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# Speaking of Existence: a Previously Unmentioned Meta-Ontological Dispute Between Quinean Ontologists

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SPEAKING OF EXISTENCE  
A PREVIOUSLY UNMENTIONED META-ONTOLOGICAL DISPUTE  
BETWEEN QUINEAN ONTOLOGISTS

by

Charles Perkins

A Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
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at

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May 2018

## ABSTRACT

### SPEAKING OF EXISTENCE A PREVIOUSLY UNMENTIONED META-ONTOLOGICAL DISPUTE BETWEEN QUINEAN ONTOLOGISTS

by

Charles Perkins

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2018  
Under the Supervision of Professor Joshua Spencer

In hopes of prompting a meta-ontological debate among eliminativist, Quinean ontologists, this paper shows that Trenton Merricks and Peter van Inwagen's disagreement about the philosophy of language implies a meta-ontological disagreement. I first show that, according to van Inwagen's philosophy of language, only artificial-language sentences assert positive existence propositions. I then use my analysis of van Inwagen's philosophy of language to define the concept of apparent ontological commitment that he presents without a definition in his essay "Alston on ontological commitment." I then present a previously unrecognized meta-ontological disagreement between Merricks and van Inwagen. I conclude with a discussion of the significance of this disagreement: multiple conceptions of being are equally legitimate interpretations of Quine's meta-ontology, and so there is no settled, single Quinean meta-ontology.

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In Loving Memory  
Of the grandparents whom I lost  
As I was working towards this degree:

Wilhelmina Ann Forbes  
November 23, 1933 — November 28, 2016  
nurse, master gardener,  
firecracker

&

Hal Norwood Perkins  
October 23, 1919 — January 23, 2018  
architect, musician,  
beloved mentor to countless people

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## 1. Introduction

Two ontologists, Trenton Merricks (2001) and Peter van Inwagen (1990), believe “there are no tables or chairs or any other visible objects except living organisms” (1990, 1). This thesis is the *eliminativist thesis*. While they agree on what there is, Merricks and van Inwagen disagree about the truth or falsehood of natural-language sentences such as “Chairs exist.” According to eliminativism, there are no chairs, yet van Inwagen thinks that the sentence “Chairs exist” is true in most contexts of utterance, and Merricks thinks that it is constantly false. Van Inwagen has recognized this disagreement about the correct eliminativist philosophy of language: “[Trenton Merricks] adopt what is fashionably called an ‘error theory’ of the sentences we use when we are speaking about artifacts...they will say that—with some obvious exceptions like ‘I wanted to sit down, but there was no chair’—the propositions those sentences express are false” (van Inwagen 2014e, 6). He has also emphasized that, while he believes there are almost no ordinary objects, a sentence such as “Chairs exist” is usually true:

When my wife said to me yesterday, ‘The chair you said you’d carry upstairs is still in the living room,’ what she asserted was (*I say*) true. True *without qualification*. True *when taken straightforwardly and literally*. True *tout court*. True *simpliciter*. True *full stop*. True *period*. Not ‘true in the loose and popular sense but false in the strict and philosophical sense,’ but *just true*. (10)

While their disagreement about such sentences is thus well-documented, what Merricks and van Inwagen have not discussed is their *meta-ontological* disagreement.

A meta-ontology is a theory of the nature of being, so an eliminativist meta-ontological disagreement is a disagreement about the nature of being between philosophers who agree on the eliminativist thesis. This meta-ontological disagreement is as yet undiscussed because it is unrecognized. In hopes of prompting a meta-ontological debate among eliminativist ontologists,

this paper shows that Merricks and van Inwagen's disagreement about the philosophy of language implies a meta-ontological disagreement.

To that end, this paper first shows (§2) that, according to van Inwagen's philosophy of language, only artificial-language, "Tarskian" sentences such as " $\exists x x$  is a chair" assert positive existence propositions. (The word "positive" is used here to distinguish a positive proposition about an object's existence from a negative proposition, such as "I'd like to give you a pen, but there isn't a single one in this room.")

