

What Is Ontological Realism?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to clarify what metaontological realism, as discussed in contemporary metaontological literature, amounts to. Although metaontological debates are of relatively long standing, the terms ‘realism’ and ‘anti-realism’ have only recently come to be regularly applied to metaontological positions. The new usage is not fully stable. This paper aims to:

- (1) distinguish three key claims associated with the term ‘realism’ in metaontology, and give some initial reasons why it is important to be very clear about the differences between these claims;
- (2) argue that the three ‘realist’ claims are independent of one other; and
- (3) argue that the label ‘ontological realism’ is best attached to just one of the three claims, namely the claim that the facts of ontology are objective.

1. Introduction

Consider this exchange between two philosophers:

A: There are no tables, only subatomic particles arranged into table-like formations.

B: No, there are tables, which are *composed* of subatomic particles, as well as the particles themselves.

A: Your view is unparsimonious.

B: Your view is counterintuitive.

This sort of discussion is what I’ll call a ‘first-order’ ontological debate: it is about what exists. The kind of ontological realism that I’m discussing in this paper is *metaontological*: that is, it is a philosophical view *about* first-order ontological debates.

Other uses of the label ‘ontological realism’ exist; for instance, you might describe yourself as an ‘ontological realist’ about mathematics intending to convey that you believe in mathematical objects like numbers and sets, and to distinguish your view from ‘mind-independence realism’ about mathematics, which plausibly neither entails nor is entailed by belief in mathematical objects. (Maybe there are mind-independent mathematical facts but they do not involve mathematical objects; or maybe there are mathematical objects but they are mental constructions

and hence mind-dependent.) Such uses of ‘ontological realism’ should be set aside for current purposes.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify what (meta)ontological realism, as discussed in contemporary metaontological literature, amounts to. Along the way, I shall make mention of some of the kinds of arguments that are used to support or undermine realist views, but it is not my aim to discuss these debates in any detail. Rather, I am taking up the prior challenge of clarifying exactly what is (or should be) at issue between those who self-identify as ‘ontological realists’ or as ‘ontological anti-realists’. Those looking for a good survey of the debates may find Manley 2009 helpful; though not much of that paper explicitly discusses ontological realism *per se*, Manley presents arguments for and against the theses which (I shall argue below) have become *associated* with realism.

Although many of the relevant metaontological debates are of relatively long standing and are relatively widely discussed, the *terms* ‘realism’ and ‘anti-realism’ have only recently come to be regularly applied to metaontological positions. They are used as labels for metaontological positions in the work of such authors as Bennett (2009), Chalmers (2009), Manley (2009) and Sider (2009), but earlier authors by whom the work of these authors is heavily influenced, such as Hirsch (see e.g. Hirsch 2002) and Carnap (see Carnap 1950) do not use ‘realism’ in this metaontological way.

And the new usage is not fully stable. This paper therefore aims to accomplish three things. Firstly, I distinguish three key claims associated with the term ‘realism’ in metaontology, and give some initial reasons why it is important to be very clear about the differences between these claims. Secondly, I argue that the three ‘realist’ claims are completely independent of one other. This makes salient a wide range of possible views which are eclipsed if one were to assume that the three ‘realist’ claims are either to be accepted *en masse* (by ‘realists’) or rejected *en masse* (by ‘anti-realists’). Thirdly, I argue that the label ‘ontological realism’ is best attached to just one of the three claims, namely the claim that the facts of ontology are objective, and that the relevant kind of objectivity should be understood as mind-independence.¹

2. The Three Claims

Metaontological claims centrally attracting the label ‘realist’ in the contemporary literature seem

¹ Chalmers states (2009, p. 92, fn. 9) that ‘nothing Substantive turns on the verbal issue of what counts as ‘realism’ or ‘anti-realism’’. This dismissive attitude is not really appropriate here, however. The current situation is one where terminology matters. And that fact is partly of Chalmers’ own making: Chalmers and others apparently want metaontologists now to avail themselves of the terms ‘realist’ and ‘anti-realist’ to characterize metaontological positions that were not previously so labelled. By doing so, metaontologists will (whether or not they intend it, and whether or not they realize it) be *suggesting* analogies with other areas of philosophy where these same terms are used. If no such analogies are intended, these terms are not sensible ones to use.

to be of three importantly different kinds (each, of course, admitting of further specification):

OFO (Ontological Facts are Objective):

There are facts of the matter about ontology, which are objective.

