

The Ontological Attitude

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1. The Received Ontology

Philosophy is more modest than it used to be. It no longer strives to be the queen of the sciences, or the arbiter of sound judgment. Most of us have learned to value conformity with the bulk of received opinion outside of philosophy while safeguarding the boundaries of our discipline. We defer to mathematicians when they claim that interesting theories are incomplete but not when they infer from that that reasoning is non-algorithmic, to biologists when they uncover our genetic makeup but not when they draw far-reaching consequences about morality, to literary theorists when they trace the role of political power in the establishment of artistic canon but not when they argue that all categories are socially constructed. Likewise, we respect the views of “ordinary folk” most of the time but we preserve the right to disregard them when they tell us which numbers will win the lottery, or which houses are haunted by ghosts.

Many have thought and some still suspect that modesty is bound to undermine philosophy as we know it. The concerns are based on the view that philosophy either lacks a subject matter or is concerned with absolutely everything, and hence, that its contributions differ from those of the other disciplines only in emphasis or methodology. But the facts don't support this view: philosophers rarely make noted contributions to mature disciplines other than their own and it is also unusual for distinguished physicists, economists, or architects to advance the state of a live philosophical debate. It appears that there are questions which are uniquely suited for philosophical answers if they are answerable at all—received opinion cannot crowd out philosophy unless it is philosophically embellished. Of course, modesty does not mean slavishness. There probably are countless areas where the re-

ceived view is wrong and philosophers can do great service in sniffing them out. But short of a stunning insight or a momentous discovery, we should not expect to overcome established opinion.

Unfortunately, there is an area where a straightforward accommodation between philosophy and received opinion seems impossible. This area is ontology. Just about every important ontological question has an answer trivially derivable from truisms. There are infinitely many primes, which entails that there are numbers and also that there are infinitely many of them. In other words, nominalism and finitism seem refuted without any help from philosophers. There is one hand and here is another, which means that there are at least two objects external to the mind. This quick argument seems to refute both idealism and monism. There are ways the world could be that are different from the way it actually is, and so merely possible worlds exist. Thus it seems that skepticism about possible worlds is absurd. Similar one-liners can be used to establish the existence of shapes, directions, unobservables, causes, mental states, rights, values, properties, propositions, events, concepts, thoughts, and much else philosophers have argued about throughout the ages. Respecting the received view requires respecting the fundamental categories we employ, which in turn requires regarding them as instantiated. While there is arguably no such thing as the received epistemology, ethics, or aesthetics there really is a received ontology.¹ And it is surprisingly bloated.²

The stock response to this observation is that philosophers should heed Berkeley's advice. Addressing the objection that his rejection of matter flies in the face of received opinion (even though conformity with common sense is something he valued highly), in the *Principles* Berkeley famously makes the following remark:

¹ There are, of course, received opinions about what is known about various things, what should be done in various circumstances, and what is worth our attention among various artifacts. But these don't make up a theory of knowledge, goodness, or beauty. The trouble with ontology is that once we settle what there is, there seems to be nothing left to do.

² Arguments for the non-existence of philosophical exotica—the mereological sum of Costa Rica and my left toe, grue grass in the backyard, in-cars in the garage, etc.—are not too hard to come by either. These pruning one-liners, however, pose significantly less threat to philosophical ontologies than their bloating cousins. Philosophical exotica have no conventional names—they all have to be introduced via definition, which makes them more or less palatable. While the man on the street hardly believes in the mereological sum of Costa Rica and his left toe, he is likely to make peace with this putative entity once he sees that in a certain (not particularly clear) sense it is “nothing over and above” Costa Rica and his left toe. The same can obviously not be said about non-philosophical exotica—Santa Claus, Atlantis, the fountain of youth, ghosts, unicorns, etc. The received ontology rules these out while it remains ultimately non-committal about the exotica.

... in such things we ought think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar. They who to demonstration are convinced of the truth of the Copernican system, do nevertheless say the sun rises, the sun sets, or comes to the meridian: and if they affected a contrary style in common talk, it would without doubt appear ridiculous. (Berkeley, 1711/1948–1957, §51)

We speak as if we were really committed to a host of entities and when we take this speech at face value we end up constructing a fantastic ontology. The advice is that we should not be taken in by language.

This sounds reasonable at first, but perplexing on second thought. Consider the example of the motion of the sun across the sky. Does Berkeley think the sun does not rise in the morning, come to the meridian at noon, and set in the evening? If so, his view *is* in conflict with received opinion. We don't just speak as if we thought the sun moves across the sky—we really think it does. And the “we” doesn't just include the vulgar: the learned can explain that movement is relative to a frame of reference and that given our usual one, the earth, the sun *strictly and literally* moves across the sky.³ Berkeley's analogy fails: when it comes to the movement of the sun there is no conflict between the vulgar view and the learned one.

When it comes to a *genuine* conflict, Berkeley's advice to the advocate of revisionary ontologies is harsh. If she has decent arguments against holes, values, or propositions, she should stick with them and she should say that although we think there are holes in our cheese, values in our lives, and propositions in our theories, in fact there are none. (Of course, we are permitted to speak as if there were as we don't mean what we say.) But what is the basis for paying less respect to received views about ontology than to received views about other matters? And, since ontological claims are inferentially connected to countless others, how are we to stop the spillover of immodesty to other areas? Philosophers who deny the authority of received ontology must arbitrarily restrict the scope of their denial or end up rejecting deference to received opinion altogether.

The alternative is to stick to modesty and declare that any form of revisionism is bunk. This stance was made famous by G.E. Moore. It is characterized by an incredulous look and a bemused tone that are hard to reproduce in print. But repetition, italics, and heavy punctuation do help:

³ For a helpful discussion of Berkeley's example, see Jackson (2007). It is interesting that the view that ordinary talk somehow carries commitment to a geocentric theory is remarkably widespread. Resistance to context-sensitivity may be the culprit. But the view that seeks to minimize context-sensitive items in natural language is by no means a received view.