This restriction is implied but not explicitly stated in van Inwagen's "Introduction: inside and outside the ontology room" (2014e). To show that the restriction follows from his explicit claims, I summarize (§2.1) his philosophy of language before I argue (§2.2) for the restriction. I also develop (§2.3) the concept of apparent ontological commitment that he presents without a definition in his essay "Alston on ontological commitment" (2014b).

I then present (§3) a previously unrecognized meta-ontological disagreement between Merricks and van Inwagen. The paper concludes (§4) with a discussion of the significance of this disagreement for eliminativist ontology and ontology in general.

## 2. The implied restriction on positive existence propositions in van Inwagen's philosophy of language

### 2.1 Summarizing van Inwagen's philosophy of language

Van Inwagen's philosophy of language makes a distinction between two languages and another distinction between two contexts. The language distinction is the distinction between artificial languages and natural languages. Van Inwagen calls the artificial language in question *Tarskian* and says that its vocabulary "consists of closed or open sentences and closed or open terms of English (or some natural language) and the sentential connectives, brackets, quantifiers,

variables, and identity sign of the vocabulary of first-order logic (so-called) with identity—perhaps supplemented by items from the vocabulary of various well-defined extensions of first-order logic with identity” (2014e, 1). The context distinction circumscribes what van Inwagen calls the *ontology room*. The ontology room is a context of utterance (2014e, 3). Insofar as van Inwagen’s philosophy of language relates to ontology, all other contexts of utterance are outside of the ontology room. Any given sentence is, of course, in a language and can be tokened in different contexts. Therefore, in van Inwagen’s philosophy of language a token of a sentence is in either natural language or Tarskian and either inside or outside of the ontology room. So there are four permutations of language and context in which a sentence may occur. They are summarized in the following table:

Table 1: Language and Context

inside, natural language (INL)	outside, natural language (ONL)
inside, Tarskian (ITA)	outside, Tarskian (OTA)

One has to follow certain rules of communication if one is inside the ontology room:

*Rule 1:* Inside, everyone must speak in Tarskian, or if one speaks in natural language, one is then understood by other discussants inside the ontology room to have expressed the Tarskian sentence that is the “most obvious Tarskian translation” of the natural language sentence one has said (2014e, 2). For example, if one says, “Chairs exist,” one’s sentence expresses the proposition expressed by the Tarskian “ $\exists x x$  is a chair.”

*Rule 2:* If a natural-language sentence has two obvious Tarskian translations, the discussant who produced that natural-language sentence must declare which of those translations the natural-language sentence entails. The natural-language sentence always expresses the specified translation after this declaration is made (2014e, 2, note 6).

*Rule 3:* Speaking Tarskian outside of the ontology room immediately moves a conversation inside (2014e, 7). Van Inwagen puts this point differently, saying “ ‘outside’ speakers are not only not speaking Tarskian but are not committed to the ‘obvious’ translations of their sentences into Tarskian” (2014 e, 7). My *Rule 3* captures the

situation, since van Inwagen's rule does not eliminate the outside/ Tarskian context/ language permutation but does not allow Tarskian to be spoken outside.

In addition to presenting these rules, van Inwagen says that ONL does not express positive existence propositions. He says, "the everyday sentence is neutral with respect to metaphysics or ontology. It either has no metaphysical implications or has only such metaphysical implications as would be accepted by every nonrevisionary metaphysician" (2014b, 147). An ONLY sentence that seems to express a positive existence proposition is a sentence that expresses a proposition that can be true without the existence of whatever it seems to assert the existence of.