See e.g. Chalmers 2009, p. 77: ‘The metaontologist may ask: is there an objective fact of the matter about whether the mereological sum of two distinct entities exists? The ontological realist says yes, and the ontological anti-realist says no.’² See also Sider 2009, p. 409: ‘[t]he answers to questions of ontology are “objective” ... and “out there”, just like the answers to questions about the nature of electrons.’ Note that one could *reject* OFO either by rejecting the existence of facts of the matter about ontology, or by resisting their objectivity. Bennett’s ‘antirealist’ (Bennett 2009, p. 40) says that there is ‘no fact of the matter’ about whether or not there are Fs.³ Bennett says she finds it hard to make sense of this sort of claim. One reading makes it a kind of non-cognitivism. On another reading it might be taken to mean that there is no *mind-independent* fact of the matter. On yet another, it might be intended to flag some sort of *indeterminacy*. Candidates here include semantic indeterminacy (the meaning of ‘There are Fs’ is not sufficiently determinate to latch onto a particular ontological fact) and metaphysical indeterminacy (the facts of ontology are *themselves* indeterminate in such a way as to fail to settle whether or not there are Fs). The question of determinacy needs to be kept apart from the question of objectivity.⁴

ODS (Ontological Disputes Are Serious):

Typical ontological disputes are serious disputes, in that they are neither trivially easy to resolve nor merely verbal.

See e.g. Sider 2009, p. 385-6 (emphasis added): “ontological deflationists” ... have said ... when some particles are arranged tablewise, there is no “substantive” question of whether there also exists a table composed of those particles. There are simply different—and equally good—ways to talk. *I, on the other hand, accept a very strong realism* about ontology. I think that questions about the existence of composite objects are substantive, just as substantive as the question of whether there are extra-terrestrials.’ Sider (p. 386, fn. 10) lists among the ‘deflationists’ (whom he is classifying, by implicature at least, as ‘anti-realists’)

² Chalmers takes it that saying ‘no’ commits one to saying that ontological theses lack ‘objective and determinate truth-values’ (2009, p. 79). Whether it does so commit one is controversial, particularly given the existence of the kind of minimalism about truth that gives rise to the quasi-realism of Blackburn (see e.g. Blackburn 1993).

³ This antirealist then goes on to say that ‘‘There are Fs’ does not have a determinate truth-value’, presumably making a similar controversial assumption to that mentioned in footnote 2 above.

⁴ It is important to note, however, that Chalmers takes determinacy to play a role in characterizing realism (see Chalmers 2009, p. 92 and footnote 2 above.) However, I am not yet convinced that this association is sufficiently widespread or in keeping with metaontological tradition to merit adding a fourth item to this list. In a similar spirit, Barnes (2009) explicitly challenges Chalmers’s association of (in)determinacy with the (un)answerability of metaphysical questions.

Carnap, Chalmers, Hirsch, Peacocke, Putnam, Sidelle, Sosa and Thomasson. Note, however, that Chalmers (2009, p. 78) classifies Hirsch and Thomasson as ‘lightweight realists’.

See also Manley 2009, p. 2-4, who says that the two ‘deflationary intuitions’ that threaten ‘robust realism’ are the intuition that disputes are ‘merely verbal’ and the intuition that they are ‘trivial’.

OBQM (One Best Quantifier Meaning):

EITHER the meaning of the existential quantifier is not sensitive (except in mundane ways) to the context of utterance OR even if it is so sensitive, there is exactly one *best* candidate meaning for the existential quantifier that is of especial relevance to ontology.

See Sider 2009, p. 397: ‘I think that there is indeed a single best quantifier meaning, a single inferentially adequate candidate meaning that (so far as the quantifiers are concerned) carves at the joints. That is: I accept *ontological realism*.’