. . . if I can prove that there exists now both a sheet of paper and a human hand, I shall have proved that there are now “things outside of us”; if I can prove that there exists now both a shoe and a sock, I shall have proved that there are “things outside of us”: etc.; and similarly, I shall have proved it if I can prove that there exists now two sheets of paper, or two human hands, or two shoes, or two socks, etc. . . . I certainly did at the moment *know* that which I expressed by a combination of certain gestures with saying the words ‘There is one hand and here is another.’ . . . How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know it, and only believed it, and that was perhaps not the case! (Moore, 1939, pp. 449–450)

I don’t think this gives us a stable intellectual outlook. If you find yourself doubting the existence of the external world you are bound to reject either the inference from “There is a hand and here is another” to “There are things outside us” (as Berkeley did) or that you know the premise “There is a hand and here is another” without proof (as Descartes did).

Non-standard ontologies are backed by genuine arguments. Some of these are epistemological, like Descartes’s claim that unless we have reason to believe we are not dreaming we should not believe anything incompatible with the assumption that we are. Some are metaphysical, like Berkeley’s contention that matter, being inherently passive cannot be the cause of anything, and hence, would be unobservable if it existed. There are also broad methodological considerations. If you have a piece of clay occupying a spatial region you can’t have in addition a statue there; if you have a physical state upon which a particular mental state supervenes there is no causal work for the mental state to do; if you have absolute space you are committed to a fundamental component of physical reality that is undetectable, etc. To dismiss such arguments via a direct appeal to the received ontology is quite unhelpful.

This is an impasse. On the one hand, there seems to be good reason to want to hold on to modesty, and hence, to accept all the obvious truisms about what there is. On the other hand, there seems to be equally good reasons not to expect a satisfactory resolution of the problems of ontology by insisting on the truth of those truisms. How accommodation between received views and philosophy is possible remains elusive. The project of this paper is to propose a remedy—one that avoids both Berkeley’s and Moore’s stance.

In the next section, I discuss the notion of ontological commitment. I argue that we can abstract away from controversial features of Quine’s proposal and come up with an attractive core conception of what it is for someone to be ontologically committed to certain entities. I use this conception to identify three types of approaches towards reconciling the received on-

tology with its philosophical rivals, and I argue that the least popular of the three—the *attitude-based approach*—has the best chance of delivering a satisfactory reconciliation. In section 3, I argue that the standard version of the attitude-based reconciliation—*fictionalism*—faces serious difficulties. In section 4, I propose and defend my own version of the attitude-based reconciliation, and argue that it delivers all the goods the fictionalist approach can without its shortcomings. I close in section 5 with a brief discussion of a possible historical precedent for the type of view I advocate.

2. Ontological Commitment

‘Ontological commitment’ is a technical term introduced by Quine to describe an attitude one bears towards putative entities when they are included in one’s complete view of the world. Quine used a number of terms in writing about this attitude: it is the mental state we are in when we ‘acknowledge,’ ‘admit,’ ‘assume,’ ‘believe in,’ ‘countenance,’ ‘hypostatize,’ ‘posit,’ ‘presuppose,’ ‘reify,’ or ‘reckon’ certain entities. In the end it is the somber ‘ontological commitment’ that stuck, probably because unlike its more colloquial rivals it is openly normative. A commitment is something one should but may not live up to. One may be ontologically committed to certain entities while sincerely denying their existence. What a theory of ontological commitment is supposed to do is to help us see how this can happen and help us catch the ontological free-riders.

The fact that ontological commitment attaches first and foremost to thinkers is rarely emphasized because Quine has offered a reductive account of the attitude: a person’s commitments are inherited from a theory she accepts, which in turn are inherited from certain sentences the theory entails. What takes center-stage is the sentence, and it is the ontological commitment of sentences for which Quine has offered his famous criterion. The complete Quinean theory comprises three theses:

- (i) One is ontologically committed to an F just in case one *believes* a theory that is ontologically committed to an F .
- (ii) A theory is ontologically committed to an F just in case the theory *logically entails* a sentence that is ontologically committed to an F .
- (iii) A sentence is ontologically committed to an F just in case *if the sentence is true there is an F among the values of its variables*.

Although elements of this theory have been widely criticized, it remains fairly popular. I will go through some of its problems in order to state a less

ambitious but more plausible view—one that I think has a strong claim to be common ground in metaphysics today. Then I will use this modified theory to classify attempts to resolve the conflict between philosophy and the received ontology.

(iii) is problematic when applied beyond first-order languages. If we have higher-order variables, we can formulate “ $\exists X. X$ (Bill)” —a sentence whose ontological commitments are opaque. Does it carry commitment to a *set* of which Bill is a member, to a *property* Bill instantiates, or perhaps merely to *individuals* of which Bill is one? Each of these theses is validated by a semantic theory for the language of monadic second-order logic. There is a related problem when it comes to languages containing temporal or modal operators whose semantic clauses quantify over times or worlds. Do variables employed in the meta-language in interpreting a sentence count as belonging to the sentence? Or can we employ quantification over times or worlds in interpreting these sentences without thereby ascribing ontological commitment? It is not clear how to address these questions.