For example, outside "Chairs exist" can be true without the existence of chairs. Since van Inwagen thinks there are no chairs, if he thinks an outside token of the sentence "Chairs exist" expresses a true proposition, he must allow that "Chairs exist" expresses a true proposition when there are no chairs, at least outside of the ontology room. I present but do not argue for these rules and van Inwagen's claim about ONL because I am investigating only the implications of his philosophy of language. I must refer readers who would like to know more about van Inwagen's view on ONL to his "Introduction: inside and outside of the ontology room" (2014e), in which he makes his case for the claim that outside of the ontology room "Chairs exist" is true without the existence of chairs.

Since, in van Inwagen's philosophy of language, natural language is either INL or ONL, and van Inwagen is explicit that ONL does not express positive existence propositions, showing that INL does not express such propositions will show that natural language does not express them at all. Therefore, I will argue that van Inwagen's philosophy of language restricts positive existence propositions to artificial language by showing in the following section that INL does not express such propositions.

## 2.2 How van Inwagen's philosophy of language restricts positive existence propositions to artificial language

*Rule 3* makes OTA trivial, in that its moving a conversation into the ontology room causes OTA to automatically change to ITA and ONL does not assert existence. Therefore, when investigating which permutations of language and context in van Inwagen's philosophy of language express positive existence propositions, we need only consider ITA and INL.

While van Inwagen uses the term "most obvious Tarskian translation" to describe the interplay of INL and ITA, he also explains limitations of explaining the rules of the ontology room in terms of obvious translation. Speaking as an interlocutor, he asks himself:

When you speak of 'the obvious translation' of a natural-language sentence into Tarskian, it's not at all clear what you mean. Consider the natural-language sentence 'If everything has a size, then everything has a shape'. Do not that sentence itself, the sentence 'Everything has a size  $\rightarrow$  everything has a shape' and the sentence ' $\forall x (x \text{ has a size}) \rightarrow \forall x (x \text{ has a shape})$ ' *all* count as 'obvious translations' of that sentence into Tarskian? The third of these seems to be what you would call '*the* obvious translation' of 'If everything has a size, then everything has a shape' into Tarskian. But on what ground do you 'privilege' that translation? (2014e, 3, note 8)

The above passage shows that van Inwagen (2014e) is virtuously vague about what makes a translation obvious. Van Inwagen suggests that his readers investigate his essay "A theory of properties" (2014a) and the fourth section of "Being, existence, and ontological commitment" (2014c) to better understand what an obvious translation is (2014e, 3, note 8). In the remainder of this section, I investigate these essays in order to explain the relationship between INL and ITA.

This investigation shows that INL cannot express a positive existence proposition without depending on ITA for its meaning. Then, since the only context in which natural language expresses propositions without depending on ITA for meaning is outside of the ontology room and since natural language sentences do not assert existence in that context, natural language

sentences cannot, according to van Inwagen's philosophy of language, assert positive existence propositions.

In the following excerpt from "A theory of properties," van Inwagen (2014a) discusses what he calls "the canonical language of quantification" in order to explain that certain natural-language phrases are used appropriately in the ontology room in place of " $\forall$ " and " $\exists$ " and that natural-language phrases are used appropriately in the ontology room in place of " $\forall$ " and " $\exists$ " and that natural-language pronouns—notwithstanding concerns of convenience—are just as good as variables:

The canonical language of quantification does not essentially involve the symbols ' $\forall$ ' and ' $\exists$ .' Natural-language phrases like 'it is true of everything that it is such that' will do as well, for the symbols are merely shorthand ways of writing such phrases. And the canonical language of quantification does not essentially involve variables—' $x$ ', ' $y$ ', and so on. For variables are nothing more than pronouns: 'variables' are simply a stock of typographically distinct third-person-singular pronouns; having such a stock at one's disposal is no more than a device for facilitating cross reference when one makes complicated statements. (van Inwagen 2014a, 160)

This discussion suggests that the canonical language of quantification is Tarskian plus certain approved or canonized natural-language phrases, some of which can be used as logical operators.

