

# Metaphysics and Ontology Without Myths



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Edited by

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and Massimo Dell'Utri

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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Metaphysics and ontology feature among the traditional and fundamental concerns of philosophers. Gaining a picture of the world—whether this may correspond precisely to its physical appearance, or whether there may be much more beyond—and the kind of objects that do exist out there, is for most philosophers (past and present) a preliminary aim upon which other theoretical activities depend. In fact, it seems that sound conclusions on topics relevant to ethics, aesthetics, psychology, common and scientific knowledge etc. can be achieved only after one has been given a picture of that sort.

This brief introduction is hardly the appropriate place to summarise the main results obtained over centuries of close philosophical scrutiny, since a great deal of water has flowed under the metaphysical and ontological bridges. What we would like to stress though is that from time to time the tribunal of history has managed to put its finger on some flawed conclusions. But “flawed” in which sense? And who is to tell?

To address the second question first, it goes without saying that a judgment of the plausibility of a metaphysical and ontological picture is inescapably linked to the particular historical and philosophical context in which the judgment itself has been raised, so that in principle we can obtain as many different judgments as there are contexts of this kind. Yet, relativistic worries aside, what one wants is an objective verdict on this and other matters—common sense requires it, and common sense presupposes that knowledge (metaphysical knowledge in our case) is not only possible but capable of making progress. And this is actually the case, to put sceptical worries aside too. It is hence from the point of view of the best metaphysical stance we are able from time to time to adopt (the one which inherits piecemeal the outcomes of a historically long discussion, separating the wheat from the chaff) that we can tell whether or not a given metaphysical and ontological picture is flawed. But, again, in which sense?

Metaphysical knowledge is a complex thing. However, the difficulty to say what it amounts to notwithstanding, the idea according to which both scientific knowledge and common sense have to play a role in it, even if not a necessarily crucial one, is by now quite widespread. One can therefore consider something to be a flaw in a metaphysical and ontological picture if

it clashes with both scientific knowledge and common sense. To take a time-worn example, who is willing nowadays to embrace wholeheartedly the abstract world of ideas and forms Plato envisaged all those centuries ago? Who would now subscribe to his own sharp distinction between appearance and reality, where the metaphysical and ontological privilege is conferred only to that which exists in the abstract world of perfect unchanging models of the things one can come across in the sphere of appearance (to the great detriment of the latter)? The picture he gave us is nothing but a *myth*—an account which is too far away from what common sense and science could accept, too detached from the usual ways of conducting a rational discussion. Pictures of this kind appear to be supported by nothing but *dogmas*, i.e. uncompromising principles taken as true without any previous critical analysis. And Plato has no shortage of company.

Think of essentialism in biology as regards the notion of species. There was a time in which scholars used to refer to species as eternal entities endowed with essential features. This conviction was to be unmasked as a myth by biological research, which pointed out how evolution—involved phenomena such as splitting, budding, fusing, etc.—makes the question of species a real problem for biology as well as philosophy.

Granted, cases like these which make room for talk of advances in metaphysics are indeed few. Most of the time what we encounter are different parties mutually opposing one another—implicitly accusing each other of offering “mythical” views, to continue with our metaphor. Take for example any metaphysical and ontological picture according to which there exists a fixed predefined structure of reality, a sort of bedrock made up of “things in themselves” and susceptible to a single overall and complete description. To some this may not seem to be what physics tells us we can have—physics, they maintain, tends to favour a view according to which reality has no predefined structure and is describable in many equivalent *correct* but *incompatible* ways without making any concession to relativism. But, is this true? Again, depending on the general philosophical stance we embrace, we may feel inclined to see (at least part of) a given picture as unjustified and think that it pertains less to metaphysics than myth.

Thus far we have not given a definition of either metaphysics or ontology. Of course, for reasons of space we cannot embark on a painstaking analysis of metaphysics, ontology and their relationship—you can find more on this in the following pages. But, interestingly enough, in an attempt to define them we may discover that there is room for talk of myth in this connection too. Take for instance the following definition:

“Ontology seeks to say what there is, whereas metaphysics to say what it is—what its fundamental nature is”. A statement along these lines is at the centre of the debate among philosophers of different bents, but it is far from uncontroversial that that statement amounts to a good definition, or that it represents a good basis on which to try one. Moreover, it could be somewhat startling to realize that there is little agreement on whether metaphysics is prior to ontology or vice versa, or that the very distinction between the two can be called into question. In cases like these one might say that if somebody keeps standing by his or her point in spite of the best counter-arguments available at the moment, then again what we get is something that pertains less to metaphysics than myth.

This and other issues revolving around metaphysics and ontology are tackled in the essays in this volume, which aim to approach a secular debate in fresh and original ways. Questions such as the possibility of a clear-cut distinction between metaphysics and ontology (Andrea Bottani), the legacy of one of the great fathers of contemporary ontology, Willard Van Orman Quine (Achille Varzi and Antonio Rainone), how to account for the success of novel predictions in science (Mario Alai), the nature of mathematical objects and the viability of nominalism (Matteo Plebani), the possibility of genuine metaphysical knowledge (Claudine Tiercelin), the principle of identity of indiscernibles and the role of intuitions (Roberto Casati and Giuliano Torrengo), the character of and the puzzles posed by social reality (Maurizio Ferraris, Richard Davies, Petar Bojanic, Stefano Vaselli) are here addressed lucidly and probed deeply, providing the necessary tools for clearing the field of unpalatable metaphysical and ontological items.