Even more importantly, (iii) starts delivering perplexing results as soon as we abandon standard formal languages. The English sentence “Someone is happy” clearly carries commitment to a person, even though it contains no variable whatsoever. Many insist that it does at the level of logical form, but the basis for this claim is obscure. Is this an empirical truth? If so, what if it turns out—as some actual linguists believe (cf. Jacobson, 1999)—that our best semantic theory for English does not postulate any variable in interpreting this sentence? Or is the claim based on a priori insight? I certainly don’t have either the intuition or the proof that any sentence in any natural language contains a variable. One often hears that postulating a variable in logical form is *unavoidable* if we want to capture the sentence’s truth-conditions. But this is surely false. Suppose the semantic value of ‘is happy’ is the property of being happy, the semantic value of ‘someone’ is the second-order property of being instantiated by someone, and suppose concatenation is interpreted as property-instantiation. Then “Someone is happy” says that the property of being happy instantiates the property of being instantiated by someone. This may not be the right semantics, but it is hard to see why it would be obvious that it isn’t.

(iii) is irremediably parochial. The reason it was taken seriously for a long time is two-fold: philosophers like first-order languages (because they have a nice clear syntax and semantics and because they have attractive meta-logical properties) and when applied to such languages the criterion delivers intuitively acceptable verdicts. Quine himself was fully aware of the parochialism and he did not mind it at all: his recommendation for resolving ontological disagreements was to start by restating our theories in

a canonical first-order form. He calls this restatement *regimentation*, a term that has misled many into thinking that he regarded the new theories as logically equivalent to the old ones. Given that he believed in the indeterminacy of translation, it is quite clear that he did not.

Those of us who remain convinced of the legitimacy of semantic notions could state a non-parochial version of (iii):

(iii') A sentence is ontologically committed to an F just in case it *says* that there is an F (i.e. if its *content* is that there is an F).

The verdicts that " $\exists x. \text{dog}(x)$ " is ontologically committed to a dog but " $\exists x. \text{cat}(x)$ " is not are plausible because the former says that there is a dog while the latter says no such thing. Whenever we are uncertain whether a sentence says that there is an entity of a certain type—for example, whether " $\exists X. X$ (Bill)" says that there is a property Bill has or whether "It rained" says that there is a past time—we are equally uncertain whether it is the case that if the sentence is true an entity of that type is among the values of the bound variables in an *appropriate* translation of the sentence to a first-order language.

(iii') cuts down the number of first-order sentences that are ontologically committed to a dog. Take, for example, the sentence " $\forall x. \text{dog}(x)$." If this sentence is true then there is a dog among the values of ' x .'⁴ On the other hand, " $\forall x. \text{dog}(x)$ " does not say that there is a dog, even though it does follow from what it says that there is. So, according to (iii) the sentence is ontologically committed to dogs but according to (iii') it is not. But this is not a problem. I don't think intuition favors the claim that the *sentence* " $\forall x. \text{dog}(x)$ " is ontologically committed to a dog—even though the *theory* that comprises the single sentence " $\forall x. \text{dog}(x)$ " surely is. The latter is guaranteed, whether we adopt (iii) or (iii') as long as we conceive of theories as sets of sentences closed under logical entailment.

This brings us to (ii)—Quine's theory about the ontological commitment of theories. Logical consequence, as it is usually understood, is bound up with the expressive power of a language, and this fact makes (ii) parochial in much the same way (iii) is. Consider Peano Arithmetic, formulated in a language whose non-logical constants are '0', "'", '+', and '·'. Is this theory ontologically committed to a natural number? The intuitive answer must surely be "yes"—this is the standard theory of natural numbers and it contains sentences such as " $\exists x. x = 0$," " $\exists x. x = 0'$," " $\exists x. x = 0''$," etc. Intuitively, this theory is committed the every natural number. Still, the theory

⁴ The reasoning here assumes that this is a sentence in a *classical* first-order language, i.e. that the domain of quantification is non-empty.

is not ontologically committed to any number according to (ii), because the language in which it is formulated does not have a number predicate, and consequently, the theory does not contain a sentence like “ $\exists x. \text{number}(x)$.”⁵ The fact that first-order Peano Arithmetic is ontologically committed to 0 and the fact that 0 is a natural number is no help because the theory does not logically entail that 0 is a natural number.

The right response to this problem might be to replace the requirement of logical entailment in (ii) with a notion of entailment that permits the extension of the language of the theory. First-order Peano Arithmetic is ontologically committed to natural numbers, one might say, because there is a way of introducing a number predicate ‘*N*’ and stating its relation to the non-logical expressions of the old theory such that the new theory logically entails a sentence that is ontologically committed to natural numbers. Since ‘*N*(0)’ and “ $\exists x. x=0$ ” are theorems of the extended theory, it logically entails “ $\exists x. N(x)$.”

But the response is problematic. Take for example a theory (let’s say it is Thales’s) that contains just one sentence: “ $\forall x. \text{water}(x)$.” By Quine’s own account, this theory is ontologically committed to water (for it logically entails “ $\exists x. \text{water}(x)$ ”) and to nothing else. This sounds right. Suppose we now extend the theory by introducing the one-place predicate ‘hydrogen’ and the two-place predicate ‘contains’ and by specifying the relation of the new expressions to ‘water’ through the following metaphysically necessary truth: “ $\forall x (\text{water}(x) \rightarrow \exists y (\text{hydrogen}(y) \wedge \text{contain}(x, y)))$.” The new theory logically entails “ $\exists x. \text{hydrogen}(x)$,” and is thus ontologically committed to hydrogen. But—I take it—we don’t want to say that Thales’s Theory carries such a commitment. Ontological commitment is a non-trivial matter, but presumably we don’t have to make substantive empirical discoveries like that water contains hydrogen to figure out what our own theories are committed to. So, this sort of theory extension does not preserve ontological commitment. And it is rather unclear what exactly the relevant difference between this case and the case of extending first-order Peano Arithmetic with a number predicate might be.

