

On Quinean “Ontology”

MARK WEINFURTER

To the non-philosopher, questions such as ‘Do numbers exist?’ appear, to put it bluntly, silly. This opinion of such questions, as well as other pejoratively viewed metaphysical questions, was prevalent among most analytic philosophers in the early twentieth century, thanks in no small part to the influence of the logical positivists. However, metaphysical questions became not only respectable but, perhaps ironically, even dominant in philosophy in the latter half of the 1900s, and continue to be so today. This about-face owes itself most prominently to Quine, who is credited with ending the dominance of logical positivism. Specifically, Quine’s discussion with Carnap, his teacher, played perhaps the defining role in the rise of ontology.

The paper that gave rise to the renewed focus on ontology was Quine’s “On What There Is.” This was followed by Carnap’s “Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology.” From these arose the perception that each author was opposed to the position of the other. Carnap, the unabashed logical positivist, was taken to continue to hold that school’s anti-metaphysical sentiments. Quine, on the other hand, was taken to have seen ontological questions as worthy of philosophical pursuit.

In this paper I will argue that, if one takes ‘ontology’ to refer to a distinctly philosophical pursuit, as it seems to be in contemporary discussion, then Quine agrees that there are no answers to be found, i.e., Quine never

Mark Weinfurter graduated in April 2013 with a BA in philosophy. His primary philosophical interests include the early modern period, ethics, and metaphysics. He hopes to eventually pursue an advanced degree in philosophy. This essay placed first in the 2013 David H. Yarn Philosophical Essay Contest.

intended to spearhead what Yablo refers to as a “progressive research program” (229). Rather, he wanted to set forth an explanation as to what it means to be ontologically committed, as well as a suggestion as to how to determine which ontology one should adopt; it is looking more closely at this latter purpose that reveals most clearly that Quine never meant to resurrect philosophical ontology. My argument, in brief, can be expressed as follows:

- (1) If Quine thought that philosophy had a role to play in ontology, then his metaontology would provide a central role for philosophy.
- (2) Quine’s metaontology does not provide a central role for philosophy.
- (3) Therefore, Quine does not think that philosophy has a role to play in ontology.

The paper will proceed as follows: In section I, I will present some reasons why one might believe that Quine meant to usher in a new era of ontology. In section II, I will explore what I think Quine really hoped to accomplish regarding ontology, analyzing the relevant sections of “On What There Is” and drawing from some of Quine’s other writings to underscore the fact that it doesn’t purport to establish ontology. Finally, in section III, I will explore the implications of my argument for ontology and metaphysics more generally.

I

Given that Quine is not seen as a friend to traditional metaphysics, what reasons would one have for thinking that he would resurrect ontology? Both Yablo and Glock, in their respective papers, give several reasons. I will begin with Yablo.

Yablo, after noting that “there is a certain cast of mind that has trouble taking [existence questions] seriously,” asserts rather strongly that “Quine of course takes [such] questions dead seriously,” presumably because he “outlines a program for their resolution” (230). Another reason might be Quine’s acknowledgment that, despite everyone’s accepting that the obvious answer to ‘what is there?’ is ‘everything’, there is still room for disagreement in the details (229). Here it is important to note that, in footnote 3 of his essay, Yablo notes that one should ignore the ontological relativity present in some of Quine’s works that he cites (230). This condition is problematic, and I will return to it in section II.

Moving to Glock. He seems to think that one should accept that Quine pushed ontology back into philosophy’s purview because for Quine

"the difference between the scientific and the philosophical problems [of ontology] is one of degree, not of kind"—both disciplines are concerned with what exists, but science works on a much narrower scale than philosophy, i.e., science asks 'are there quarks?' while philosophy asks 'are there material objects?' (242). Building on this link between scientific and philosophical pursuits, Glock concludes that for Quine the questions of what actually exists and what a theory is ontologically committed to are "intimately linked." Indeed, "science is our best guide to what exists. By establishing what things our best current scientific theory takes to exist, we also provide the best theory of what things actually exist . . . Quine's ontology does not simply follow current science; it is also driven by distinctly philosophical standards of ontological admissibility" (243).