See also Chalmers (2009, p. 77), who describes van Inwagen as developing a ‘realist’ position in his 1998, where he is primarily concerned with defending the claim that the existential quantifier expresses being or existence, which is ‘univocal’.

Five points of clarification are needed here. Firstly, ‘typical ontological disputes’, for current purposes, refers to the (apparent) disputes which currently feature heavily in the metaontological literature, such as that between mereological nihilists, who say: “No fusions exist”, and unrestricted compositionists, who say: “For every collection of things there exists a distinct thing which is its fusion”. Or that between mathematical nominalists, who say: “No abstract mathematical objects exist”, and mathematical platonists, who say: “Many abstract mathematical objects, such as numbers and sets, exist”. In this paper I shall focus on these examples as illustrative; it should be clear how the points carry across to other familiar ontological disputes.

Secondly, the ‘mundane’ ways for quantifiers to exhibit sensitivity to utterance context are the familiar kinds of contextual restriction. When I walk into the lecture room and say ‘Someone has failed their exams this year’, I don’t mean someone somewhere in the world, I mean one of my students. When you say ‘Everybody in the room is taller than me’, you don’t mean that everybody in the room (yourself included) is taller than you are. One way to ascribe a *non-mundane* kind of context sensitivity to the existential quantifier would be to maintain that the existential quantifier has both a ‘serious’ or ‘heavyweight’ use, on which it is metaphysically controversial whether there are numbers, and an ‘everyday’ or ‘lightweight’ use on which it is obviously correct to say that there are numbers. (See e.g. Hofweber 2005; Chalmers 2009, §6.)

Thirdly, although this will not be my focus here, note that there is no immediately obvious reason why one should adopt the same metaontological attitude towards all typical ontological

disputes.⁵ One could, for instance, think that the nihilists and unrestricted compositionists are having a merely terminological dispute while the platonists and nominalists are having a substantive one. (Hirsch 2005 defends this combination of views.) Notions of ontological realism which are relativized to subject matter are available, allowing that one can be an anti-realist about mereological ontology and a realist about mathematical ontology. The issues I'm discussing here will play out similarly with respect to these subject-specific kind(s) of ontological realism. For simplicity, in this paper I shall focus on the kind of general view which adopts the same stance with regard to all (or at least most) of the typical disputes.

Fourthly, I by no means intend to suggest that the three claims OFO, ODS and OBQM are the only important or interesting metaontological claims for philosophers to debate. (Others include, for example, claims about the appropriate methodology for ontology and claims about how and whether we know any ontological truths.) I focus on these three merely because they are the claims associated with ontological *realism* in particular.

Fifthly, and perhaps most importantly for current purposes, let me make a clarificatory remark about the appeal to objectivity in OFO. This appeal is intended (by me at least, and I think by at least some of the other authors who characterize ontological realism using OFO) to make contact with a tradition, familiar from other areas of philosophy, according to which 'being a realist about Fs' amounts to (or at least involves) claiming that the way Fs are is (in some important sense) objective, in that it is *independent of the way we think, talk, experience, conceptualize, and so on*. Here is a typical passage in this vein, from Khlentzos 2008 (writing in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*):

According to metaphysical realism, the world is as it is independently of how humans take it to be. The objects the world contains, together with their properties and the relations they enter into, fix the world's nature and these objects exist independently of our ability to discover they do. Unless this is so, realists argue, none of our beliefs about our world could be objectively true since true beliefs tell us how things are and beliefs are objective when true or false independently of what anyone might think.

It is not straightforward to say exactly what mind-independence amounts to in such characterizations of realism (my own views on this subject are outlined in Jenkins 2005); but for our purposes all that matters is that there is a strong tradition of characterizing realism in some area of philosophy as a commitment to objectivity, which in turn is cashed out as a commitment to 'mind-independence' in some sense or other.

