds of simplicity—the view posits fewer material objects than

³⁹ See also (Dorr and Rosen 2003).

universalism, for example, and is to that extent preferable. Bennett grants the point, but insists that nihilism also requires a more complicated ideology, featuring a host of complex structural plural predicates. Hence, on at least one way of thinking about simplicity, the two views come out on a par.

Bennett points out that this type of critique is compatible both with deflationism and with robust realism about metaphysics. Her claim is that with regard to some metaphysical claims of the form ‘There are Fs,’ there is little justification for believing either that the claim is true or that it is false. This is consistent with denying truth-value to the sentence, as well as with holding that either the sentence or its negation is determinately true. However, it is not consistent with varieties of deflationism according to which the dispute is merely verbal and can be settled simply by eliminating differences in the way we are using our terms. (Bennett offers arguments against this type of deflationism, which she terms ‘semanticism’.)

Bennett is careful not to commit all of metaphysics to the realm of the unknowable. First, she emphasizes that some disputes in metaphysics may be quite tractable, even if others are not. And second, when she argues that a dispute has reached an impasse, her point is that we can go no further with standard metaphysical methodology. She leaves it open whether there may be some ‘broader theoretical grounds’ that might justify our choice between two theories on those issues. For example, when it comes to the dispute between mereological nihilism and universalism: if it could be argued on general theoretical grounds that ontological simplicity is a guide to truth while ideological simplicity is not, this might help break the impasse. But, as she says, that sort of argument ‘is a long way from the kind of highly localized fighting at close quarters’ that characterizes disputes in mainstream metaphysics (p. 74).

6 Easy Answers

Deflationists all agree that there is something wrong with mainstream metaphysics; but according to *mild deflationists*, this is not because the disputants do not really disagree, or because there is something deeply flawed about the claims they make. The problem, as they see it, is that mainstream metaphysics inflates the importance and difficulty of certain metaphysical questions.

In their contribution, Bob Hale and Crispin Wright discuss the meta-ontological implications of their *abstractionism* (sometimes called ‘neoFregeanism’) about mathematical entities. The view was conceived, in part, as an answer to Benacerraf’s problem about how we know the truths of mathematics, when

they seem to require the existence of abstract objects. Abstractionism is a variant of the Fregean idea that mathematical knowledge can be grounded in knowledge of logic coupled with stipulations of abstraction principles such as Hume's Principle:

The number of Fs = the number of Gs iff the Fs are equinumerous with the Gs.

(understood as implicit definitions of their ingredient abstraction operators, such as 'the number of'). Their claim is that knowledge of the left-hand sides of such equivalences is no more problematic than knowledge of the corresponding right-hand sides. If this is correct, there is something misguided about disputes about the existence of numbers—not because there is no single right answer, but because the right answer is not a metaphysically heavyweight claim and (properly understood) is easy to arrive at.

A mainstream metaphysician is likely to wonder how we can be sure there is no significant risk of reference failure: doesn't the success of the stipulation require that there antecedently exist numbers denoted by the singular terms on the left-hand side? For Hale and Wright, this worry gets things backwards: it would be an appropriate worry if abstraction principles were attempts to 'fix the reference' of, say, numerical terms in a manner in which it is often supposed that natural kind terms are fixed. But in Hale and Wright's view, abstraction principles put forward as implicit definitions work quite differently: 'properly viewed, the very stipulative equivalence of the two sides of an instance of an abstraction principle is enough to ensure both that it is not to be seen as proposed as part of a project of reference-fixing and that there *is no significant risk of reference failure*' (p. 207). On their view, for a singular term to refer, it is sufficient for it to systematically function as a syntactically singular term in a variety of true atomic sentences. And we can get to know the truth of a suitable such range of atomic sentences via the stipulative equivalences, given our ability to verify their right-hand sides.

Hale and Wright's view has generated significant interest in the literature, and a variety of recommendations have been made for how best to understand it. For example, Sider has argued that abstractionists are (or ought to be) quantifier variantists along the lines of Eli Hirsch (Sider 2007); while Katherine Hawley has argued that Sider is wrong about this (Hawley 2007). Meanwhile, Matti Eklund recommends that those impressed by the motivations of abstractionism should instead adopt maximalism (Eklund 2006). Hale and Wright's essay in this volume is intended in part to explain why they reject these proposals, and to articulate the sort of metaontology that does lie behind abstractionism.