As in the case of (iii), what drives our judgments is an intuitive notion. We think Peano Arithmetic is ontologically committed to natural numbers because we think the theory entails a sentence that says there are numbers

⁵ Of course, the language of first-order Peano Arithmetic does contain a predicate whose extension comprises all and only the natural numbers. Under the standard interpretation, “ $x=x$ ” is satisfied by all and only the natural numbers. But the fact that the theory entails “ $\exists x. x=x$ ” can hardly be regarded as a proof that it is ontologically committed to the natural numbers.

and we think Thales's Theory is not ontologically committed to hydrogen because we think it does not entail a sentence that says that there is hydrogen. Whether this sentence can actually be formulated in the language of the theory is neither here nor there. I suggest that we drop the notion of logical entailment and use the intuitive notion entailment instead:

- (ii') A theory is ontologically committed to an F just in case the theory *entails* a sentence that is ontologically committed to an F .

This removes the parochialism of (ii) in the way in which helping ourselves to the notion of content did in the case of (iii). Like content, entailment is not language-bound:

"Snow is white" has the same content as "Schnee ist weiss" and "A dog is barking" entails " $\exists x (\text{dog}(x) \wedge \text{barking}(x))$ " even though these sentences belong to different languages.

Let's consider now the first plank of the Quinean theory, the claim that one's ontological commitments are the ontological commitments of the theories one believes. The first thing to note that if the theory is to be reductive then (i) has to be strengthened to the claim that we are ontologically committed to an F *in virtue* of believing a theory that is so-committed. The analogous strengthenings of (ii') and (iii') are unproblematic: it seems plausible that a theory carries ontological commitment in virtue of its entailments, and that a sentence carries ontological commitment in virtue of its content. It is not equally obvious that a person is ontologically committed in virtue of her beliefs. The attitude we bear to a theory in virtue of which we assume the ontological commitments of the theory must be *belief-like*—it must be a form of acceptance. But acceptance comes in many forms and varies along different scales. I can accept a theory tentatively or firmly, I can accept it temporarily (e.g. for the sake of discussion or evaluation) or for good, I can accept it on the basis of evidence I possess or on the authority of others, etc. Couldn't ontological commitment be a form of acceptance distinct from belief?

There are cases that suggest even the mere equivalence explicitly stated in (i) might be false. Consider, for example, Max who first hears from his parents about Einstein's theory of special relativity. Suppose what he hears is rather sketchy, imprecise, and in crucial parts simply inaccurate. Nonetheless, Max can surely accept the theory in some sense on the basis of such testimony. Sometimes this sort of acceptance comes short of being a belief—Max may even lack the prerequisite concepts to entertain the theory. Is it clear that in these cases Max is not ontologically committed to whatever Einstein's theory is ontologically committed to? He *subscribes* to the theory and this fact should be taken seriously. *If* we decide that Max

is ontologically committed to whatever the theory of special relativity is in virtue of his acceptance of the theory we reject (i). We would say that acceptance weaker than belief is sufficient for ontological commitment.

Here is a different example. Anna is a smart kid but she cruises the web too much. Somehow she picked up the belief that archeologists have determined that dragons were a kind of dinosaur, and so, she also came to believe that there once were dragons on earth. Is she ontologically committed to dragons? Does the world, as she takes it to be, contain dragons? This is unclear. The dragons of her world were dinosaurs, so perhaps the right thing to say is that Anna is committed to some extra dinosaurs, but not to dragons. *If* this is right, (i) is false: a form of acceptance that is stronger than belief is necessary for ontological commitment.

There is nothing in Quine that supports (i) against doubts of this kind and I don't think the subsequent literature hasn't much to offer either. In light of this, I think it is reasonable to retreat from (i) to a weaker claim:

- (i') One is ontologically committed to an F just in case one *accepts* (in the relevant sense) a theory that is ontologically committed to an F .

What exactly the relevant notion of acceptance amounts to is an open question. Putting the three planks together it goes as follows: one is ontologically committed to an F just in case one *accepts* (in the relevant sense) a theory that *entails* (in the ordinary sense) a sentence whose *content* (in the ordinary sense) is that there is an F .

Reconciliation between the received ontology and its philosophical rivals can take one of three paths, following one of the three components of the theory of ontological commitment. Traditionally, reconciliatory attempts focused on entailment or content. For example, to reconcile the received view about numbers with nominalism one might take the position that "There are infinitely many primes" does not entail " $\exists x. \text{number}(x)$ " or that " $\exists x. \text{number}(x)$ " does not say that there is a number. To reconcile the existence of hands with monism one might argue that "There is a hand and here is another" does not entail " $\exists x \exists y. x \neq y$ " or that " $\exists x \exists y. x \neq y$ " does not say that there is more than one thing.

The trouble with traditional approaches is that they save the received ontology by sacrificing the received logic or the received semantics. The fact that received theories can be *rephrased* in a certain way that avoids ontological commitment is in itself irrelevant as long as one does not insist that the rephrased theories have the same entailments with the same contents as the original ones. And once one insists on a tight relation between our familiar theories and the paraphrases one takes a revisionary stance either in

logic or in semantics. To do so, will elicit the same reaction from consistent defenders of philosophical modesty as a direct assault on the received ontology:

... if the theory seems to say, for example, that every person has a guardian angel in heaven, then the theory is true only if the angels in heaven really exist. (Rosen, 2005, p. 14)

If we want a principled way to address the conflict between received views and philosophical ontology it is best to focus on acceptance. The common core to all attitude-based approaches to reconciliation is that we are not committed to the plethora of entities received theories are because we do not accept those theories *in the sense in which acceptance carries ontological commitment*. This is a more promising line simply because it uncontroversial that there are many forms of acceptance and because there is no received opinion about exactly which of them are ontologically committing. By contrast, the received view is that there is a unitary notion of entailment and content.

I have argued that the key to a successful reconciliation is the recognition that sometimes our attitude towards established theories is non-committal. The question is *how* this is possible, and *when* does this happen.