Chalmers (see 2009, p. 92 and especially fn. 9) explicitly declines to characterize objectivity in terms of mind-independence, 'on the grounds of the obscurity of [the latter] notion', though he leaves it open for others to do so if they wish. He does not say why he finds mind-independence obscure, nor what is wrong with any of the extant attempts to spell out what it amounts to. Instead he cashes out the objectivity element of his 'realism' as a commitment to

⁵ This point is discussed by Bennett (2009) and Chalmers (2009).

there being ‘objective truth-value’ for (paradigmatic) ontological *assertions*, where the possession of an objective truth-value is characterized as lack of sensitivity to context of assessment. In other words, he characterizes objectivity as the rejection of assessor-relativism (the view according to which the relevant propositions have truth-values only relative to a context of assessment; see e.g. McFarlane 2005 for details). The idea that realism (construed as the objectivity of certain facts) consists in opposition to *some* kind of relativism is a fairly common one, but it is often argued to be inappropriate. (See e.g. Joyce 2009, who argues that ‘the *subjectivism vs. objectivism* and the *relativism vs. absolutism* polarities are orthogonal to each other, and it is the former pair that matters when it comes to characterizing anti-realism’.) But it is unclear whether Chalmers intends to tap into this tradition of taking realism as opposition to some kind of relativism when he associates objectivity to the rejection of *assessor-relativism*. Assessor-relativism is a claim about the truth-values of certain assertions. How this is supposed to be related to the objectivity or lack thereof of *facts* is not discussed. But perhaps the envisaged connection is that if the truth-value of a proposition is relative to an assessor’s context, that is (must be? would be?) because the fact expressed by that proposition obtains *for the assessor* rather than in any non-relative way. (Maybe this can also be construed as a way of explicating the mind-dependence of facts.)

Sider (2009) writes in a manner more obviously in tune with traditional uses of ‘realism’ to mean a commitment to mind-independence. In pointing out that thinking there is ‘something wrong’ with certain metaontological debates is consistent with adopting *first-order* metaphysical realism, he writes (p. 387):

The deflationists I have in mind are not opposed generally to metaphysics, and they share the robust realism, so ubiquitous among analytic philosophers, according to which the world is the way it is independent of human conceptualization.

And in discussing his commitment to reality’s having an ‘objective structure’ – the commitment which leads him to adopt OBQM, which I suspect he construes as the core of *metaontological* realism – he contrasts objectivity (that which is ‘out there in the world’) with that which is ‘projected onto it by us’ (§7). Sider does say that mind-independence construed counterfactually will not work as a way of spelling out objectivity (see pp. 400-1). I agree, but I think all this shows is that, in these contexts, mind-independence needs to be construed in a different way. (See Jenkins 2005, where I argue against construing realism in terms of what I call ‘modal independence’ from our minds, and in favour of construing it in terms of what I call ‘essential independence’. I discuss the irrelevance of *counterfactual* mind-independence to realism in response to arguments due to Blackburn to the effect that mind-dependence construed in counterfactual terms is not adequate to characterise realist positions.)

3. Keeping The Claims Apart: Why It Matters

It is a fairly natural assumption that OFO, ODS and OBQM will be accepted all together, by ontological ‘realists’, or rejected all together, by ontological ‘anti-realists’. To illustrate, consider the (apparent) dispute between mereological nihilists and unrestricted compositionists. One obvious kind of ontological realism will assert that the nihilists and unrestricted compositionists mean the same by ‘exists’, so that they are not talking past each other, that there is a substantive dispute here which philosophers ought to work on, and that there is an objective (mind-independent) fact of the matter about which (if any) objects compose further objects for them to discover.

One obvious kind of ontological anti-realism, on the other hand, asserts that there is *no* substantive dispute here, but merely a verbal one: the nihilists and unrestricted compositionists mean different things by ‘exists’, and neither of them ‘gets it right’ (in an objective, mind-independent sense) about what ‘exists’ means, since there are no objective, mind-independent ontological facts of the matter of the relevant kind to settle this point. There are just different ways of using language.