As we have already mentioned, a good part of Eklund's contribution is concerned with interpreting Carnap's internal/external distinction. But after

tentatively deciding that Carnap is committed to quantifier variantism of the sort advocated by Hirsch, Eklund considers various problems for this view and suggests an alternative.

Here is the primary objection he raises (see his section 5). Recall the speakers of Lewish, who (according to the quantifier variantist) can truly say ‘There are three things over there’ while pointing at a region containing two simples. They are talking about the simples as well as the fusion. Suppose they go on to name the fusion ‘Bob’. Now, allegedly the Inwegian should grant that the relevant sentences in Lewish are true, presumably including the sentence ‘Bob is a fusion.’ But this requires the Inwegian to abandon the standard Tarskian principle:

(T) For a sentence of the form ‘F(a)’, of any language, to be true, the singular term ‘a’ must refer.

In order to accept this principle, and acknowledge that ‘Bob is a fusion’ is true in Lewish, the Inwegian would have to acknowledge that something is referred to by ‘Bob’. The only way out appears to be for the Inwegian to restrict this principle, or to deny that ‘Bob’ is really a singular term. (For some responses to this argument, see the contributions of Chalmers, pp. 121–3 and Hirsch, pp. 249–51).⁴⁰

Maximalism, which Eklund recommends as an alternative to quantifier variance, takes this form of argument and runs with it. In brief, the view is that, ‘For any kind of object K, where the [quantifier variantist] said that there was some language such that “Ks exist” comes out true (where “exists” expresses this language’s existence-like concept), the maximalist says that Ks exist’ (p. 153). If the quantifier variantist has good reason to accept that there are languages containing names that refer to fusions, then the quantifier variantist has good reason to accept that there are fusions. The result is a view according to which the dispute about fusions has a single correct answer, but the answer has been arrived at through semantic reflection rather than by the methods of mainstream metaphysics. Eklund goes on to argue that maximalism, while it does not entail a deflationary approach to ontology, can be combined with deflationism about ontology in a way that satisfies the motivations of the quantifier variantist.

Another contributor, Thomas Hofweber, also holds that there are cases in which genuine metaphysical disagreements can be answered by reflection on how language is used. But I will discuss Hofweber in section 8 among the reformers, because even in these cases he takes the answers to be in no way

⁴⁰ For more on this kind of argument, see also (Eklund 2006, 325–7), (Hawthorne 2006), and (Sider 2007, sec. 2.7).

trivial. And as we will see, his overall intention is to secure the status of ontology as a legitimate branch of inquiry with its own domain.

7 Defending Mainstream Metaphysics

We have encountered various arguments to the effect that metaphysical disputes are seriously misguided. In this section, we will focus on deflationist arguments that rest on the claim that in some metaphysical dispute, both sides are speaking the truth, or at least that they would both be speaking the truth if they were embedded in communities that speak just as they do. In their contributions, John Hawthorne and Ted Sider offer reasons for rejecting this kind of claim.

Suppose we grant that Lewis and van Inwagen mean something different by ‘There are only two things there,’ and thereby don’t really disagree. (The following objections will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the claim that a whole community of Lewish speakers would not be disagreeing with a whole community of Inwegian speakers.) In particular, when van Inwagen says ‘There are only two things there,’ he speaks the truth; and when Lewis says ‘There are three things there,’ he speaks the truth. Let us also grant that what van Inwagen means by ‘There are only two things there’ with his quantifiers unrestricted, is just what Lewis means by this sentence, with his quantifiers restricted to simples. If this is the case, it is easy to see why Lewis should grant that the sentence is true when uttered by van Inwagen.