And what makes a language artificial, even more so than its origin story, is our ability to canonize or completely describe it (Gunter 1992, 3-4). Van Inwagen does not provide such an inventory, but his use of the term "canon" implies that the number of natural-language phrases used as operators in the canonical language of quantification is finite and thus consistent with its artificiality. I should emphasize that these operator phrases are distinct from the "close or open terms of English (or some natural language)" (2014e, 1) that are also part of Tarskian. While, due to the properties of natural language, these other terms are infinite in number, they do not prevent the complete description of Tarskian that makes it an artificial language. By referring to all of them, as van Inwagen (2014e, 1) does, one can completely describe Tarskian.

In the fourth section of “Being, existence, and ontological commitment,” van Inwagen (2014c) argues that using artificial language for ontological debate is methodologically the correct approach because doing so avoids ambiguity and facilitates investigation of the ontological implications of one’s theories (85). Applying this justification for using the canonical language of quantification to our definition of the ontology room, we can understand the ontology room as a context of utterance that is a conversation, conducted the right way, about ontology. The following, from van Inwagen’s “Introduction” (2014e), supports this conclusion: “One remark that I have heard more than once in the meta-ontology room is that I have no right to call the ontology room by that name; I ought to call it the *Quinean* ontology room or some such. Well, we all have a right to our opinions, however ill-judged they may be” (1, note 2).

What makes a translation “obvious” is that discussants in the ontology room are able to make a reliable assumption about what ITA sentence is the obvious translation of an INL sentence, even though it seems many sentences will have multiple equally obvious translations into the canonical language of quantification. Discussants in the ontology room are able to make these assumptions because they all usually translate from natural-language sentences to the same Tarskian or canonical-language-of-quantification sentences. And following *Rule 2*, they recognize when it is not possible to count on this consistency of their translation habits, so they know when they need to declare a certain translation the most obvious Tarskian translation of a natural-language sentence.

Thus, there is a usually adequate correspondence relation between INL sentences and ITA sentences that, when found inadequate, discussants complete by following *Rule 2*. Van Inwagen calls the ITA sentences that correspond to INL sentences by that relation “most obvious

Tarskian translations,” and discussants who use Tarskian to symbolize natural language know which ITA sentence their INL sentences map onto or correspond with.

From here on, I use the acronym MOTT to represent the phrase “most obvious Tarskian translation.” For each INL sentence that a discussant in the ontology room could be expected to understand as an ontological claim, there is a MOTT. The rules of the ontology room determine if one needs to declare the MOTT of an INL sentence. I present the function **MOTT** in bold type to distinguish it as a *function that yields a MOTT* and not a MOTT itself. **MOTT** replaces an INL utterance with its MOTT. Thus, Discussants in the ontology room—suppose there are two, George and Connie—talk to each other in the following way: George wants to say, “ $\exists x x$  is a chair” and, having grown tired of pronouncing, “backwards capital E, lower case  $x$  ...” or “It is true of at least one thing such that...” he says “Chairs exist.” Connie hears “Chairs exist,” and she infers that George expects her to derive **MOTT**(“Chairs exist”). She thus infers that he is saying “ $\exists x x$  is a chair.” Thus, George and Connie use **MOTT** to provide a convenient system of encryption that allows them to discuss in Tarskian or the canonical language of quantification without pronouncing its cumbersome notation. Knowing what sentence is a MOTT of an INL sentence is an esoteric skill, but all this communication happens, after all, in the ontology room. Multiple INL sentences will have the same MOTT. Therefore, anyone who understands Tarskian is able to produce multiple INL cyphertexts of ITA sentences that other discussants are able to decode with **MOTT**, such as “There is at least one chair,” “Chairs are real,” “There are chairs out there,” and so on.