In addition to the naturalness of the association, there is historical precedent to consider. Chalmers (2009, pp. 77-8) traces the realism/anti-realism dispute in metaontology back to differences between Quine (in e.g. 1948) and Carnap (in e.g. 1950), and it is not unreasonable to interpret Quine as believing something in the vicinity of each of OFO, ODS and OBQM and Carnap as believing something in the vicinity of each of their negations. Quine (or at least, a Quinean⁶) can say that ‘exists’ has exactly one meaning (OBQM), that the question ‘Do fusions exist?’ is a serious, non-verbal one (ODS) to be settled by empirical means (via the selection of the best-confirmed overall theory), and that in discovering the answer to this question one is discovering an objective, mind-independent fact about the world (OFO). Whereas Carnap (or at least, a Carnapian; see Hofweber 2005, pp. 276-7) can say that ‘Do fusions exist?’ has ‘internal’ and ‘external’ readings, such that on the internal reading the question has a trivial answer and on the external reading it is ill-formed or meaningless (~ODS), where this trivial answer that it has on the internal reading is the upshot purely of our conceptual framework, and not any objective ontological fact (~OFO). It is also usual to interpret Carnap as believing in quantifier variance (~OBQM); Eklund 2009, §§4-5 discusses (and also queries) this standard interpretation.

But however natural, and however in keeping with tradition, these package deals are, it is important to be clear that every non-contradictory combination of acceptance and rejection of OFO, ODS and OBQM in fact marks an interesting (if not necessarily plausible) position in logical space. (I shall argue for this claim in the next section.) One should not conflate the three theses, or assume that taking a stance on one issue commits you to taking any particular stance on the others.

⁶ I can’t get into the exegetical question of whether Quine really believed these theses, and/or at what stages of his career he believed them; papers like Quine 1968 raise some difficult questions about this, and it is by no means straightforward to say how these should be squared with Quine 1948.

Some authors do appear to be making some such conflation or assumptions. Sider, for example, appears to characterize ‘realism’ using (something in the vicinity of) each of OFO, ODS and OBQM at different times, as can be seen by examining the cited passages from Sider 2009 on pp. 2-3 above. It may be that Sider intends to reserve the term ‘realist’ for those who hold all three of OFO, ODS and OBQM. However, the *vibe* of Sider 2009 suggests that he thinks the defining core of ontological realism is OBQM. If this is so, it would be helpful to hear more about why we should accept that OFO and ODS are either commitments of, or the kind of thing that commits one to, realism thus characterized.

Chalmers (2009) is careful in his explicit definition of ‘ontological realism’, which he attaches to OFO alone. But he cites (e.g.) van Inwagen 1998 as defending a ‘realist’ position (p. 77), and yet van Inwagen 1998 talks a good deal about the univocality of the existential quantifier and not at all about the mind-independence or objectivity of ontological facts.

Bennett (2009, p. 41), like Chalmers, appears to think of ‘realism’ as OFO, and carefully distinguishes something in the vicinity of \sim OFO (the position she calls ‘antirealism’) from something in the vicinity of \sim ODS (the position she calls ‘semanticism’). It is worth pointing out, however, that both Bennett’s and Chalmers’s associations of ‘realism’ with OFO and not (following Sider or Manley) with ODS and/or OBQM is merely stipulative. They do not give reasons for using the terminology in their particular way, given that it is used in a range of ways by other authors. I shall offer some reasons in §5 below for adopting this sort of usage.

4. Keeping The Claims Apart: Combinations

Let me start by talking about some of the interesting connections between the stances one might take with regard to OFO, ODS and OBQM: connections that might, not unreasonably, lead to *associations* being made between these theses. Then I shall argue that every combination of acceptance and rejection is coherent (though not all are particularly plausible, at least in my opinion).

Firstly, and obviously, rejection of OBQM can be *part of one* source of motivation for rejection of ODS. If one thinks, for instance, that mereological nihilists and unrestricted compositionists express different things by ‘exists’, one can begin to make a case that there is merely a verbal disagreement between them. Indeed, Sider argues that this is the *only* way to argue for \sim ODS; he says that ‘deflationists [i.e. defenders of \sim ODS] must accept *quantifier variance*’ (2009, p. 391, emphasis in the original), where adopting ‘quantifier variance’ is a way of rejecting OBQM. (It is the thesis that there are different, but equally good, candidate meanings for quantifier-like expressions.)