In sum, one may believe that Quine intended to revive ontology for the following reasons:

- (1) Because he recognizes that there is room for disagreement and provides a way to resolve those disagreements;
- (2) Because he thinks science and philosophy are intertwined, and thus thinks that the latter can assist the former in its progress.

These seem to be good reasons, *prima facie*. However, I will show in the following section that neither is actually a good reason. This will require a close look at Quine's "On What There Is."

II

Quine begins "On What There Is" discussing how merely talking about x is not sufficient for committing oneself to x 's existence. None of this is terribly interesting for our purposes. Where it gets interesting, however, is when Quine switches focus and begins discussing what *does* qualify as ontologically committing. One is ontologically committed when one uses the existential quantifier over bound variables. For example, when one asserts $\exists x(Bx)$, where 'B' represents the predicate 'is black', one is committed to the existence of at least one thing the color of which is black (31). Note here that this commits one only to the existence of a black thing and not to the existence of the property 'blackness,' since the truth of this statement requires only that the thing and not the property exist (32).

But this does not tell us what there is, only what one says there is or what a theory says there is, which, because of the myriad things that many have said throughout history, is of little help. There thus must be a

way to determine which theory to accept. Quine, recognizing this, claims that accepting an ontology is similar to selecting a scientific theory in that any reasonable person would choose the simplest theory that explains and organizes our experience (35). Thus one should be ontologically committed to whatever is required in order for the claims of the best theory to be true, and determining the best theory requires “tolerance and an experimental spirit” (38).

In short, Quine doesn’t provide an ontology in “On What There Is,” but rather articulates the steps that he thinks are necessary for determining what there is. Indeed, a more accurate title for his paper might have been “On How to Determine What There Is,” since it says nothing about what exists.

While it’s not very clear what Quine means by “an experimental spirit,” I do believe this comment is suggestive of the thesis for which I am arguing. Simply put, philosophy is *not* experimental, at least not in the way that I believe Quine means ‘experimental’. If it were, then the criticisms lobbied in philosophy’s direction—often by hubristic members of the scientific community—regarding philosophy’s apparent inability to progress would not exist. Sure, Quine mentions the possibility of seeing “how much of the physicalistic conceptual scheme can be reduced to a phenomenistic one,” among others, but I don’t think that Quine meant for the crux of ontological investigation to be carried out by philosophy (38).

This last claim also finds support in taking a closer look at what Quine actually establishes in the paper. There are only two things: that one should determine what the best theory is and that one then needs to determine what entities are required to validate the claims of said theory. Such a prescription for determining what exists is not very philosophically useful because there isn’t much that one can say regarding how to determine what the best theory is. Quine of course favors a simpler, more austere theory, but he is aware that simplicity is not an unambiguous standard. Different theories can claim to be the simplest, albeit in different ways (36). In adjudicating between these sorts of competing claims, one must experiment, and while some amount of a priori conceptual analysis might prove helpful (such as when a logically equivalent alternative to claim p that does not require positing some existent q can be formed, in which case we can say there is no q), in most cases empirical observation of some sort will be required to determine whether an existence claim is true. Another way of articulating this point is as follows: there’s nothing in principle that prevents one from quantifying over anything. It certainly might be unwise to assert that $\exists x(\sim Ex)$, where ‘E’ stands for ‘exists’, but there’s nothing in the syntax of first-order logic that prevents the formation of this sentence. Something more is needed—non-philosophical, empirical investigation—to determine

whether the sentence is true. The only claims that appear to escape this requirement are tautologies and contradictions, neither of which are very useful for the sorts of existence questions that interest philosophers.

Taking these two reasons into consideration, as well as the fact that philosophy is largely non-empirical and as such cannot by itself contribute to the resolution of existence questions, one can see that Quine's meta-ontology doesn't give philosophy much to do. It thus seems that Quine's thoughts regarding how to resolve ontological questions share much with one of Quinean ontology's critics, who claims that seeking answers to existence questions, which require empirical enquiry, is more properly the responsibility of science proper and not philosophy (Thomasson 75). Philosophy's only responsibility then is to clarify a theory's commitments, not to determine them itself. Thus, while Quine may think philosophy and science intertwined, and indeed that philosophy can help science progress, this does not entail that Quine felt that philosophy should take precedent in determining what there is.