Sassari (Italy), March 3, 2014

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# CHAPTER ONE

## THE MYTH OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ONTOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS

ANDREA BOTTANI

### 1. Ontology and metaphysics

It is a widely shared idea that no systematic account of the most fundamental aspects of reality can be complete unless it includes both an account of what things there are (*an sit*) and an account of their fundamental nature (*quid sit*). What Aristotle originally called “first philosophy”, whatever it may be, can be nothing but a complex of these two components. Here are some ways of stating the idea:

One very important part of metaphysics has to do with what there is, with what exists. This part of metaphysics is called ontology. Ontology, that is, is that part of metaphysics that deals with metaphysical sentences of the form “An X exists”, and “There are Y’s” (van Inwagen 1998, 16).

According to a certain, familiar way of dividing up the business of philosophy, [...] ontology is concerned with the question of what there is (a task that is often identified with that of drafting a “complete inventory” of the universe) whereas metaphysics is concerned with the question of what it is (i.e., with the task of specifying the “ultimate nature” of the items included in the inventory) (Varzi 2009, 1).

We might wonder whether there could be anything to metaphysics other than ontology, and indeed ontology does seem to be a large part of the metaphysical enterprise. But metaphysics is concerned not just with what is, but also with the way that it is. Objects do not merely exist: they have certain features. [...] Simply to list the things that are [...] does not capture the way they are (Le Poidevin 2009, xix).

Those who distinguish in this way the account of what there is from the account of what it is, ordinarily conceive of the two accounts as

somehow independent, in the twofold sense that neither entails the other and that it is possible to give at least one of them without having already given the other. But they disagree as to which has priority over the other. Some think that the former comes first and the latter later (one can only start saying what there is, only later one can wonder what it is), others think that it is the latter that “comes first” and the former later (one can only start asking *in abstracto* what things might be, only later one can wonder which of them there really are). Those who accept the distinction also diverge over terminology, for the word “metaphysics” has sometimes been used to name the theory of what there is (Ingarden 1964, who calls “ontology” the theory of what it is), sometimes the theory of what it is (Varzi 2009, who calls “ontology” the theory of what there is—see above) and sometimes a general account that includes both (van Inwagen 1998, Le Poidevin 2009, see above). I shall say nothing of this lexical muddle here, except that I shall conform to Varzi’s usage and call “ontology” the theory of what there is and “metaphysics” the theory of what it is.<sup>1</sup>

The distinction between ontology and metaphysics is closely related to Quine’s distinction between ontology and ideology of a language or theory in general (Quine 1951, 1983). According to Quine, the ontology of a theory is the set of things that the theory assumes as existing, while its ideology is the set of properties that can be expressed by its predicates. So one might simply treat metaphysics as the ideology of first philosophy. But metaphysics is ordinarily conceived of as a theory of *what* things are (viz. of their ultimate nature), and in ideology there is much more than this (viz. a theory of *how* they are). If one is willing to distinguish *what* something is from *how* it is, metaphysics is rather a proper part of the ideology of first philosophy.

In what follows, I shall argue that the distinction between ontology and metaphysics is flawed. It is just a myth and should be given up. As I shall show, this necessarily follows from the following three assumptions: 1) ontology is a systematic taxonomy of what fundamentally exists, not a disordered list of existential generalizations; 2) no apparent disagreement about the nature of the entities belonging to some taxonomical category counts as a real disagreement about the ultimate nature of something, provided that there is total agreement about the nature of what belongs to the highest categories, those that restrict no other category; 3) every disagreement about the nature of what belongs to the highest categories is *eo ipso* a disagreement about what there is. Since none of 1)-3) is obviously true, I shall separately argue for each of them (not in this order). The rejection of the distinction of ontology and metaphysics has some bearing on the very idea of ontology. One important consequence is that it

is only in a very weak sense that ontology says what there is. Ontology reorganizes ontological commitments that come from common sense and sciences. It cannot start without an external preliminary input of independently established existential commitments.

## 2. What there is, what it is and how it is

There are natural reasons to be *prima facie* suspicious of the distinction. One is that it can make no sense to distinguish within physics (or biology, or set theory) a discourse aimed at saying what physical (or biological or set-theoretical) objects exist from another discourse aimed at saying what they are. Generally, assumptions of both types occur fairly mixed in the same discourse, and very often they are embedded in the meaning of the same sentences. Why on earth should first philosophy be regarded as an exception?

But this line of attack misinterprets the distinction. In Quine's approach, ideology and ontology are not conceived of as two distinct discourses, theories or accounts, but rather as two different aspects of one and the same discourse, theory or account. Ontology and metaphysics should be charitably interpreted in the same way, as different kinds of information mixed up in the same discourse, theory or account—like different colour threads in the same cloth. But the two kinds of information must be logically independent, however mixed up in the same discourse, otherwise the distinction would collapse. Can information of one kind remain unchanged even when information of the other kind evolves?

Those who distinguish ontology and metaphysics ordinarily think that people can agree on what there is even when they disagree on its ultimate nature (see again Varzi 2009, Le Poidevin 2009, quoted above). If so, one can stick to a fixed theory of what exists while changing one's ideas on its ultimate nature. And one can meaningfully assert that something exists while ignoring what it is that she is asserting the existence of. But this is strange: how could the assertion that entities of a certain kind exist have any meaning in the absence of any information about what these entities are?