3. Acceptance Weaker than Belief

The standard way to bring about an acceptance-based reconciliation between a received theory and a conflicting philosophical view is to claim that our usual form of acceptance towards the received theory is something weaker than belief. This is the *fictionalist* position.

What fictionalists about a certain theory *T* argue is that the virtues of *T* are independent of its truth. So, according to Hartry Field (1980), the principal virtue of mathematics is that it facilitates deduction within nominalistic theories. It can do so effectively even if it is false. Bas van Fraassen's (1980) opinion is that the aim of science is mere empirical adequacy. False theories may provide empirically adequate accounts of observable phenomena that are simple and elegant. Richard Joyce (2006) thinks many of the virtues of an ethical theory are practical. False theories may be at least as practically useful as true ones.

These three examples illustrate three different versions of fictionalism. Field thinks his target theory is *subsidiary* to another one: the point of mathematics is to serve the inferential needs of physics. Van Fraassen sees

physics as a *pumped-up* theory which aims at a smaller target than it seems to: all it is supposed to do is get the entailments about observables right. And Joyce considers ethics a mere *decoy*: a theory whose real function has nothing to do with discovering the truth about anything. What they have in common is the claim that the theories in question are in no way at fault if they happen to be false.

If all the virtues of a theory are independent of its truth it would be a mistake to believe it. If you are clearheaded, you will suspend belief, although you may well continue to act as if you believed in ordinary circumstances. (Let's call your attitude *belief minus*.)⁶ When in those circumstances you say that things are as the theory says they are you are not making an assertion, only acting as if you are. (Let's call your speech act *assertion minus*.) *Hermeneutic fictionalists* believe that we are in fact clearheaded: we accept some received theories without believing them and express our attitudes without making assertions.⁷ They offer an attitude-based reconciliation between a received ontology and its philosophical rivals.

Hermeneutic fictionalism does not involve commitment to any particular ontology—it is simply a strategy to level the playing field in which ontological debates are conducted. The strategy tends to be deployed by proponents of revisionary ontologies, but this is only incidental.⁸ If you were committed to numbers, electrons, or values, you *could* still be a hermeneutic fictionalist with regard to received theories about these entities. But you would forfeit the standard argument in favor of your ontology: you would concede to your opponent that the reason the theory about the entities you believe in is generally accepted is *not* that it is true.

Fictionalists tend to exert the bulk of their efforts in arguing that the virtues of their target theories have nothing to do with truth. But even if one were to grant that, there would remain two further issues to address before they can declare victory.⁹ We need an explanation of what belief minus is

⁶ Fictionalists often think belief minus is a relation we bear to the contents of fictions when we are immersed in them. I regard this as a mere analogy. As I understand it, fictionalists need not insist that the analogy is perfect, or even particularly useful. So, to point out disanalogies between our attitude to Sherlock Holmes and the number 2 is not an effective way to argue against fictionalism.

⁷ Fictionalists who think we should be clearheaded (but perhaps are not) are called *revolutionary* fictionalists. The hermeneutic/revolutionary distinction is from Burgess (1983). Revolutionary fictionalists who think we *do* believe the target theory advocate a change of attitude, and hence, abandon modesty.

⁸ For example, Yablo (1998) advocates a fictionalist attitude towards mathematics but remains agnostic about the existence of mathematical entities.

⁹ I discussed these problems for fictionalism in Szabó (forthcoming).

and a defense of the suggestion that it is at least possible for us to bear such an attitude.

Let's start with the first problem. It is superficially tempting to say that belief minus is the attitude we bear to theories that have been discarded but that continue to be widely employed for certain limited purposes, such as Newton's theory of gravity, Dalton's law of partial pressures, or Wegener's views on continental drift, to name just a few. But this gives us a false analogy: the virtues of these theories are *not* independent of their truth. They are false but approximately true, and the fact that they come near enough to truth seems to be the reason why they work in certain settings. We accept these theories tentatively and we regard their falsehood as a strike against them. By contrast, the fictionalist thinks the truth or falsity of his target theory should be of *no concern* to us.

Hermeneutic fictionalists face a dilemma. If they think belief minus is a rational attitude, then it looks like belief minus collapses into a mere *assumption*. For if we really employ a theory for some limited purpose—to aid our complex reasoning, to predict our future observations, to strengthen our wavering resolve, etc.—then we have good reason to adopt it for those exact purposes and for nothing else. But even those who doubt that we are actually pursuing the truth when we are engaged with these theories must acknowledge that we think our acceptance of these theories is open-ended, and thus, intuitively quite different from an assumption. If, on the other hand, they think belief minus is not a rational attitude, they completely abandon modesty. For the view that our attitude towards a received theory, such as mathematics, physics or ethics is not adequately backed by reasons flies in the face of what our ordinary views about these attitudes are.

But let's assume that there is a way to identify belief minus as a rational attitude, distinct from mere assumption. The second problem the hermeneutic fictionalist faces is to explain how belief minus is attainable. The difficulty is that belief minus is supposed to be compatible with philosophical reflection. Someone who bears this attitude towards a theory should be able to endorse it in ordinary contexts and reject it in philosophical ones. In other words, the attitude should be *sensitive* to the difference between those contexts.

It might seem that this sort of sensitivity is a fact of life. There is, after all, an obvious difference between the correctness conditions of ordinary and philosophical existence claims. It would be odd to object to a proposed proof in arithmetic on the grounds of the alleged non-existence of numbers, while such an objection during a philosophical debate would be entirely appropriate. Isn't the fact that we all recognize this enough to show that it is possible for an attitude to be sensitive to the difference between ordinary and

philosophical contexts?¹⁰ I don't think so. For a difference in correctness conditions has an alternative explanation, one that does not require there to be a difference *in kind* between the context of a mathematical discussion and the context of a philosophical one.