I don’t think he’s right about that, for reasons I shall come back to in a moment. But for now,

note that those who want to make this kind of case for the rejection of ODS may well be doing so in the service of the claim that there is *nothing of importance to choose* between the nihilist's position and the unrestricted compositionalist's. I don't think a dispute's being merely verbal entails that there is nothing of importance at issue (see Jenkins MS for my reasons). One further thing that seems to be required is the claim that that disputant's meaning for 'exists' is better attuned to the mind-independent reality. (This is, presumably, why Sider is interested in 'quantifier variance', which says there are multiple *equally good* candidate meanings. See Sider 2009, pp. 397-402 for one attempt to explain what this requirement of equal goodness comes to. Others, of course, are possible.) If one meaning *is* better attuned in this way, then although the participants are 'talking past on another', there is also an objective fact which plausibly determines that one of them should really *stop* talking as she does and adopt the other's way of speaking if she wants to describe the world as fully and correctly as possible. And that makes it look as if something of importance *does* hang on whether one chooses to be among (and speak with) the nihilists or the unrestricted compositionals.⁷

One obvious way to try to reject the existence of an objective fact of the matter about whose language is best for getting things right is to deny that there are any objective *ontological* facts of the matter. Thus ~OFO can get in on the act when philosophers are going about using ~OBQM to motivate ~ODS in the obvious way. This constitutes a not-implausible Just So Story according to which one would expect to see it sometimes assumed that rejection of all three 'realist' theses (i.e. adoption of the position ~OFO & ~ODS & ~OBQM) forms a natural theoretical unit. In counterpoint, acceptance of all three (OFO & ODS & OBQM) looks like a good, strong way of blocking anti-realism, and constitutes a position which (I take it as read) contains no obvious tensions. It is therefore a natural position to associate with those who want to be 'realists' about ontology.

But other sources of motivation for ~ODS are available. *Prima facie*, at least, sensitivity to utterance context in the meaning of other terms besides 'exists' (in mereological dispute, 'fusion'; in the platonism/nominalism dispute, 'mathematical object') might be appealed to in arguing that the typical ontological disputes are merely verbal. Sider (2009, §4) argues that things are not so straightforward; contextually variable use of the predicate 'table' cannot be blamed for the dispute between van Inwagen and Lewis as to whether tables exist; rather, he thinks, it must be the quantifier 'exists'. For one thing, it is difficult to find any suitable account of what each disputant means by 'table'. For another, these two disputants disagree over sentences not involving the word 'table'; for example, they disagree over the truth-value of ' $\exists x \exists y \exists z (x \neq y \& x \neq z \& y \neq z)$ ', as used of a world where there are exactly two material simples.

But even granting that Sider is right about the difficulty of blaming predicates like 'table', there

⁷ A different way for one meaning to be better would be by virtue of accord with natural language use by other speakers. Whether that sort of thing would also stop the dispute being 'merely verbal' isn't particularly relevant here, but see Bennett 2009, p. 40 for the view that it wouldn't.

are options for motivating a \sim ODS position without appealing to \sim OBQM. Sider moves straight from the (purported) impossibility of blaming predicates like ‘table’ for the insubstantiality of typical ontological disputes to the necessity of blaming quantifier variance. But I think there are other ways to hold \sim ODS. One would be to say that typical ontological disputes are not, or at least should not be, couched in terms of what ‘exists’, but rather (say) in terms of what is ‘real’ (see e.g. Fine 2009), or in terms of what is ‘fundamental’ (see e.g. Schaffer 2009).⁸ One could then try to identify context-sensitivity *in these other terms* in order to motivate the claim that typical ontological disputes are merely verbal.

Another would be to argue that the meaning of ‘exists’ (or some other relevant term) is sensitive, not to the utterer’s context, but to the context of the *assessor* of the utterance,⁹ so that those who reckon the nihilist speaks truly (including, importantly, the nihilist herself) and those who reckon the unrestricted compositionalist speaks truly (including the compositionalist herself) can both be right given what those utterances mean with respect to those assessors’ different contexts. (Again, note that we need the further claim that there is no objective fact about which assessment context is best for getting at the truth, if we are to turn this into a motivation for saying *nothing of importance* is at issue between the participants.)¹⁰

A further \sim ODS option is to say that some or all of the terms appearing in typical ontological disputes are *meaningless*.¹¹ This is compatible with OBQM; it could be, for example, the existential quantifier is univocally meaningful but many *other* terms appearing in the claims at issue between participants typical ontological disputes (‘table’, ‘sum’, ‘identical’, etc.) have no meaning.