The worry can perhaps be kept under control by embracing a direct theory of reference. If Kripke 1980 is right, one can succeed in referring to tigers even if one knows *nothing* about tigers (this is the case if someone who has never seen a tiger and has never heard anybody naming tigers hears for the first time an utterance of “in India there are tigers” and asks “what are tigers?”). If one is able to refer to tigers, one can utter

meaningfully the sentence “tigers exist”. Therefore, *a fortiori*, the bare idea that tigers exist entails or presupposes nothing about what tigers are.

This might seem to miss the point. If one knows nothing at all about tigers, indeed, one can hardly express or understand something informative by saying or hearing that tigers exists, even if she succeeds in saying or hearing that. And ontology, whatever it may be, has to convey information about what there is. Therefore, nothing ontologically informative can be said by uttering the sentence “tigers exist” unless one knows at least something about tigers. But one might know something about tigers, it may be suggested, without knowing *what* they are. If so, one can tell something ontologically informative by saying that tigers exist even if one is ignorant of *what* are tigers, provided one knows at least something about *how* tigers look.

We started with a twofold distinction between what there is and what it is. Now we have a threefold distinction between what there is, how it is and what it is, the idea being that we must distinguish between how something is and what it is in order to legitimate the distinction between what there is and what it is. But the distinction between *what* something is and *how* it is can itself be put in question. The notion of what something is is traditionally associated with the idea that objects have a nature, and what they are consists in the nature they have. Very often, natures are treated as essences and conceived of as common to all things of the same kind (for example, to all tigers). But many properties of objects do not depend on their nature and information about them is merely about *how* objects are, not about *what* they are. So, “tigers are animals” says *what* are tigers, but “tigers are striped” merely says *how* they are. It is a widely shared idea that natures can be explained in terms of conditions of identity specifying what it is for objects of some sort to be the same (a trite example concerning sets treats them as identical just in case they have the same members, another concerning material objects treats them as identical just in case they have the same parts).<sup>2</sup>

Anti-essentialist philosophers deny that common nouns (either sortal terms like “animal” or mass nouns like “gold”) have any special role in specifying the nature of what exists. They think that there are plenty of objects that do not fall within the extension of any common nouns—the material contents of certain spacetime regions can easily be, for example, partly gold and partly water, and so neither (entirely) gold nor (entirely) water. And they may think that even uniformly golden contents of spacetime regions are not essentially gold. But the emphasis on identity criteria may still be retained, in accordance with the Quinean dictum “no entity without identity”. Material objects of any sort can be thought to be

the same just in case the spacetime regions they occupy are the same. So we may tentatively make the following assumption: to tell what are the members of some category F (for example horses, or even material objects) amounts to telling what it is for members of F to be the same. So, the question becomes: can one say that the Fs exist without entailing or presupposing what it is for things that are F to be the same?

As a matter of fact, this is often the case. For example, philosophers and even ordinary people are perfectly able to refer to persons and say that persons exist while wondering what it is to be the same person; and they can agree that persons exist while radically disagreeing on what it is to be the same person. Therefore, it is perfectly possible to say that something exists without saying what it is. But then, it might be argued, it is possible to do ontology without doing metaphysics. For, if there are sentences saying that some things exist without saying or presupposing what they are, then there are lists of such sentences. And what might ontology be if not a list of that kind? Therefore, one may conclude, ontology is one thing, metaphysics quite another.

### 3. Ontology and taxonomy

The reason why I think that this conclusion should be resisted is precisely that I do not believe that ontology can be simply treated as a list of existential generalizations. Consider Borges 1952, where “a certain Chinese Encyclopedia” is described in which it is written that animals are divided into:

1. those that belong to the Emperor,
2. embalmed ones,
3. those that are trained,
4. suckling pigs,
5. mermaids,
6. fabulous ones,
7. stray dogs,
8. those included in the present classification,
9. those that tremble as if they were mad,
10. innumerable ones,
11. those drawn with a very fine camelhair brush,
12. others,
13. those that have just broken a flower vase,
14. those that from a long way off look like flies.

This “chaotic enumeration” is nothing but a list of existential generalizations saying that animals of each of the fourteen listed varieties exist. But this is not an ontology, not even a “regional ontology” for the zoological realm. Whatever it may be, ontology is a systematic taxonomy of what exists (either a systematic taxonomy of whatever exists or of what exists in a specific region of the real, such as the zoological realm). A systematic taxonomy must satisfy certain formal constraints, among which completeness (nothing should be left outside all categories), disjointness (nothing should be put in different categories unless one category is included in the other, as the category of horses is included in the category of animals) and uniformity (no ontological category is admissible unless the entities belonging to it have the same conditions of identity).

Could a systematic classification of what exists fail to specify what the entities belonging to the envisaged categories are? If an ontological taxonomy could incorporate one or more categories of entities for which no conditions of identity are given, it should in principle be possible to disagree about the ultimate nature of the entities belonging to those categories (their conditions of identity) while leaving unchanged the system of categories itself, viz. ontology.

For some categories of entities—for example, numbers—this is commonly held to be the case. Suppose two philosophers agree that numbers exist, believe that there is an ontological category to which all numbers belong, and never disagree about the existence of any categories of things. Certainly, they accept the same ontology, but this does not seem to prevent them from disagreeing about what numbers are. Philosopher A may see numbers as abstract individuals encoding the properties that follow from certain axioms (Zalta 1999), while philosopher B sees them as cumulative sets, conceived of either *à la* Zermelo or *à la* von Neumann. Therefore, one might conclude, an ontology committed to numbers seems to be fairly compatible with divergent theories of their ultimate nature (the point can be found stated in Varzi 2009).