That the cyphertexts of an ITA sentence are multiple does not undermine the claim that in the ontology room, INL is encrypted ITA because **MOTT** can use multiple natural utterances to yield the same Tarskian utterance. One might ask why discussants in the ontology room cannot



have another function—call it **WOTT**—that operates in the other direction, from Tarskian to obvious English translations. **WOTT** does not work because any one Tarskian sentence has multiple natural-language translations, such as “Chairs exist,” “There is at least one chair,” “Chairs are real,” or “There are chairs out there,” for “ $\exists x x$  is a chair.” So **WOTT**(“ $\exists x x$  is a chair.”)  $\neq$  **WOTT**(“ $\exists x x$  is a chair.”) unless one gets lucky and **WOTT** picks the same **WOTT** (typographically analogous to **MOTT**) both times. Thus, **WOTT** runs into a multiplicity of outputs that stops it from working. **MOTT** does not.

I have demonstrated that INL sentences are at least as incapable of expressing positive existence propositions as the motto *E Pluribus Unum* is incapable of expressing the proposition expressed by the sentence “Haydon is the mole.” *E Pluribus Unum* is capable of expressing the same proposition as the sentence “Haydon is the mole” in a completely stipulated way: if two discussants wanted to, they could agree that in the context of their own conversation *E Pluribus Unum* expressed the proposition expressed by “Haydon is the mole.” If this arbitrary, stipulated connection between sentences is expression, ITA does express positive existence propositions in van Inwagen’s philosophy of language in an analogous way.

Describing such connections between sentences and propositions as expression confuses them with the other instances of sentences’ expressing propositions that we use in our day-to-day lives that do not rely on stipulation. Therefore, the stipulated relation, which might seem to play out between sentences and propositions of ITA and INL, is better recognized as encryption of sentences only.

This claim is similar to van Inwagen’s (2014d) response to Quine’s “Variables Explained Away” (1960). In that paper, Quine advances a system of six rules, “a general, finite battery of such auxiliary operators ...that will enable us always to coax variables thus into positions where

we can dispense with them” (344). Quine’s paper is dazzling in that it does “enable to us to get rid of existence prefixes and their variables whenever” (345), while retaining the ability to communicate everything that variable-reliant artificial language is able to communicate. For example, his system replaces the two-places predicate  $Bxy$  that stands for “ $x$  bites  $y$ ” with the one-place predicate  $(Der B) x$  that stands for “ $x$  bites something.” And then again, the system replaces  $(Der B) x$  with the zero-place predicate  $(Der Der B)$  that gives us “something bites something” (344). These alterations are the work of only one of the six operators in Quine’s battery, Derelativization, which is abbreviated as *Der*. Quine’s reason for creating such a system is to replace variable with their “full and explicit analysis” (345), yet van Inwagen (2014d) does not think Quine’s effort is successful because the sentences that his system produces are impossible to understand “without a prior understanding of variables” (120). Similarly, INL is impossible to understand without a prior understanding of the canonical language of quantification. Just as, according to van Inwagen, Quine’s variable-free, fully analyzed sentences depend on variable-bearing sentences for their meaning, INL depends on ITA for meaning.

Further evidence that van Inwagen’s philosophy of language puts positive existence propositions outside the domain of natural language is found in his discussion of the close alliance between existence and number:

The essence of the applicability of arithmetic is that number can count anything, things of any kind, no matter what logical or ontological category they may fall into: If you have written thirteen epics and I own thirteen cats, the number of your epics *is* the number of my cats....To say that unicorns do not exist is to say something very much like this: the number of unicorns is 0; to say that horses exist is to say essentially this: the number of horses is 1 or more. And to say that angels or ideas or prime numbers exist is to say—more or less—that the number of angels, or of ideas, or of prime numbers, is greater than 0. (2014c, 61)

The above discussion—in natural language—gives examples of and evidence for the number-existence alliance but goes no further. In order to say *how* existence and number are connected,

one has to use artificial language in order to demonstrate that connection by proof, given that van Inwagen is using Fregean insights into the relationship between number and positive existence propositions. Acknowledging his debt to Frege, van Inwagen points out that he does not agree with him that statements about a number of horses, for example, are statements about the horse *concept*. Unlike Frege, van Inwagen views such statements as statements about *things*. “I would say that, on a give occasion of use, it predicates of certain things that *they* number more than zero” (2014c, 62).