Let me return now to the comment made in section I regarding Yablo's insistence that we ignore Quine's ontological relativity. This is a rather high price to pay when it comes time to interpreting Quine because he is at root a relativist regarding ontology. This much is hinted at in "On What There Is." Quine ends that essay discussing two conceptual schemes, the physicalistic and the phenomenistic. He notes that the phenomenistic conceptual scheme considers physical and mathematical objects myths, but that the quality of myth is relative to the epistemological point of view, for which phenomenism has priority. The epistemological point of view, however, is only one point of view, and one is free to adopt any other point of view depending on one's interests and goals, i.e., the system one adopts depends on what one wants to do (38). This relativism is even more apparent in some of Quine's later work. For example, in "On Empirically Equivalent Systems of the World," Quine concludes that "oscillation between rival theories is standard scientific procedure" and that, if there's no good way to choose between two incompatible but empirically equivalent systems, "we may simply rest with both systems" (328). Such permissiveness certainly doesn't seem consistent with Yablo's claim that Quine provided a way to resolve ontological disagreements. This isn't to say that Quine holds an anything-goes attitude toward ontology—a theory must account for the observations that science makes—but so long as it passes that test, and maybe some others, Quine is willing to let some disagreements slide. It is thus not the case that Quine *really* provided a method for resolving disagreements about ontology.

The preceding discussion is, I believe, sufficient to show that Quine never meant to revive ontology as a distinctly philosophical endeavor. He

only meant to show how one can clean up the metaphysical messes left by the philosophical tradition and how to help science clean up its own. To borrow another's terminology, Quine only meant to establish a modest project for philosophy, one in which philosophers merely make explicit what our scientific theories commit us to (van Fraassen 11). This is certainly not a trivial pursuit; it just doesn't qualify as grounds for a significant philosophical pursuit. If there is a philosophical pursuit to be had here, and I think there is, it is one that is tangential to the empirical investigations of science.

III

What are the implications of the conclusion that I have reached? The first, and most immediate, is that those who consider themselves to be advancing the Quinean ontological project don't actually have any project to advance. Quine is not the patron saint of ontology that they have taken him to be. I imagine that this conclusion will be upsetting to such ontologists, but this does not change the fact that the received conception of Quine as opposing Carnap simply doesn't obtain. There is, in fact, no substantive difference between Carnap's and Quine's attitudes regarding ontology, a fact that others, for example Eklund, have noted as well (245). Both are pragmatists regarding which theories one should adopt, both have essentially the same view regarding philosophy's relation to science, and both are at heart empiricists. Whatever disagreement did exist between the two had a much narrower scope than the received notion implies.

To further establish this last point, let's look closely at both thinkers' writings, which will reveal not only similar goals but also similar strategies for achieving them. I have already discussed Quine's in some detail and will thus only note one other important point. Toward the latter half of "On What There Is," after showing how mere linguistic utterance doesn't commit one ontologically, Quine begins discussing the myriad ontological commitments to abstract entities required by classical mathematics (32). This makes mathematics a good example of how important it is to consider one's ontological commitments and how different ontological commitments have substantial consequences for intellectual inquiry. With that in mind, Quine enumerates several positions regarding the existence of universals in mathematics, both in the Middle Ages and among his contemporaries. One of these is Realism/Logicism, which Quine characterizes as "[condoning] the use of bound variables to refer to abstract entities known and unknown, specifiable and unspecifiable, indiscriminately" and which he groups with the medieval notion of Realism, "the Platonic doctrine that universals or abstract entities

have being independently of the mind" (33). Here's the kicker: included in the list of proponents of Logicism, with its seemingly Platonic metaphysics, is Carnap.