There are reasons to resist this conclusion, however, for it is far from clear that A and B really disagree about the nature of *something*. Consider that, by hypothesis, A and B completely agree about what categories of things there are. So they agree, in particular, that there are both abstract entities and sets, and agree that numbers are nothing over and above entities of these categories. If this is so, however, they can disagree about the ultimate nature of something only if they disagree about the ultimate nature of abstract entities or of sets (or both). Can they disagree, say, about the nature of sets? Suppose that A says that sets are entities of a kind *F* and B says that sets are entities of a kind *G*. Again, it would seem natural to

conclude that A and B disagree about the nature of sets. But remember that A and B never disagree about the existence of some category of things, so they agree that both *Fs* and *Gs* exist and agree that sets are nothing over and above the *Fs* and the *Gs*. Therefore, disagreeing about the nature of something is for them tantamount as disagreeing about the nature of either *Fs* or *Gs* (or both). And we can ask now about *Fs* and *Gs* the same question we asked before about sets: can A and B disagree about their nature? In that direction, we can ascend up to the highest categories (those that restrict no other category), without being able to decide whether A and B really disagree or not about the nature of something.

The moral is that, as long as there is total agreement on what categories of things exist, no apparent disagreement about the nature of the entities belonging to some category can count as a real disagreement about the nature of something, provided that there is total agreement about the nature of the entities belonging to the highest taxonomical level. Commitments to the ultimate nature of what exists can only be localized at the highest taxonomical level.

#### 4. Semantical vs. metaphysical divergence

One may be tempted to resist this conclusion by arguing along the following lines. Suppose that A and B agree that *F* and *G* are the highest categories (so that everything is either an *F* or a *G*), and agree about the ultimate nature of both *Fs* and *Gs*, but disagree as to which highest category numbers belong (it may be that A believes that numbers are abstract entities and abstract entities are *Fs*, while B believes that numbers are sets and sets are *Gs*). If any commitment to the ultimate nature of what exists were localized at the highest taxonomical level, as I said, then A and B would agree about the ultimate nature of everything. And, of course, A and B never disagree about the existence of anything, for by hypothesis they share one and the same ontology. So, what do they disagree about, if they disagree at all? It would be natural to answer: they disagree *about numbers*, about what *they* are, about *their* ultimate nature! If there were nothing about whose nature they disagree, in no way would A and B be disagreeing, but this is absurd.

I see that there is a disagreement here, and I see that the disagreement has to do with numbers. It has to do with numbers, however, in no more than two ways. In the first place, A and B disagree about the reference of numerical expressions like “1”, “2” and so on (A believes that they refer to abstract entities satisfying certain axioms, while B believes that they refer to sets) and about the extension of the predicate “number” (A believes that

the extension of “number” is a set of abstract entities, while B believes that it is a set of sets). To the extent that the disagreement is about the reference of some words, it is semantic and has nothing metaphysical to it. It does not concern the ultimate nature of things, but merely the relations between words and things.

The disagreement on ordinary objects between an orthodox perdurantism *à la* Lewis and a stage view *à la* Sider (see Lewis 1986, Sider 2001) can be regarded as a similar case. Lewis and Sider agree that both worms and stages exist, and substantially agree about their nature. But they disagree about ordinary objects (for example, cats). According to Lewis, cats are spatiotemporal worms while according to Sider they are instantaneous stages. Again, the disagreement seems to be semantic rather than metaphysical. It concerns the extension of ordinary predicates like “cat” and the reference of ordinary names like “Felix”—that is, how the words of our everyday language can best be mapped onto the fixed items, conceived of in the same way, of a shared ontology.

So, in the first place, the disagreement between A and B is semantic. But it would be strange if it were *only* semantic, just as it would be strange if the disagreement between Lewis and Sider about ordinary objects were *only* semantic. For, provided we succeed in referring to something by uttering such words as “3” or “4” and such words as “Felix” or “Bobby”, we can ask what *these entities* are and disagree as to the correct way to answer that question. And this disagreement seems to be metaphysical rather than semantic. Is it?

I think it is not semantic, but neither is it metaphysical. Suppose two people (say, A and B) are at some common point in a labyrinth and completely agree about the overall structure of the labyrinth. They have, say, a map and both believe that every part of the map represents a real part of the labyrinth. And both believe that the map fits fairly well the real structure of the labyrinth. In particular, they agree that the labyrinth is circular and can be divided, say, into three kinds of regions: the inner regions (up to 1/3 radius from the centre), the intermediate regions (up to 2/3 radius from the inner regions) and the external regions (up to the circumference from the intermediate regions). Therefore, so far as the labyrinth is concerned, A and B have the same ontology and the same metaphysics, the same theory of what there is and the same theory of what it is. But they are completely ignorant of *where* they are located inside the labyrinth. So they can look around themselves, refer to the path where they find themselves and disagree as to what sort of region *it* is. A says that *it* is an inner region while B says that *it* is an intermediate region. The disagreement is neither about the existence of some region of the labyrinth

nor about its nature. The map clearly represents every existing region, as well as its (inner, intermediate or external) “nature”. And both A and B believe that the map is fairly correct. But A and B give different reconstructions of the points at which their perspectival experience of the labyrinth touches the non-perspectival overall image of it.<sup>3</sup>

So, the point remains. If A and B share a common ontology, and agree about the ultimate nature of what belongs to the highest categories, they cannot disagree about the ultimate nature of anything. They can indeed diverge as to how their perspectival knowledge of the world and their perspectival speech about it fits a shared non-perspectival overall image of the world, but they can only agree about the ultimate nature of everything (viz. they can only share one and the same metaphysics). Commitments to the ultimate nature of what exists can only be localized at the highest taxonomical level.