For example, to explain that “There are exactly six languages that Esterhase speaks” (in which the word “six” is an adjective) means the same thing as “The number of languages that Esterhase speaks is 6,” one needs to present a symbolization of the latter sentence that is similar to the following, where  $Lx$  stands for “ $x$  is a language Esterhase speaks”:

$$\exists s \exists t \exists w \exists x \exists y \exists z (s \neq t \ \& \ s \neq w \ \& \ s \neq x \ \& \ s \neq y \ \& \ s \neq z \ \& \ t \neq w \ \& \ t \neq x \ \& \ t \neq y \ \& \ t \neq z \ \& \ w \neq x \ \& \ w \neq y \ \& \ w \neq z \ \& \ x \neq y \ \& \ x \neq z \ \& \ y \neq z \ \& \ Ls \ \& \ Lt \ \& \ Lw \ \& \ Lx \ \& \ Ly \ \& \ Lz \ \& \ \forall r (Lr \rightarrow (r = t \vee r = w \vee r = x \vee r = y \vee r = z)))$$

(One could also render the above statement in the more natural-sounding (but nonetheless artificial, for reasons discussed in §2.2) canonical language of quantification as: “There is a language that Esterhase speaks and another language that Esterhase speaks and another language that Esterhase speaks and another language that Esterhase speaks and another language that Esterhase speaks.”) One then needs to prove that so-called “number-committed statements” (Tennant, 2017) can be derived from artificial language sentences such as these, and *vice versa*. In order to make this demonstration one must add numbers and a “number of” function to the canonical language of quantification (Tennant 2017). Then, one is able to produce the necessary proofs.

This cursory discussion shows how, in order to demonstrate the close relationship between existence and number, one must use artificial-language positive existence propositions. Therefore, one cannot produce this demonstration without entering the ontology room, since, due to *Rule 3*, attempting to produce OTA drops one straight in. Since natural-language sentences cannot be used to demonstrate the alliance between existence and number, they do not express positive existence propositions at least not according to how van Inwagen understands existence. Suppose there is in fact such an alliance between existence and number. Then, if natural language could (*contra* van Inwagen) assert positive existence propositions, one would be able to perform the same demonstration in ONL.

### 2.3 Defining apparent ontological commitment

This section discusses Alston's (1958) dilemma, a problem involving both ontology and the philosophy of language. Van Inwagen responds to this problem by advancing a concept of *apparent* ontological commitment.

Theoretical commitments to the existence of entities are called *ontological commitments*, and the practice of avoiding ontological commitments by replacing language that refers to, or appears to refer to, unwanted entities with equally usable, commitment-free language is called "ontological reduction." The following sentence contains an ontological commitment to holes:

*S1*: There are three holes in this piece of cheese.

If, in my theory, I did not want any holes, I might produce an ontological reduction of *S1*. Such an effort might produce the following sentence:

*S2*: This piece of cheese is triply perforate.

By replacing *S1* with *S2*, I discard a sentence, *S1*, that is ontologically committed to an entity that I do not want in my philosophical theory and replace it with another sentence, *S2*, that is not committed to the unwanted entity, and thus I have performed an ontological reduction.