The alternative explanation is that it is *always* inappropriate to challenge the prevailing assumptions, unless the challenge is signaled explicitly. When we are discussing a mathematical proof we take the existence of numbers for granted. To object that this presupposition is unwarranted would derail the conversation from its current direction—hence it is inappropriate. There is nothing special about philosophical existence claims in this regard. To object to the proof on the grounds that the person advancing it has a bad track record, or on the grounds that the proof is too complicated to merit serious attention, or on the grounds that anyone who disagreed with it would be fired would be equally inappropriate, if the objection came out of the blue.¹¹

If philosophy has a proper subject-matter it is hard to believe that there is a difference in kind between ordinary and philosophical contexts. After all, we don't think we transport ourselves into a special context when we start discussing astronomy, philology, or stamp-collecting. Why would philosophy be different? There are more or less relaxed contexts—contexts where we are more or less patient towards far-flung criticism. The fact that raising specifically philosophical objections is in many contexts inappropriate can be adequately explained by assuming that those contexts are not sufficiently relaxed. But belief minus is supposed to be sensitive not to the relaxed/none-relaxed distinction but to the ordinary/philosophical one. If the latter distinction is a myth, so is the non-committal attitude hermeneutic fictionalists think we bear towards various theories.

4. Acceptance Stronger than Belief

Hermeneutic fictionalism rests on the idea that our sincere utterances in ordinary circumstances are sometimes not genuine assertions. Rather, they express a form of commitment that is weaker than belief, and hence does not reveal ontological commitment. We display our genuine commitments only in contexts where matters of ontology are at stake. If so, we should

¹⁰ Cf. Chalmers (2009).

¹¹ It might seem that philosophical contexts are special because *nothing* is shielded from criticism. I think this is an illusion. It is inappropriate to object to the claim that water is necessarily H₂O in a philosophical debate on the grounds that water is a mixture of different substances. Such an objection is not relevant to the topic and accomplishes nothing besides derailing the conversation. The fact that the objection is true is no excuse.

never be reluctant to ascribe ontological commitment to *philosophers* when they make unequivocal pronouncements. But sometimes we are.

Anyone who has taught Berkeley knows that students often read him as denying the existence of tables and chairs, mountains and trees. Berkeley says over and over again that he does no such thing but his words have a hard time getting across. This is because he also says that the familiar objects he thinks are real are nothing more than collections of ideas, and because he denies the existence of matter. Since we don't think tables and chairs, mountains and trees are collections ideas and we do think that they are material, we are naturally reluctant to grant that Berkeley is ontologically committed to them.

Leibniz's insistence that monads cannot interact with one another and change due to an inner principle poses a similar problem. Once the metaphysical picture is clear, it is hard to accept his insistence that he does not deny that a billiard ball can cause the motion of another. Leibniz points out that he has room for the right kind of correlation between aggregates and that he thinks there is nothing more to causation than that, but this does not change the fact that causation is a form of interaction and that he categorically denies that interaction is possible. Again, despite forceful pronouncements to the contrary, it is hard to resist the judgment that Leibniz's ontology does not contain causes and effects.

Lewis famously said in *The Plurality of Worlds* that he is a theist. Those who read him tend to disagree: the fact that he is a modal realist and that he believes that many non-actual worlds contain deities seems insufficient to show that he is ontologically committed to gods. But not according to Lewis's own theory—he thinks that non-actual worlds are as real as this one, even if they are causally and spatio-temporally isolated from us. Quantification appropriate in discussions of ontology cannot be restricted to what is local, so a modal realist of Lewis's stripe really should say with full sincerity that there are gods. Be that as it may, few of us would concede that Lewis was a theist.

It seem that if we are not willing to concede that Berkeley's ontology contains mountains, that Leibniz's had causes, and that Lewis's was full of gods we must either say that these philosophers were mistaken about what they believed or that they were wrong about what they said. Mistaken belief would presumably have come from a shortcoming in conceptual mastery: perhaps Berkley did not have the concept of a mountain, Leibniz failed when it came to the concept of a cause, and Lewis was incompetent with the concept of existence. A mistake about what they said would have to come from a semantic confusion: perhaps these philosophers were wrong about what the words 'mountain,' 'cause,' or 'exist' mean in the public language.

But when we step back for a moment we should find these accusations quite implausible.

Why not take both the philosophers' pronouncements and our own reactions at face value? I think Berkley really did believe that there are mountains, but his ontology does not contain mountains (only ideas of mountains). Similarly, Leibniz was entirely correct when he ascribed to himself the belief that there are causes, but there are no causes in the world as he takes it to be (only correlations). And Lewis did indeed believe that there are countless gods, even though he was not ontologically committed to gods (only to possible gods). To have my cake and eat it too, I propose to decouple ontological commitment from belief.

My suggestion is the mirror image of hermeneutic fictionalism. The hermeneutic fictionalist agrees with Quine that the form of acceptance that carries ontological commitment is belief, but parts way with him in insisting that our attitude towards received views is a weaker form of acceptance. I am on board with Quine when it comes to our attitude towards received views: I think we do believe them. What I reject is the contention that the form of acceptance that carries ontological commitment is belief. I think it is a stronger form of acceptance.

The fictionalist thinks the virtues of certain theories are *independent of* their truth. I disagree: I think truth is part of what makes any good theory good. But the virtues of certain theories *go beyond* their truth. When it comes to theories that do not aim at the truth, fictionalists recommend that we should not believe them—our attitude should be something less: an attitude I called *belief minus*. When it comes to theories that aim at more than mere truth, I recommend that we should not merely believe them—our attitude should be something more: an attitude I call *belief plus*.