If this is true, different people can accept the same ontology but different metaphysics in no more than one case: when they agree about what categories of things there are but disagree about the ultimate nature of what belongs to the highest categories. But it is far from clear that this can be the case. Suppose *F* and *G* are the highest categories of some ontological taxonomy. Can different people agree on what there is but diverge on what *Fs* and *Gs* are? Or equivalently, can one change one’s theory of what either *Fs* or *Gs* are while leaving unaltered one’s ideas about what there is?

I strongly doubt it. One might change one’s theory of what *Fs* and *Gs* are in two different ways. First, one can discover that *F* and *G* have different extensions from what was previously thought (some *Gs* are nothing over and above *Fs*, or vice versa); second, one can leave *F*’s and *G*’s extensions unaltered while discovering that *Gs* (or *Fs*, or both) have criteria of identity different from what was previously thought. In both cases, it seems hardly believable that nothing has changed in the theory of what there is. On the one hand, to move entities from one category to another amounts to reducing entities of one category to entities of another. Where there were two entities, now there is just one. How might one’s ontological commitments have remained unchanged? On the other hand, if the conditions that *Fs* must satisfy in order to be identical change, it cannot be that the set of *Fs* remains the same. The moral to be drawn is that the theory of what there is pre-empts the theory of what it is. Unless it is a “chaotic enumeration” in Borges’ style, ontology cannot be separated from metaphysics.

## 5. Ontology as a “sphere of inquiry”?

One possible reaction to this conclusion may be to bite the bullet and embrace the idea that ontology cannot be asked to be anything more than a “chaotic enumeration” in Borges’ style. Systematic ontology and metaphysics, it might be observed, are indeed two faces of the same coin. But pure ontology is chaotic and metaphysically innocent. It cannot be asked for an “inventory” or a “systematic classification” of what there is, but just for a possibly incomplete and possibly redundant list of ontological commitments that it seems reasonable to accept.

From this point of view, Varzi has recently contrasted ontology as a theory with ontology as a sphere of inquiry. Conceived of as a theory, ontology is a systematic inventory of all that there is. Conceived of as a sphere of inquiry, ontology is concerned with what there is in a completely non-systematic perspective, its only task being the assertion or denial of a disordered mass of existential sentences, like those that typically figure in a chaotic enumeration. Inasmuch as two philosophers assert and deny exactly the same sentences of the list, they accept the same ontology, regardless of whether they embrace or not the same theory of the ultimate nature of what they are asserting or denying the existence of. Suppose, for example, that both “statues exist” and “lumps of matter exist” are contained in the list. If two philosophers assert both sentences but one thinks that statues are identical with lumps of matter while the other does not, their disagreement does not concern what there is, but only what it is, so there is nothing ontological to it, provided that ontology is conceived of as a “sphere of inquiry”.

The idea of ontology as a sphere of inquiry is far from clear. The word “ontology”, as it is currently used, does not seem to denote anything like what is currently called “a sphere of inquiry”. Spheres of inquiry are normally conceived of as sets of questions, problems or issues rather than sets of assertions, while ontology, as it is currently conceived of, can only consist of assertions. More importantly, ontology is not only aimed at producing existential assertions, but also at supporting them by arguments. And very often arguments for the existence of some sort of things are grounded in some idea of what things of that sort are (for example: numbers exist because they are sets, and sets exist).

Finally, the idea that an absolute boundary can be traced between *an sit* assertions and *quid sit* assertions might come out to be ultimately untenable. We said before that, if two philosophers A and B accept exactly the same list of existential generalizations, among which “statues exist” and “lumps of matter exist”, but one thinks that statues are lumps of matter

while the other does not, their disagreement is purely metaphysical, in no way ontological. But suppose one adds to the list of existential sentences jointly accepted by A and B a sentence like “entities that occupy the same place as a statue at some time and pre-exist that statue exist”. If A and B disagree about the identity of statues with lumps of matter, they must also disagree about the truth of the added sentence, so they would no longer accept the same list of existential sentences. A metaphysical disagreement has now become ontological, even though it seems to have exactly the same content as before.

The example can be generalized, the conclusion being that every metaphysical disagreement can be turned into an ontological disagreement merely by enlarging the chaotic list of existential generalizations that is under ontological analysis. In the same way, every ontological disagreement can be turned into a metaphysical disagreement simply by restricting the list of existential generalizations that is under ontological analysis. Regardless of whether the idea of ontology as a sphere of inquiry is acceptable or not, it does not succeed in making ontology independent from metaphysics.

## 6. Ontology and chaotic enumerations

One may wonder what might be the role of chaotic enumerations in ontology, if any. Chaotic enumerations can be neither a part of ontology nor a product of ontological reflection. It is not the aim of ontology to randomly collect ontological commitments and put them in a disordered list. Neither can ontology aim at assigning a truth-value to the items of the chaotic list. There can be no sort of discourse in which one can decide whether it is true or not that there are true friends, blue azaleas, molecules, desires, and bacteria of the species *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*.