But why should van Inwagen grant that ‘There are three objects there’ is true when uttered by Lewis? Is there a way to say, in Inwegian, what is meant by this sentence in Lewish? When Lewis says ‘Something is F,’ we might try to translate this into the Inwegian sentence ‘a simple or organism is F or some simples together are F*’, though this scheme requires there to be a polyadic non-distributive predicate like ‘F*’ to replace every monadic predicate in Lewish. Things get harder when Lewis says ‘There are three chairs at every table.’ (One may be tempted to bring in sets for the translation, but what about a mereologically Inwegian community that does not accept sentences that quantify over sets?) In his contribution to this volume, John Hawthorne employs examples like this to argue that, even if two sides of a metaphysical dispute are really speaking different languages, it will not follow that one of them can always express every intension that the other can.

Suppose Hawthorne is right, and there are Lewish claims with no intentionally equivalent translations into Inwegian. How much of a problem is this for the kinds of metaphysical deflationist I have been considering? Surely

it is consistent to hold (on the one hand) that the metaphysical disputants are essentially speaking different languages whose quantifiers mean different things, and (on the other) that one language can express sentences with truth-conditions that cannot be captured by the other. True, deflationists like Hirsch appeal to rough translations in order to get van Inwagen and Lewis to realize that they are not disagreeing with each other: ‘Look, van Inwagen only means (roughly) that there are no tables that are simples or organisms’; or ‘Look, Lewis only means that there are some simples arranged table-wise.’ But I take it that this is just a dialectical strategy. The availability of even coarse-grained translations is not by any means a logical requirement of this type of deflationism, which can still be motivated in a variety of ways.⁴¹ One might appeal to a direct intuition that the two communities are not really disagreeing, assuming that intuition exists. One might consider this kind of deflationism the best explanation for the sense of shallowness accompanying metaphysical disputes. Or one might consider it a more or less straightforward application of a general principle of semantic charity. These motivations do not require any kind of inter-translatability among the postulated idiolects.

But there is a problem with this response, which Matti Eklund raises at one point in his contribution.⁴² Assuming that Lewis can express all the intensions that van Inwagen can express, but not vice versa, does it not follow that Lewish is in some sense a superior language? If so, there is a loss of parity between the two ontologists (or the two communities), even if they are not disagreeing with each other with the sentences under discussion. For one thing, it would seem that a serious metaphysician like van Inwagen has a significant motivation to abandon his impoverished idiolect in favor of Lewish. But this causes trouble for the deflationist, in that it is hardly in the spirit of deflationism to grant that the Lewis is better off in his description of the world. For it follows that metaphysics still has an important mission: to identify the best language in which to take inventory of the furniture of reality.

⁴¹ Hirsch in particular emphasizes the availability of intensionally equivalent translations in order to motivate the claim that a dispute is verbal. I myself am more moved by the direct intuition that the two communities would be speaking the truth than I am by the idea that each is in a position (without an expansion of expressive power) to express every intension that the other can.

It is unclear to me whether Hirsch would agree that a dispute can be verbal without intertranslatability. (See his sections 3 and 4, and also his (2002), pp. 68–70.) His definition of a verbal dispute is this: ‘Given the correct view of linguistic interpretation, each party will agree that the other party speaks the truth in its own language’ (p. 239). Does this require that each party could all along express everything that the other party can? It might be that, for one party to acquire the proper tools for interpreting the other party, the first party must expand the expressive power of its language. But it seems to me that the languages need not be intertranslatable to begin with, or even capable of expressing the same ‘characters’ in Hirsch’s sense.

⁴² See the end of Eklund’s Section III. See also (Dorr 2005).

The point is delicate. First, it is still a significant concession to deflationism to grant that van Inwagen and Lewis are not really contradicting each other in the little dispute displayed above; or if they are, it is because at least one of them is misusing English words. And this concession would vindicate the traditional deflationist line that insofar as there is an interesting disagreement in the neighborhood, it is about how we should speak, and its resolution should have an entirely different flavor and methodology than the typical contemporary debate in metaphysics. Second, relative impoverishment of a language does not always amount to inferiority. Consider a world whose inhabitants speak Engless, which is just like English but lacks the word ‘nice’. Assume that ‘nice’ has no analysis in English, and indeed that it is impossible finitely to express the intension of ‘Everything is nice’ in Engless.⁴³ The result is that Engless is intensionally impoverished relative to English. But this is hardly a decisive reason to upgrade Engless with another word. Perhaps speakers of Engless would not care to add a word that means what ‘nice’ means. Additional expressive power is not always worth the complication engendered by a larger vocabulary. Thus, the deflationist can claim that Inwegian is not *significantly* impoverished relative to Lewish, and that there is no motive to abandon the first in favor of the second.