Like the fictionalist, I will have to say something about the form of acceptance I am postulating. Before I turn to that task, I'd like to highlight what I take to be the chief advantages of the view I am proposing. Like hermeneutic fictionalism, I offer an attitude-based reconciliation between the received ontology and its philosophical rivals. This means that I take the logic and the semantics that governs our discourse at face value. No hidden ambiguities, no unexpected entailments. Unlike hermeneutic fictionalism, I also go along with our ordinary assessment of what our attitude is towards the received ontology. I acknowledge the soundness of the one-liners that show that shapes, directions, unobservables, causes, mental states, rights, values, properties, propositions, events, concepts, thoughts, etc. exist. What I reject is the move from this admission to the claim that these entities are elements of the world as I take it to be. I resist the move from belief to belief plus.

So, how does belief plus differ from mere belief? Consider Berkeley and his belief that there are mountains. It seems natural to say that Berkeley does not fully understand the content of his belief. This is not to say he does not understand it at all—he surely passes every reasonable test for possessing the relevant concepts. The problem is that he does not know *what mountains* are: he thinks they are collections of ideas, not material objects. This sort of mistake does not undermine his ability to think about or refer to mountains. What it does is undermine his ability to provide an adequate *explanation* for the truth of his beliefs about mountains. This is, I think, what guarantees that his belief falls short of being belief plus, and this is why he is not ontologically committed to mountains. Belief plus is belief plus explanation.

Some questions ask for more than true, relevant, and informative answers. When I ask you whether you know what time it is a simple “yes” will not suffice. What I really wanted is for you to tell me what time it is and thereby show that you know it. A more intriguing example of a question that asks for more than a simple answer was given by Sylvain Bromberger (1992, p. 22). Imagine the following situation. Holmes and Watson are investigating a case. A man lies dead in a room with a bullet in his head. He is not wearing a glove and the fingerprints on the gun do not match his. The doors and the windows are locked from the inside by the victim and have not touched before the investigators entered the room. The chimney is too narrow to allow passage for a grown man. There are no secret doors and hidden outlets and there is nobody hiding in the room.

Watson asks the obvious question: “How did the murderer escape?” and Holmes answers: “Through the chimney.” Now suppose Holmes has already figured out that the murderer was a dwarf. Then his answer was true, relevant, and informative. It was nonetheless inappropriate. Watson’s question asked not just for an answer—he wanted an explanation of the answer.

Ontological questions, I contend, also ask for explanations. They are simple by form and content—they are questions like “Are there symmetrical relations?,” “Do complex numbers exist?,” “Are colors real?” But their simplicity is misleading—what they ask is not a just “yes” or “no” but also an account of how the “yes” or “no” could be the right answer. Such an explanation cannot be given without knowing what the entity whose existence is at stake is. One engages an ontological problem only when one is in a position to give what an ontological question asks for, i.e. when one gives an explanation for the truth of an existential proposition or its negation. So, the conflict between received ontology and philosophical ones is illusory: there are received views about what there is but there is no received ontology.

My view makes genuine ontological disagreements relatively rare. Knowing what an F is turns out to be prerequisite for having an *ontological view* about F s. By contrast, you can think and talk about F s—have a *view* about F s—without knowing that. When you know what an F is and you believe there is an F you bear belief plus to the proposition that there is an F . But you bear belief too, and in the course of an ordinary conversation when ontological matters are not at stake you express nothing more than the weaker attitude. When you think you know what an F is but you are mistaken then you might think that you are revealing your ontological commitments in expressing your beliefs but you are doing no such thing. I suspect this is what happens to a number of philosophers—I think it happened to Berkley, Leibniz and Lewis.

Are the philosophical debates about ontology genuine ontological disagreements? I am not sure. Take the debate about the existence of numbers. Do we know what they are? I think this is open to serious doubt. I believe that natural numbers satisfy the Peano Axioms—this much is surely received view. I also believe that the number 2 is not identical to Julius Caesar. This is another well-established opinion independent of the Peano Axioms. I believe that the number two cannot be identical to both $\{\{\emptyset\}\}$ and $\{\emptyset, \{\emptyset\}\}$ for these sets are different. I am inclined to think that the number two is distinct from both, in fact that it is not a set at all. But I am not too sure about this (cf. Benacerraf, 1965). Some think the number 2 is a property. I like the idea that it is a *sui generis* entity: it is what it is and no other thing. But I worry that this only disguises my ignorance of what it really is. If my worry is well-founded I have no ontological view about natural numbers. Some philosophers may not be better off in this regard than I am. My comfort is that my belief that there are natural numbers is unshaken by these doubts.¹²

5. Clear and Distinct Ideas

While the meta-ontological outlook defended here is unusual, I think it has a historical precedent.¹³ Some of his comments suggest that Descartes held

¹² What can I offer to a nominalist? I think she should rephrase her view in a slightly more cautious fashion: if numbers are what we normally take them to be then they do not exist. When revisionary ontologies are stated in this way, I think they must be taken seriously.

¹³ I have defended a similar view in Szabó (2003). There I have suggested that belief plus is not a propositional attitude—rather it is a mental state whose content is a mere propositional constituent. Ontological commitment to unicorns is expressed by saying that one believes in unicorns, and this, I have argued, is not equivalent to saying that one believes

a similar view. In the *Second Meditation*, immediately after he runs the *cogito* argument, Descartes raises a question that casts doubt on what exactly the argument has achieved. He writes:

But I do not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this ‘I’ is, that now necessarily exists. So I must be on guard against carelessly taking something else to be this ‘I,’ and so making a mistake in every item of knowledge that I maintain is the most certain and evident of all. (Descartes, 1641/1984, AT VII 25)

The passage suggests that while Descartes believes he has shown that he exists, he thinks his knowledge may contain a mistake. What he has in mind seems to be misidentification—since he does not know *what* he is, he may be mistaking himself for something else. And if that other thing fails to exist then he made a mistake in drawing the conclusion of the *cogito*. This is a doubly curious idea. First, it is unclear in what sense one might be able to misidentify oneself in thought. If I am delusional and believe myself to be Julius Caesar, the thought that I exist is still about me, not about the Roman general. Second, even if I can misidentify myself in thought, it is not clear how I could be mistaken that this thing exists, if I have indeed proved that it does. Isn’t it obvious that if one knows a proposition then the proposition is true, and hence, it cannot be mistaken?