In a sense, however, chaotic enumerations do indeed play a crucial, indispensable role for the rise of a systematic theory of what there is. One key point is that to do ontology is not to begin *ex nihilo* the game of saying what there is. We already play this game in ordinary language and science—indeed in anything we say. If we list in whatever order some of the things we are (pre-philosophically) committed to in any of the different domains that are for us of some interest, we have a chaotic enumeration. How can the game of saying what there is be carried over in ontology? Certainly not by adding new items to the chaotic list, which could only increase the chaos. Ontological reflection begins when one wonders how to turn a chaotic enumeration into a systematic theory of what there is, viz. how to bring order, coherence, unity, precision and completeness into a

confused congeries of disconnected existential commitments. Ontology essentially aims to systematize our pre-philosophical heterogeneous ontological commitments, not to add new “internal” commitments to the old “external” ones. But the only way one can turn a list of heterogeneous ontological commitments into a systematic taxonomy of what exists consists in saying what the entities mentioned in the list are, *viz.* what is their ultimate nature. So, to build a systematic ontology amounts to imposing a metaphysics on a chaotic list of ontological commitments. The outcome of this process is something that is at once a metaphysics and an ontology—both a systematic theory of what there is and a theory of its ultimate nature.

One can find mixed together in a chaotic enumeration existential generalizations belonging to extremely heterogeneous discourses speaking of completely different domains of objects (quarks, rhododendrons, chairs, waves, colours, black holes, pains, fields, numbers, true friends and so on). The only way to unify all these ontological commitments in an ontological taxonomy is to ascend to the highest levels of generality. This is why the whole process is oriented to the individuation and characterization of the highest categories that all the other categories restrict (they may reduce to just one, for example, tropes). For any entity, indeed, the question “what is it?” is in the last analysis answered by reference to the highest category it belongs to.

This shows that it is only in a very weak and derivative sense that ontology can be said to specify what there is. None of the ontological commitments one can find in ontology are entirely grounded in ontology itself, for in a sense ontology can only reorganize ontological commitments that come from outside (from the sciences and from common sense). By saying what are the entities to which we are committed outside ontology, one can turn a great number of pre-philosophical commitments into a smallest number of wider commitments internal to ontology. An example is: 1) there are trees, houses and elementary particles; 2) trees, houses and elementary particles are bundles of universals; 3) there are bundles of universals. Only 2) and 3) are properly philosophical statements, 3) is grounded in 1) and 2), but 2) says nothing about what exists.

This explains why the items of a chaotic enumeration usually disappear in an ontological taxonomy, and also explains why to leave no place for them in a taxonomy does not amount to deny their existence (for example, the existence of trees and houses). It may indeed be sometimes the case that some external ontological commitments are not subsumed under some wider commitments in an ontological taxonomy, but just given up (which

is the case, for example, of the commitment to chairs and tables in van Inwagen's theory of what there is).<sup>4</sup> The decision to give up in that way some of the entities we are ordinarily committed to, however, cannot be grounded on empirical bases, but only on the impossibility of putting anything of that kind into any of the admissible categories (a claim that can only be justified by a metaphysical analysis of the ultimate nature of the entities of that kind).

This cannot be the rule, however, for a systematic taxonomy according to which a tiny minority exists of what is thought to be existent by ordinary people and scientists would be hardly acceptable. An ontological taxonomy, indeed, is evaluable in terms of its efficacy in giving a structure, order and unity to a huge number of heterogeneous existential commitments widely acceptable in ordinary language and sciences. Here is the general idea in Lewis' words:

One comes to philosophy already endowed with a stock of opinions. It is not the business of philosophy either to undermine or to justify these pre-existing opinions to any great extent but only to try to think of ways of expanding them into an orderly system. A metaphysician's analysis of mind is an attempt of systematizing our opinions about mind. It succeeds to the extent that 1) it is systematic; and 2) respects those of our pre-philosophical opinions to which we are firmly attached [...]. So it is throughout metaphysics and so it is with my doctrine about possible worlds (Lewis 1973, 88; see also Rescher 1997).

This idea of first philosophy as having primarily to do with systematization might seem to entail a descriptive conception of first philosophy, one according to which first philosophy aims to represent the world as we conceptualize it rather than as it is in itself. Here is why this is not the case. The more general is a category, the less its characterization depends on the particular nature of the entities we are actually committed to. So, the highest categories, those that restrict no other category, are purportedly such that anything possible belongs to them, regardless of its specific nature and kind. Therefore, first philosophy is not pre-empted by the analysis of our current ontological commitments. The chaotic set of the existential generalizations we pre-philosophically accept can be systematized in various and divergent ways, for it is compatible with a number of different theories of the ultimate nature of what we are committed to. The general point remains: since there is no way to do ontology without doing metaphysics and vice versa, “ontology” and “metaphysics” are different ways of naming the same discourse account or theory, just as “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” are different ways of naming

the same planet. The distinction is flawed and should be given up. It is just a myth.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In order to refer to a general account that includes both theories, I shall use the Aristotelian expression “First philosophy”. I do not believe that this is the best lexical choice in general. As far as I can see, however, it is the most suitable in the present context.

<sup>2</sup> The very idea of a criterion of identity goes back to Frege 1884, § 62.

<sup>3</sup> There is some analogy with Perry’s famous example of the “messy shopper” (Perry 1979). When the messy shopper discovers that it is himself who is the messy shopper, the discovery is not about the supermarket, its structure and what exists in it, but rather about the way in which a first person perspectival experience is related to a non-perspectival overall map of the supermarket.

<sup>4</sup> See van Inwagen 1990.