In response, a case can be made that the extra intensions that can be expressed in Lewish really are worth expressing. Consider the example of perdurantism and spinning disks, which Hawthorne raises in order to cause trouble for deflationists who assume intertranslatability. Take the sentence:

(D) Possibly there is a lonely homogenous stationary disk but no lonely homogenous spinning disk

as uttered by the endurantist. (As has been discussed at length in the literature, classical perdurantism does not distinguish lonely homogenous spinning disks from lonely homogenous stationary disks.) The endurantist takes this sentence to be true. Now, either this sentence is true in the mouth of the endurantist, or it is not. If it is not true, the endurantist is importantly wrong about something that the perdurantist is not wrong about, and the type of deflationism we are discussing is undermined. If it is true, there can be no intensionally equivalent translation of this claim into the perdurantist’s language that the perdurantist will accept. But this claim of the endurantist, if it is true, is just the sort of claim a metaphysician should want to make. So either one disputant is importantly wrong or we have a significant impoverishment on the part of the perdurantist language.

⁴³ Of course ‘nice’ is vague, but that’s irrelevant.

There are also compelling examples in which there is a worthy truth that only one side can express, even if the other side can express an *intensionally equivalent* truth. For instance, consider:

(T) Tables exist in virtue of the simples that make them up.

The deflationist should admit that (T) is true in Lewish and false in Inwegian. And presumably, if (T) expresses a fact in Lewish, it is an important fact about the structure of reality that metaphysicians should want to express. But how can one express in Inwegian the true claim that is expressed in Lewish? If all talk about tables is to be translated in terms of simples arranged tablewise, the resulting translation of (T) will be false if it preserves anything like the asymmetric relation of *existing in virtue of*. (See Hawthorne, pp. 225–7).

These cases lead to a related point not stressed by Hawthorne. Imagine a highly conciliatory perdurantist who grants that the endurantist speaks another idiolect and is moved by considerations of charity to treat the endurantist's claims as true. Presumably such a perdurantist may 'get the hang' of the endurantist's way of talking—he understands what the endurantist is saying. Moreover, the compositional abilities that accompany language learning would seem to ensure that the perdurantist understands claims like (D) and (T), even if these go beyond the expressive powers of his native language. But, intuitively, even the most conciliatory perdurantist who understands what (D) and (T) mean in the endurantist's idiolect will consider them to be false. He will not simply consider these to be true claims that he cannot express in his native language—in stark contrast with the native speaker of English who understands the English sentence 'Dinner was nice.'

Ted Sider rejects altogether the idea that Lewis and van Inwagen could mean something different with their quantifier expressions, on the grounds that meaning is not determined solely or even primarily by use. In his contribution, he argues that a crucial component of the semantic equation has been left out, namely *naturalness*. Using David Lewis's terminology, naturalness is an objective feature of the world that makes certain properties intrinsically more eligible to serve as the semantic values of our predicates. Focusing on properties, we can think about naturalness in terms of similarity:⁴⁴ *being blue* is more natural than *being grue* because blue things are similar in a way that grue things are not. The idea is that eligibility determines reference in cases where facts about language use underdetermine what is meant.

In particular, Sider argues that one of the candidate meanings for 'exists' is by far the most natural—call it '**existence**'. If its intrinsic eligibility

⁴⁴ Though this is not the only way to think about naturalness. See (Lewis 1986) for discussion.

outweighs the use of facts that differ between the Lewis and the Inwegians, then they mean the same thing with their quantifier expressions after all. Moreover, the question whether one of the candidate meanings fits ordinary usage when it comes to the English terms ‘exists’ hardly settles the debate. For if that candidate meaning is not **existence**, it may turn out that simply examining our own linguistic intuitions will lead us astray. The Sider–Lewis picture thus provides a very real sense in which ontological disputes can turn upon what the world is like.