So rejection of ODS does not require rejection of OBQM. Does it at least require rejection of OFO? The motivations for \sim ODS suggested so far sit comfortably with the rejection of OFO, but there are others which do not. For one might think that the dispute between the nihilist and the unrestricted compositionalist is merely verbal in that there is nothing to it over and above the fact that they are talking past each other, but *that it is an objective ontological fact that both are*

⁸ Not *all* ontological disputes need be couched in such terms in order for this move to work; only *typical* ones. So (for example) one doesn’t necessarily prejudge the question of whether there exist any non-real or non-fundamental things in taking one of these two options. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this point.

⁹ See e.g. MacFarlane 2005 for an explanation of this type of assessor-relativist semantics.

¹⁰ One might wonder whether \sim OBQM is still required on such a view. In the *metalanguage* statement of truth conditions for ‘exists’-involving claims, the relativist might say ‘x exists’ is true relative to assessor A iff x exists-for-A and true relative to assessor B iff x exists-for-B. Does this mean the relativist is committed to there being equally good candidate meanings for ‘exists’ (exists-for-A, exists-for-B, etc.), contra OBQM? I don’t think so. She can argue that these metalanguage terms are not, and are not to be mistaken for, real-life natural-language existential quantifiers. (For one thing, they don’t exhibit the appropriate relativistic semantics to be the existential quantifier.) And she can say that the existential quantifier is the unique, privileged thing in terms of which ontological disputes are, and should be, conducted, which is a commitment to OBQM. Thanks to Ted Sider for discussion of this point.

¹¹ Thanks to Jack Ritchie for this suggestion.

*right given what they mean.*¹² This view has versions corresponding to OFO & ~ODS & ~OBQM and OFO & ~ODS & OBQM, since the thing which makes it the case that the two are talking past each other may or may not be sensitivity to utterance context in the meaning of ‘exists’. (It could be some other term, or some other kind of sensitivity, or both.)

Once we see the OFO & ~ODS & OBQM position, it is easy to see how the commitment to objective facts can coherently be dropped from it. One could instead hold a ~OFO & ~ODS & OBQM position by claiming (for instance) that it is sensitivity to utterance context in the meaning of ‘fundamental’ that makes the nihilist’s dispute with the unrestricted compositionalist merely verbal (since it is a dispute about whether, fundamentally, there are fusions), and that there are no objective facts of the matter about ontology (hence nothing to determine that one participant’s use of ‘fundamental’ is better than the other’s).

So far we have covered five of the eight available combinations of attitudes to OFO, ODS and OBQM. Next let’s consider the two remaining ~OFO combinations. Firstly, note that one can reject the objectivity (mind-independence) of ontology while maintaining that there are non-terminological disputes to be had about it. For instance, one might hold that the facts of ontology depend upon what George thinks, so that *Fs exist* obtains iff (and in virtue of) *George thinks that Fs exist*. If this is right, there are clearly non-terminological disputes to be had about whether fusions exist. And the typical disputes may be held to be among them. These sorts of disputes could not be resolved by clarifying what the participants mean; we’d have to do some empirical investigation to find out whether George believes in fusions. And note that one need think nothing unusual about the sensitivity to context of quantifiers in order to hold this type of ~OFO & ODS view. Thus ~OFO & ODS & OBQM is an option. However, one might believe something like the above while holding that quantifiers are sensitive to context of utterance. For instance, one might think that utterance context determines whether ‘exists’ expresses *exists*₁ or *exists*₂, where what exists₁ depends on what George thinks exists, and what exists₂ depends on what Barbara thinks exists. This gives us a ~OFO & ODS & ~OBQM position. (For less toyish examples of positions of these kinds, replace ‘what George thinks’ with ‘what our best scientists believe’ and ‘what Barbara thinks’ with ‘what the folk believe’.)