# CHAPTER TWO

## REALISM IN THE DESERT

### ACHILLE C. VARZI

#### 1. The Desert

The desert, of course, is Quine's: the simple world of spatiotemporal sand he advocated in his early ontological writings, beginning with "On What There Is".<sup>1</sup> Quine spoke of it as a sober alternative to the McX's and Wyman's overpopulated universe, which is to say Meinong's jungle,<sup>2</sup> with all of its "rank luxuriance" of extraordinary creatures: unactualized *possibilia*, ideas in the mind, *abstracta*, things that do not quite exist in the good old sense of the term but that ought nonetheless to enjoy some form of being in order for what we say to be meaningful. Forget all that, said Quine. Perhaps a Fregean therapy of individual concepts might help us navigate through it all, but *à quoi bon?* We'd do much better simply to clear the slum and be done with it. Welcome to the desert.

I like the desert. It may not be beautiful, but at least it doesn't offend our aesthetic sense. It may not be comfortable, but at least it is safe. It is dry, clean, simple, quiet. It is as light as a place could be. And it is metaphysically extensional: in the desert, what you see is what you get. It is not, however, on the desert/jungle opposition that I wish to focus here. Everybody has thought about it at length and has already made up their mind one way or the other, and I have learned from experience that it is very hard to produce arguments against the jungle people. It is like arguing against dialetheists: you can't win. You can only hope that your opponent will get tired of pretending to be serious about the content of their pronouncements. More importantly, I do not intend to dwell upon the contrast between the desert and the jungle because that contrast arises mainly—if not entirely—at the level of ontology, understood rather strictly as the doctrine of what there is. It's about ontological commitments, and more specifically about Plato's beard, Occam's razor, and whether the blade of the razor is sharp enough to do a good shaving job. Those are all

important issues, and for a long time the debate on realism has in fact focused on them. But there is a different side to the debate, one that pertains to issues in the domain of genuine metaphysics, as opposed to mere ontology, and that in my opinion bites even deeper. That's the side I intend to focus on.

I am appealing, here, to a certain distinction between ontology and metaphysics that I have tried to articulate and defend elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> I am aware of its limits and I know it is controversial, but in the present context it is not crucial to endorse it wholeheartedly. I'm just using it to set the stage. Intuitively, the idea is that ontology is concerned with the question of what there is, i.e., what entities exist, whereas metaphysics seeks to explain, of those entities, what they are and how they are organized—their nature, how they relate to one another, what laws govern them, and so on. Thus, if you like C.D. Broad's popular metaphor,<sup>4</sup> ontology is concerned with the task of drawing up a complete “inventory” of the world, of specifying its content, whereas metaphysics is concerned with the structure of that inventory, its internal organization, its foundations if you like. Or again, in the terminology of the scholastic tradition, ontology is concerned with *an sit* questions, whereas metaphysics deals primarily with *quid sit* questions. This distinction is, I think, intuitive and helpful—and relatively uncontroversial. It becomes controversial if you match it (as I would) with the claim that ontology comes first, i.e., that it is in some sense *prior* to metaphysics: one must first of all figure out what things exist or might exist; then one can attend to the further question of what they are, specify their nature, speculate on those features that make each thing the thing it is.<sup>5</sup> But this priority claim is not required for the distinction to make sense, and I don't need to rely on it. I only want to say that, just as we are bound to face questions of realism at the ontological level, in the good old sense of the term, so we are facing questions of realism at the metaphysical level, in the sense I have just explained: realism about the structure of the world, not about its content. And in this connection the opposition is not between Quine and Meinong—between the desert and the jungle. It is between Quine and Aristotle, between the desert and the garden, so to speak—and I mean a natural garden, like the Garden of Eden, with its tidily organized varieties of flora and fauna neatly governed by natural laws that reflect the essence of things and the way they can be, or the way they must be. To the extent that you believe that the world *is* like a garden in this sense—that it comes structured into entities of various kinds and at various levels and that it is the task of philosophy, if not of science generally, to “bring to light” that structure—to that extent you are a realist. But if you think that the Edenic tree of the knowledge of good and

evil is a fiction and that a great deal of the structure we are used to attribute to the world out there lies, on closer inspection, in our head, in our organizing practices, in the complex system of concepts and categories that underlie our representation of experience and our need to represent it that way—then, to that extent you are not a realist.

I realize this is all highly metaphorical, but I trust the picture is clear and familiar enough. I also hope it is obvious that you don't get to live in a metaphysical desert of this sort unless you already live in an ontological desert. That, however, is only a necessary condition, not a sufficient one. Your ontological desert could still have a lot of structure. For example, structure in terms of essences, laws of causation, unity, persistence through time, etc. Not so if you live in a metaphysical desert. So, in a way, when it comes to the metaphysical part of the story, Quine's notion of a desert—at least, the notion of a desert I am interested in here—goes back to Hume, not to Occam.<sup>6</sup>

Causation is perhaps the best example. For Hume, it is a paradigm example of a metaphysical “fiction”, a concept that does not correspond to a genuine feature of reality.<sup>7</sup> There is nothing, in reality, necessarily connecting what we call “cause” and what we call “effect”. Or rather, there is nothing we can observe in reality except for certain relations of succession, contiguity, and constant conjunction. Hence we cannot form any philosophically respectable concept of causation over and above that of a constant conjunction of like objects in like relations of succession and contiguity, *pace* our natural “propensity” to go for something bigger.