Ontological reduction is a kind of *paraphrase*. Paraphrase, as Alston understands it, is the replacement of any sentence, clause, or phrase with another sentence, clause, or phrase that makes the same assertion as the original. The terms “translation” (White 1956; Alston 1958) and “paraphrase” (van Inwagen 1990; van Inwagen 2014b) have both appeared in the debate on ontological reduction, in which they are both used to refer to this same replacement maneuver, even though these terms are not used synonymously in conversational or most of academic English. Not minding my own idiolect, I use the term “paraphrase” because van Inwagen uses it in his discussion of ontological reduction. I also use the term “ontological reduction” (137) for the same reason, even though Alston originally used the term “existential reduction” (1958). If I were writing in my own idiolect, I would use “paraphrase” to mean a maneuver such as replacing “Chairs exist” with “Some chair shaped regions of space are exactly occupied by a material object” (van Inwagen 2014c, 6) and “translation” to mean a maneuver such as replacing “Chairs exist” with “Les chaises existent.” So, my idiolect suggests, as do many others, that translation replaces words from one language with words from another language, while paraphrase only uses words from one language. Using such a distinction requires finding the boundary between one language and another. Finding such boundaries is a persistent problem in linguistics and the philosophy of language. However, it seems to me that, with respect to the issues under discussion in this paper, solving this problem would only inform the terminology.

The main challenge to ontological reduction is a dilemma that first appears in William Alston's (1958) paper "Ontological Commitments." I endorse the following summary of

Alston's dilemma, from van Inwagen:

Either [S2: This piece of cheese is triply perforate.] is an adequate translation of [S1: There are three holes in this piece of cheese.] into other language (language that is not explicitly existential) or it is not. If it is an adequate translation of [S1] into other language—that is, if it says the same thing as [S1] but in different words—then it must involve those who employ it as a vehicle of assertion in the same ontological commitments that [S1] does. And in that case, of course, no ontological commitments are avoided. And if [S2] is *not* an adequate translation of [S1] into other language, then [S2] is not an ontological reduction of [S1]. In neither case, therefore, can one avoid ontological commitment to [holes] by devising an ontological reduction of the sentence [S1]. (van Inwagen 2014b, 138)

Ontological reductions are not avoided, or the paraphrase is not an ontological reduction of the original. Van Inwagen agrees: "I concede, therefore, that avoiding ontological commitment by the method of ontological reduction is something that can't be done" (2014b, 148). But there are caveats to this concession.

What can be done, however, is to remove merely *apparent* ontological commitments by paraphrase. One will succeed in this endeavor if (a) the original sentence seems to imply the existence of so-and-so's (which, for one reason or another, one wishes not to affirm the existence of), (b) it is evident that the paraphrase does not imply the existence of so-and-so's (and hence does not mean the same as the original), and (c) the ontological reduction could (in principle) be used for all the same purposes as the original in the business of everyday life. (148)

In conjunction the above three indications of successful removal—(a), (b), and (c)—do not form a sufficient condition for the removal of an apparent ontological commitment. Consider a discussant, Karla, who has the habit of removing his *genuine* ontological commitments. Karla is theoretically committed to the existence of holes, but for a lark he constantly speaks of perforations. An "original sentence" of Karla's will seem to imply the existence of holes, the sentences Karla produces through paraphrase will not imply the existence of holes, and Karla's sentences of perforation are (in principle) just as useful for the business of everyday life as their

original counterparts. Thus, Karla is just as able to remove genuine ontological commitments as easily as honest philosophers are able to remove apparent ones. But a fourth necessary condition—(d) that the ontological commitment from the original sentence is apparent—will banish Karla’s cynical behavior and in conjunction with (a), (b), and (c) will form a sufficient condition for the removal of apparent ontological commitment.

To get (d), we need a definition of apparent ontological commitment. We can use **MOTT** to create such a definition:

*x* is apparently ontologically committed to *y* if and only if (i) *x* is an ONL utterance and (ii) if *x* were an INL utterance **MOTT**(*x*) would assert the existence of *y*.

One might also define apparent ontological commitment in terms of translation:

*x* is apparently ontologically committed to *y* if and only if (iii) *x* is an ONL utterance and (iv) if *x* were translated into ITA *x* would assert the existence of *y*.