The last remaining combination is OFO & ODS & ~OBQM. This is the view that there are objective facts about ontology, typical ontological disputes are non-trivial and not merely verbal, and the meaning of our quantifiers is sensitive to context in some non-mundane ways, such that no one meaning is ontologically privileged. This is a coherent position too.

The context-sensitivity of ‘exists’ could be of a kind that does not impact upon the typical ontological disputes (which concern the objective facts of ontology). Maybe there are two

¹² Note that if OFO is true there are bound to be *some* ontological disputes which are not merely terminological in this area. But this does not mean the typical disputes that philosophers are familiar with are anything other than terminological. Thanks to Daniel Nolan here. Hirsch (2002) offers an extended and convincing argument that his adoption of a quantifier variance view does not commit one to mind-dependence.

meanings of ‘exist’: a ‘lightweight’ one and a ‘heavyweight’ one (in Chalmers’ sense: see p. 4 above). And maybe these meanings are equally important for doing (complete) ontology. *But* maybe typical ontological disputes have tended, for accidental historical reasons, to be couched in terms of the heavyweight quantifier only. Then, the fact that there are two equally ontologically important meanings for ‘exists’ does not threaten to render typical ontological disputes merely verbal or otherwise non-serious, and nor is it at all in tension with the objectivity of ontological facts.

A more familiar variant of this view holds that only the heavyweight quantifier is of importance to ontology; the lightweight quantifier is useful in everyday discourse but is of no importance for ontologists. (This, plausibly, is roughly the view outlined in van Inwagen 1990; at least, Nolan forthcoming suggests this interpretation of van Inwagen. The view is also defended in e.g. Hofweber 2005.) This view is a close cousin of the OFO & ODS & ~OBQM view just sketched, but isn’t quite a ~OBQM view in the sense under consideration here, since according to it the quantifier has a single best meaning for ontological purposes. It is a more traditional combination: OFO, ODS and OBQM.

5. Terminological Best Practice

I suggest, in line with Bennett and Chalmers, that we should use ‘realist’ for those who accept OFO and ‘anti-realist’ for those who reject it. I urge that it is not a good idea to use ‘realism’ exclusively for OFO, ODS, OBQM views and ‘anti-realism’ exclusively for ~OFO, ~ODS, ~OBQM views as Sider appears to do.

For one thing, it would be nice if anti-realism could consist simply in the rejection of realism. For another, other perspicuous terms are available to mark the other distinctions: ‘inflationist’ (or perhaps just: ‘non-deflationist’) for those who accept ODS and ‘deflationist’ for those who reject it; ‘quantifier invariantist’ for those who accept OBQM and ‘quantifier variantist’ for those who reject it.

A third reason to prefer this kind of definition of ‘realism’ with respect to metaontology is continuity with the use of the term ‘realism’ in other structurally similar areas of philosophy (such as metaethics and metaphysics), where ‘realism’ is very commonly used to capture a commitment to objectivity and/or mind-independence (see e.g. Dummett 1963, p. 146; Putnam 1981, p. 49; Wright 1986, p. 5), but is *not* standardly used as a label for views about whether certain debates are merely verbal and/or trivial, or views about the contextual shiftiness (or otherwise) of bits of our language.

An alternative approach would be to embrace some wooliness in the definition of ‘realism’, and let it be a vague umbrella term for positions that include some combination of theses in the vicinity of OFO, ODS and OBQM (and perhaps a few others too). But my methodological

preference is for clarity and precision where such virtues are obtainable. And whilst for many terms of philosophical art the die of wooliness is irreparably cast, I don't think the same is true of 'realism'. Yet.¹³

¹³ I am grateful to David Chalmers and Daniel Nolan for illuminating discussions on this topic. Many thanks are also due to Mark Barber, S. C. Bradley, Keith Frankish, Jack Ritchie, an anonymous referee for this journal, and particularly Ross Cameron, Daniel Nolan and Ted Sider, for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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