Likewise, consider Hume on identity, i.e., diachronic identity.<sup>8</sup> On the face of it, the thought that things persist through time underlies much of our everyday interaction with the world of ordinary experience. We readily suppose that an object may continue numerically the same, in spite of the fact that it may undergo several qualitative changes and for most of the times it is absent from the senses. Bananas ripen, houses deteriorate, people lose hair and gain weight. In this world of flux, persisting things are the only anchor we have, but the source of their persistence is a puzzle that has been with us since the early days of philosophy. What grounds our belief that the things around us (and ourselves, too) may survive from day to day in spite of the many changes that affect them? How can we say that they are the same things, if they are no longer the same? The answer, for Hume, is that we can't. On the face of it, the identity relation can only apply to constant and unchangeable objects. It is only “the smooth passage of the imagination” along the ideas of resembling perceptions that makes us ascribe identity to variable or interrupted objects, it is our propensity to unite broken appearances of resembling perceptions that produces the

“fiction” of a continued existence.

Ditto for personal identity, where again Hume is quite explicit in using the language of “fiction”. And ditto for unity.<sup>9</sup> Here, too, Hume famously argued that we have a propensity to attribute existence to multiplicities, such as a school of fish, when strictly speaking existence in itself belongs only to unity—a fish. Strictly speaking, unity is never applicable to a multiplicity except on account of the “unites” of which that multiplicity is composed. Thus, again, when we give way to our propensity to say more, strictly speaking we engage in a mental construction, a pretence, a “fiction”.

Now, to all this Quine would add that even the notion of an object, a material object, which is the most basic notion that we have when it comes to the world out there, is the result of some operation of the mind. Even that involves an intellectual or ideological construction of some sort. And one way of putting this claim, which is more typical of the later Quine,<sup>10</sup> is based on a consideration of how our experience of the world is shaped by our cognitive development. At the beginning there is just world (mass term). It’s not all alike: here is mama, there is cold, over there—noise. Soon we begin to distinguish and to recognize: more mama, more cold, more noise! Yet initially these things appear to be all of a type. Each is just a history of sporadic encounter, a mere portion of all there is. Only with time does this fluid totality in which we are immersed begin to take shape. With time, objects begin to objectify; they begin to move, fall, break, disappear and reappear. Sensations acquire more definite contours, fade out and come back, resemble one another in our memories. Noises vary depending on the things around us. We begin to act and to predict. We launch into giving names, using verbs, painting adjectives. Such marvellous unfolding is the subject of much inquiry by psychologists and biologists, and eventually by sociologists. But for a philosopher it is really the source of deep and bemusing bewilderment, if not a dilemma: Are we learning to make out the structure of the world, or are we endowing the world with a structure of our making? Is reality gradually revealing the mechanisms according to which it is organized, or is it we who progressively organize the amorphous and continuous flux of our experience? And the Quinean answer, or at least my Quinean answer, is—the latter. That’s what it means to say that we live in a *metaphysical* desert.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Boundaries in the Sand

In some of my writings, I have put this in terms of boundaries.<sup>12</sup> There are no boundaries, in the desert. More precisely, there may be lots of

boundaries of various sort, but no natural boundaries, no “joints of reality”. All the boundaries we find are lines we have drawn, artificial fences that merely reflect of our own demarcations, our classifications, our organizing activity. We may have the feeling that in some cases such demarcations are grounded on natural discontinuities in the underlying reality. But look closely and you’ll see that there are no discontinuities. It’s just sand, and sand, and sand...

In the geopolitical domain, where the boundary metaphor finds its origin, this claim is only *prima facie* extravagant. *Prima facie*, the distinction between natural and artificial boundaries is perfectly intelligible, and we should be thankful to the British Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon of Kedleston, for having explained it so clearly in his celebrated Romanes Lecture of 1907.<sup>13</sup> Think of Ireland, Lake Maggiore, or the crater of Vesuvius versus Austria, Wyoming, Yellowstone Park, or a soccer field. In the latter cases, it is clear that we are dealing with entities whose boundaries are the expression of a collective intentionality that translates—peacefully or by warfare—into political, social, and legal agreements whereby it is determined where a certain territory begins and where it ends. Not so in the former cases, where the boundaries seem to have nothing to do with our organizing activity. We can stipulate that one part of Lake Maggiore belongs to Piedmont and the rest to Lombardy, and the dividing line will be an artefact. But the shoreline—the border of the whole lake—does not seem to depend on us. It’s there regardless, it exists “on its own”. Ditto for the boundaries of a volcano, an island, or even a peninsula, such as Iberia, which although connected to the continent is separated from it by the “admirably fashioned” Pyrenean wall. The distinction between these two sorts of boundary is so compelling, intuitively, as to seem ineluctable. In a physical map we may omit all political boundaries; but a political map will perforce include all physical boundaries—at least, those physical boundaries that are visible at the relevant scale. And yet it doesn’t take long to realize that the distinction is not as ontologically robust as it appears to be. As we fly over lake Maggiore we have the *impression* of seeing its shoreline, as opposed to the Piedmont/Lombardy boundary. But we all know that, as we go there, ground-level, things are quite different. What looked from the air like a sharp line turns out to be an intricate disarray of boardwalks, stones, cement blocks, musk sediments, marshy spots, decayed fish. Ditto for the celebrated borderline of the Irish island. It’s not just a matter of our disrespect for Nature. Things would not be different if we took a close look at the coast of a virgin island in the middle of the ocean. We may locate the boundary of the island at the water/beach interface, but that