Carnap, a proud logical positivist, rejected such a classification, and, demanding satisfaction, published "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology." In this essay he hopes to show that "[accepting and using] a language referring to abstract entities . . . does not imply embracing a Platonic ontology but is perfectly compatible with empiricism and strictly scientific thinking" (206). The essay, then, is a direct reply to Quine and his classifying Carnap as a Platonist. Before continuing, it is important to note that Carnap does mention in a footnote that Quine, by labeling him a Platonist, only meant that he accepts "a language of mathematics containing variables of higher levels" (215, footnote 5). This of course only strengthens the claim that Carnap wrote the essay to distance himself from the undesirable connotations of Platonism.

In the essay proper Carnap claims that there is a distinction within the set of questions concerning the existence of abstract entities, a distinction between internal questions and external questions. Internal questions are those that occur within a linguistic framework. Linguistic frameworks are introduced whenever one wants to introduce new entities into one's language and thus needs to develop new ways of speaking and the rules that those new ways must follow. Answering internal questions is thus determined by those rules, which can include empirical or logical methods, depending on whether the framework is factual or logical (206). So, for example, if one wants to know whether unicorns exist in the observable, spatio-temporal world, which Carnap calls the 'thing world', the framework that determines how to answer that question is empirical.

Contrasting with internal questions are of course external questions, which, to continue with the previous example, ask about the reality of the thing world itself. Such questions, according to Carnap, are asked only by philosophers and don't make any sense unless one interprets them as inquiring into whether one should adopt the thing framework. Such a question will be answered by pragmatic considerations and has no theoretical or cognitive content (214).

We can stop here and note the similarities between Quine and Carnap with regard to ontology: both share the goal of showing that merely making an utterance does not imply an ontological commitment; both believe that choosing a conceptual framework (Carnap disapproves of Quine's calling it an ontology) is a matter resolved by practical, and not theoretical, considerations; and both think that non-philosophical investigation will do more than philosophy to determine what frameworks are worth keeping. Carnap puts it thus: "Let us grant to those who work in any special field of

investigation the freedom to use any form of expression which seems useful to them; *the work in the field* will sooner or later lead to the elimination of those forms which have no useful function” (215, emphasis added).

It should now be clear that the debate between Quine and Carnap is not one involving a substantial difference in attitude regarding ontology generally. Indeed, the Quine–Carnap debate is an internal debate between “a positivist teacher and his post-positivist student, both of whom share explicitly anti-metaphysical sentiments” (Schaffer 347). Given their shared sentiments, it may be appropriate to collapse the Quine–Carnap distinction, at least within ontology (since it still might have use for those who wish to defend the analytic-synthetic distinction); perhaps the term ‘quinap’ will be an appropriate new label for their view of ontology. Given that this distinction collapses, so too does the goal of traditional Quinean ontology—to determine what there is.

There are, however, some positive implications for ontology that follow from the collapse of the Quine–Carnap distinction. One is that philosophy can move toward a different understanding of ontology. One promising alternative includes grounding and fundamentality, in which we no longer question whether properties, meanings, numbers, etc. exist, but whether they are fundamental, i.e., whether they are the grounds of other phenomena (Schaffer 347). Another possibility is to inquire into the structure of reality, choosing which fundamental notions should be used to describe reality. If one proponent of such a view is correct, this is something that no one can avoid, so current Quineans can get straight to work (Sider 420).

Another positive implication, this one more comforting to current Quineans, is that Quine’s *metaontology* is still a viable philosophical position, and they needn’t abandon their convictions completely. What *does* need to happen is a shift in focus away from addressing existence questions (questions within ontology) to addressing questions *about* ontology. Given that it certainly isn’t clear whether Quine’s metaontology is free from problems, current Quineans may still have much for which to argue.

What is clear is this: contemporary ontology does indeed rest on a mistake—an incorrect understanding of Quine. This mistake, like many mistakes in the history of philosophy, has been the source of much work, some of it interesting in its own right. But many of these mistaken moves in philosophy have eventually fallen out of favor. It’s time, I believe, to end the Quine–Carnap distinction in ontology and with it the view that the proper task of philosophical ontology is to answer existence questions.

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