So far we have been considering responses to the claim that Lewis and van Inwagen (or at least the Lewish and the Inwegians) are both speaking the truth. But can these points also be brought to bear against the kind of deflationist who claims that Lewis and van Inwagen are failing to make truth-evaluable claims at all? In some cases, they can. Suppose the latter brand of deflationism is motivated by the idea that Lewis and van Inwagen are best interpreted as employing the specialized quantifier of Ontologese; and that there are too many candidate meanings for the quantifier in this language, none of which is singled out by the relevant facts of use. In particular, the deflationist might point to the varied and conflicting intuitions among ontologists about whether it follows from there being grains arranged heapwise that there is a heap, and so on. As a result, it might be argued, the meaning of the quantifier in Ontologese is indeterminate. This line of reasoning would clearly be undermined if, as Sider claims, there is a significant element of semantic determination that is entirely independent of use, viz., naturalness.

Moreover, if Hawthorne is right, then a language whose quantifier has $\text{exists}_{\text{VANINWAGEN}}$ as its meaning is significantly impoverished relative to a language whose quantifier has $\text{exists}_{\text{LEWIS}}$ as its meaning. (That is, the latter allows its speakers to express a wider range of metaphysically important truths.) But then, assuming these are among the candidate meanings for the Ontologese quantifier, might not the ability to confer significant expressive power itself contribute to the use-independent eligibility of a candidate meaning?⁴⁵ If so, the deflationist line of reasoning just mentioned may also be undermined by the considerations adduced in Hawthorne’s paper.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ While the fact that one candidate confers greater significant expressive power is independent of facts about the actual use of the quantifier by metaphysicians, it is likely that the *reason* for preferring such a candidate meaning has to do with the practice of metaphysicians in using the quantifier. In particular, they typically aim to express as many metaphysically significant truths as possible.

⁴⁶ There is likely interdependence here: the naturalness of a candidate meaning may well contribute to its ability to confer significant expressive power.

8 Reforming Metaphysics

It is possible to acknowledge a significant role for metaphysics—one not confined to the realm of verbal disputes or trivialities—and yet call for a reform of mainstream methodology. Let us turn now to those robust realists who propose an alternative approach to the business of metaphysics, and of ontology in particular.

We have already encountered Sider's contention that the meaning of the quantifier is determined in part by the naturalness of candidate meanings, and not simply by facts of language use. But even assuming that there is a most natural meaning of the quantifier, it may still be that some less natural candidates do a *far* better job of matching use. After all, *fit* is still an important element on Lewis's account of how the reference relation selects a semantic value. In that case, our quantificational expressions may latch on to a non-natural feature of Reality, or will perhaps be indeterminate across several meanings after all.

But suppose ontologists were simply to *introduce* a quantifier-like expression, stipulated to pick out the most natural candidate meaning (if there is one)? With this expression '∃' in place, we can transform the Lewis/van Inwagen debate into one about whether $\exists x$ (x is a fusion); or relatedly, whether $\text{exists}_{\text{DL}}$ or $\text{exists}_{\text{PU}}$ is the meaning of '∃'. At least some of the arguments that Lewis and van Inwagen actually use in their dispute will arguably survive this transformation—though perhaps not those that appeal to intuitions about ordinary language. This sort of revisionist program for ontology has been urged by Cian Dorr (2005) and is provisionally defended by Sider in section 11 of his contribution to this volume.

A central slogan of mainstream metaphysics, that being is univocal, has been famously rejected by Martin Heidegger. In his essay, Kris McDaniel interprets and defends Heidegger's critique from a perspective grounded in analytic philosophy. He begins by disambiguating the slogan: it is one thing to claim that 'there is' and 'there exists' have only one sense, and quite another to claim that there is only one way to be or exist. Both claims are central to mainstream metaphysics; but McDaniel argues that Heidegger was right to reject them, and defends this rejection from van Inwagen (among others). The resulting view is not one of metaphysical deflationism, however. It claims that ontological disputes are genuine and deep, but one must be careful about which notion of being is at issue in them.

According to McDaniel, Heidegger recognizes the existence of a generic sense of 'being', but takes it to be *posterior* in meaning to the various more 'restricted' senses, corresponding to 'existenz', 'extantness', 'subsistence', etc.