As it becomes clear from the discussion following this passage, Descartes wants to make sure that nothing is included in his idea of himself that does not properly belong to it. Once he shows that the idea contains only what is required for entertaining the possibility that an evil demon is deceiving him, the possibility of the mistake goes away, and the conclusion of the *cogito* is restated:

I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason,—words whose meaning I have been ignorant of until now. But for all that I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. (Descartes, 1641/1984, AT VII 27)

This might solve the first puzzle. Despite the slightly misleading phrase “carelessly taking something else to be this ‘I’” Descartes is not concerned about misidentification, but about misdescription, which of course is not

the proposition that unicorns exist, or any proposition about unicorns, for that matter. While I stand by my conclusions, I have grown dissatisfied with the fact that they are so tightly connected to semantic considerations. The core of my position—a core that withstands a change in argumentative strategy—is that our attitude that carries ontological commitment is stronger than belief. Whether it is a propositional attitude is of secondary importance.

only possible but commonplace. He grants that the proposition that he exists is *about him*—what he is worried about is that the idea of himself within that proposition *misrepresents him*. But the second puzzle is as alive as before. How can we understand the possible mistake in Descartes knowledge he is worried about? The proposition is true, so how is it mistaken?

Here is an idea. We need some way to distinguish between two distinct contents associated with the sentence “I exist.” One is the proposition the sentence expresses in a given context—this is what has shown to be true by the *cogito*. The other is a proposition that results from unpacking all the information encoded in the ideas that make up the first proposition. This one can be false if the idea expressed by ‘I’ misrepresents the person it refers to. Explanation of the truth of the first proposition would need to go through the second, and if the explanation is correct, the second proposition must be true as well. I conjecture that the words ‘real’ and ‘truly existent’ in the restatement of the conclusion of the *cogito* after Descartes has answered the question what he is marks the admittance of the self into the Cartesian ontology. Now that I know what I am I don’t just know that I exist; I also fully *understand* this proposition.¹⁴

The *cogito* is not an outlier, when it comes to settling ontological questions in Descartes’s philosophy. He has strikingly similar things to say in discussing pain.

. . .when someone feels an intense pain, the perception he has of it is indeed very clear, but it is not always distinct. For people commonly confuse this perception with an obscure judgment they make concerning the nature of something which they think exists in the painful spot and which they suppose to resemble the sensation of pain; but in fact it is the sensation alone which they perceive clearly. (Descartes, 1644/1984, AT VIII 22)

Someone who feels intense pain knows that she is in pain. Nonetheless, there is a possibility of a mistake in this very item of knowledge. Although as clear as any idea can be, this person’s idea of pain may not be distinct. This happens if she is mistaken about *what* pain is, for example, if she thinks it is a sensation that is located in the body or resembles something located in the body. As long as her idea of pain remains confused she does not fully understand the proposition that pain exists. Consequently, she is not in

¹⁴ Descartes says he was hitherto ignorant of the meaning of words like ‘mind,’ ‘intelligence,’ ‘intellect’ or ‘reason,’ and perhaps ‘I.’ This is an overstatement—he surely would not insist that he lacks what we would normally call linguistic competence with these words. I suggest that he means only that he lacked full understanding of these words, which boils down to nothing more or less than that he did not know what these things are.

a position to give an account of the truth of the proposition and, I contend, she cannot address the ontological question about pain.

Descartes thinks philosophical questions in general, and ontological ones in particular can be adequately discussed only after we made our ideas clear and distinct. Clarity for an idea is nothing more than being “present and accessible to the attentive mind,” but distinctness is something much more demanding. Descartes says that a distinct idea must be “so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear.” (Descartes, 1644/1984, AT VIII 22). What exactly this amounts to is somewhat hazy, but in practice Descartes always insists that someone who has a clear and distinct idea of something must know what that thing is. As I read him, Descartes thinks we are not ontologically committed to a thing until we have a clear and distinct idea of it. Before one embarks on the journey of philosophical reflection one has no ontology. In this, I fully agree with him.

Let me close the paper by summarizing its main claims. I have argued that the ontological attitude—our attitude that carries ontological commitment—is not mere belief. The fact that I believe that there are *F*s does not settle the question whether my ontology contains *F*s. Unlike belief, the ontological attitude requires full understanding of the proposition believed. Such a full understanding is by no means guaranteed by semantic and conceptual competence—we can and often do think thoughts whose content we fail to understand fully. Full understanding of the proposition that there are *F*s requires knowledge of what *F*s are, and such knowledge is a precondition for explaining the truth of that proposition. What ontology aims at are explanations for the truth of true existential propositions. Consequently, ordinary existential beliefs can be reconciled with philosophical ontologies, as long as the nature of the relevant entities is not fully understood. Since I think this is indeed the case with most controversial entities, I conclude that the received ontology poses no threat to continued modesty in matters philosophical.¹⁵

¹⁵ Earlier versions of the paper have been presented at Workshop on Ontological Commitment, University of Paris, IHPST and at the Eidos Conference on ‘Because’ in Geneva. The final version was given at the 6th European Conference on Analytic Philosophy in Kraków. I thank the participants of these events for discussion and comments. I also thank Tamar Gendler for numerous conversations on the topic.

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