Whatever is in the domain of these restricted senses is also in the domain of the generic sense of being. (To say this, of course, we must *employ* the generic sense; this is also what allows us to say that there are many ways of being.) A Quinean can account for restricted uses of the quantifier, but will understand these as *defined* in terms of restrictions on a primitive general sense of the quantifier. And if the Quinean accepts notions of naturalness or fundamentality applied to logical terms, she will (following Sider) argue that there is a single most natural meaning for the quantifier, corresponding to its most unrestricted use. On McDaniel's Heideggerian view, these assertions of priority are all reversed. The various restricted senses are semantically primitive, while the generic unrestricted sense is defined in terms of them. Moreover, the restricted senses are entirely natural and fundamental: they correspond to the true 'logical joints' that Sider discusses, whereas the unrestricted quantifier does not.

In this way, McDaniel's view also distinguishes itself from an egalitarian quantifier variance, according to which any possible meaning for a quantifier expression is as good—or natural—as any other. In the absence of egalitarianism, there remains the substantive issue of which among the various quantifier meanings are the metaphysically basic, joint-carving ones. Moreover, if more natural candidate meanings are more eligible, metaphysical disputes cannot simply be settled by attending to facts of ordinary use. This point does not require a single best Siderian quantifier meaning; it simply requires the falsehood of egalitarianism.

Another response construes all of this focus on quantifiers as misplaced. In his contribution, Kit Fine argues that 'the critical and distinctive aspect of ontological claims lies not in the use of the quantifier but in the appeal to a certain concept of what is real' (p. 171).⁴⁷

In ordinary talk, the fact that two people are married 'is reason enough to think that a couple is married', and likewise the fact that there are no goblins 'is reason enough to think that the number of goblins is 0 (and hence that there is a number)'. At the same time, we want to take seriously the ontologist who says 'There are no couples' and 'There are no numbers.' Fine rejects two popular approaches to differentiate ordinary from ontological claims. According to some serious ontologists, the ordinary claims are not strictly and literally true; but, Fine argues, 'if these are not strict and literal truths, then one is left with no idea either of what a strict and literal truth is or of what the strict and literal content of these claims might be' (p. 162). Fine also rejects the idea that we should treat the ordinary and ontological claims as employing quantifiers with

⁴⁷ For a rather different view on which quantifier commitments are distinct from ontological commitments see (Azzouni 2004), especially Chapter 3.

different senses. It may well be that there is an ordinary sense of ‘there are’ in which ‘there are no mereological sums’ is true, and an extended sense of ‘there are’ in which that sentence is false. But then there is no substantive question remaining about mereological sums except whether such an extension is consistent and practical (pp. 163–4). According to Fine, this does not show that there was no substantive dispute between the realist and the anti-realist about sums; instead, it shows that we have not correctly characterized their dispute: ‘What we wanted was a thick ontologically loaded sense of the quantifier over whose application the realist and antirealist could sensibly disagree’ (pp. 164–5).

Fine’s solution is to characterize genuine ontological disagreement as concerned not about what things there are, but about what things *exist*, what things are *real*, where these terms are predicates and express, roughly, the concept of being ‘a genuine constituent of the world’. There may be no way to define this concept without invoking other terms within a circle of metaphysical ideas; but Fine argues that we have a good enough intuitive working grasp of the concept to be optimistic about the work of ontologists.

G. E. Moore famously held that metaphysical debates over whether there is an external world are misguided, because we are more certain of the propositions under attack than we are of any statements that might be brought against them (1939). And as we saw in section 1, it is easy for many metaphysical disputes to seem misguided in just this way. For example, it is a truism that the finger is a part of the hand, so some objects have (proper) parts. And it is a platitude that some numbers are prime, so there are some numbers.

In his essay, Jonathan Schaffer takes a broadly Moorean line towards existence questions like ‘Are there numbers?’ and ‘Are there wholes?’ But unlike many philosophers who are moved by intuitions of triviality, Schaffer is no metaphysical deflationist. Instead, he takes his cue from a much older philosophical tradition that does not take existence questions to be central to metaphysics at all. He reminds us that Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is concerned not primarily with what exists, but with what things are *substances*—the most basic entities—and what things depend on them. For instance, Aristotle takes the existence of numbers for granted: but he is interested in whether they are transcendent, or whether they are ‘grounded in concreta’ (p. 348).

Schaffer goes on to develop an Aristotelian vision of metaphysics, according to which its primary concern is to identify the most fundamental entities, and to study the grounding relations that hold between those entities and the rest. In short, the pressing concern for metaphysics is not whether parts, numbers, and fictional entities exist, but how: are they basic entities or derivative? A large part of this task is to say which things are substances; that is, which things are prior to other things but not posterior to anything (pp. 351–5). But we must also

identify the intermediate grounding relations in order to chart the structure reality. In short, the task of metaphysics is to say what grounds what. Where Fine's vision of ontology has it dividing things into the real and the unreal, Schaffer's vision has it delineating the world's many layers and grounding relations.

A very different kind of reform is urged by Thomas Hofweber's contribution. He rejects the idea that ontology answers questions that can only be asked using metaphysical terms of art, like whether numbers **exist** or are **real** or **fundamental**. He also denies that we have pre-theoretical concepts corresponding to these terms. At the same time, Hofweber is concerned to show that ontology has its own legitimate domain of inquiry, and that the answers to its questions are not trivial. But this requires giving an account of why, for example, 'There are numbers'—as it is used in ontology—is not entailed by the mathematical truth that there are infinitely many prime numbers. (Likewise for 'There are properties' and the geographical truth that certain rock formations have properties in common.) On Hofweber's view, the claims of metaphysics do not conflict with the claims forthcoming from such other disciplines. Thus we should not claim that metaphysical truths trump those of mathematics or geography—or vice versa.

What, then, should we think of ontological existence claims? Hofweber argues that, in ordinary language, quantifiers are polysemous. Take the sentence 'There is someone we both admire.' On a *domain conditions* reading of the quantifier, a claim is being made about what the world contains, viz. an individual admired by both of us. On an *inferential role* reading of the quantifier, the claim being made is neutral about whether the object admired exists or not. Only in the later sense, for example, does this sentence follow from 'We both admire Sherlock'. (Indeed, it is part of the point of the second reading of the quantifier to mark such inferential relationships without existential commitment.) With this distinction in hand, Hofweber argues that there are two very different claims that can be made by uttering 'There are numbers.' And it is only on the inferential role reading that this sentence follows from the claims of mathematics; whereas the ontologist is interested in the domain conditions reading of this sentence.

So ontology has its own domain after all. But in at least some cases, its questions can be answered by careful reflection on the semantic function of the expressions employed in the relevant discourse. For example, Hofweber argues that expressions like 'two' in 'two plus two is four' are 'really determiners, expressions just like 'many' or 'some', that appear for cognitive reasons in a syntactic position contrary to their true type' (p. 281). Even 'the number two' as it is ordinarily used does not have the semantic function of 'picking out an entity'. As a result, although we can sensibly use an expression like 'the

number two' with the intention of denoting, we can be sure we will not succeed in denoting the number two, in the ordinary sense of 'the number two'. This kind of reflection doesn't tell us anything 'about how many things there are, whether they are abstract or concrete, etc. But it guarantees that whatever things there may be, none of them are numbers' (p. 286). Hofweber claims that a similar case can be made for the non-existence of propositions and properties, though not for that of Cartesian souls. Reflection on language is thus sometimes the proper methodology for answering questions in ontology. But even in such cases the answer is in no way trivial; and a substantive remaining task for ontology is to identify which ontological questions can be answered in this way, and which cannot.

9 Conclusion

This Introduction has been largely concerned with attacks on metaphysics, and what can be said in response to them. But it is worth stressing that metametaphysics has a constructive component as well. After all, optimistic metaphysicians should seek not only to deflect the barbs of deflationists, but also to reflect on the proper methodology for metaphysics. To undertake serious metaphysics, one ought to have at least a tacit position on the semantic relationship between ordinary and metaphysical claims, and of the weight that should be afforded to various criteria of theory selection. For this reason, these papers are important prolegomena to any future metaphysics.⁴⁸

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⁴⁸ Thanks to Ryan Wasserman, David Chalmers, Amie L. Thomasson, John Hawthorne, Stephen Yablo, and William Dunaway for comments and/or discussion.

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