The second definition is correct, but the first definition is better because it makes the implications of the second definition explicit: (iv) is true of *x* if *x* is apparently ontologically committed to *y* because one who utters *x* INL is responsible for **MOTT**(*x*). Either definition will at least eventually lead to Karla’s exile. It is true that if (d), then Karla may nonetheless tell lies in the ontology room by speaking ITA, but inside he will be held responsible for the philosophical implications of what he says.

### 3. Speaking of existence

Merricks says, “when the folk say ‘there are statues’, they ordinarily mean that there are statues. Thus the folk often say, and often believe, *falsehoods*” (2001, 190). So he explicitly allows natural-language sentences to entail positive existence propositions. Van Inwagen, however, allows that natural-language statements such as “there are statues” are true outside of the ontology room but do not assert the existence of statues, as I have shown in §2.2. The

disagreement about the correct philosophy of language between Merricks (2001) and van Inwagen (2014e) has been presented as one about the role context plays with respect to positive existence propositions. In so far as the disagreement is about context, it is a disagreement about when people are making ontological claims. According to van Inwagen, one has to be *doing ontology* to make an ontological claim. Merricks does not agree; he thinks people are making ontological claims when they are not thinking about ontology. What this paper has shown thus far is that Merricks and van Inwagen have as much of a disagreement about language as they do about context. In this section, I will show that this language-focused disagreement, unlike the context-focused disagreement, is not readily dismissed as a disagreement about whether non-ontologists make ontological claims.

Merricks thinks that natural-language sentences entail positive existence propositions while van Inwagen thinks they do not. For van Inwagen, existence is not assertable in natural language, while for Merricks it is. According to van Inwagen, existence does not present itself to us in our lived experience as we capture that experience with our natural language. For Merricks, existence does make such a presentation. Therefore, Merricks and van Inwagen disagree about the nature of being.

Van Inwagen makes a distinction in the following passage between “thin” conceptions of being, such as his own, and “thick” conceptions of being. That being does not present itself so that natural language can express positive existence propositions is consistent with such a thin conception:

Sartre and Heidegger and all other members of the existential-phenomeno-logical tradition are, if I am right, guilty of ascribing to the “being” of things features of those things that should properly be ascribed to their natures. That is why they deny that being is the most barren and abstract of all categories. That is why they have, so to speak, a “thick” conception of being—as opposed to the “thin” conception of being that I believe to be the correct conception of being. (2014c, 56)



Thus being, as van Inwagen understands it, is nothing more than whatever needs to be true with respect to  $x$  for the case to be that not everything is not  $x$ . Unlike “existential-phenomenological” being, the thin conception has nothing to do with life outside of the ontology room or our experiential/ phenomenological interpretations of the world. If one agrees that natural language is intimately connected to such interpretations, it makes sense that van Inwagen would relegate being to “ $\exists$ ” where it can be kept away from the contaminants, as it were, of human experience.

The thick/ thin distinction under discussion here is not the same distinction as that in (Fine 2009) which distinguishes “[the ordinary person’s] using the quantifier in a thin, ontologically neutral sense” from “[the philosopher’s] using the quantifier in a thick, ontologically loaded sense” (5). However, Fine’s thick/thin distinction does seem congruent with van Inwagen’s inside/outside distinction. However, van Inwagen would dispute whether the non-philosopher uses the quantifier in a weakened sense. Since natural-language utterances do not assert positive existence propositions on his view, he might say that the non-philosopher’s relevant natural-language utterances don’t use any kind of quantifier at all. So he could satisfy Fine’s challenge to the approach of “playing up the content of the ontological commitment rather than by playing down the content of the ordinary commitment” (5). The challenge is “How is the distinction between the two senses of the quantifier to be understood?” Van Inwagen would say that what Fine calls the thin quantifier should not be understood as a quantifier. This response from van Inwagen might be further evidence for Fine’s claim that on what he calls the quantificational (i.e., in this paper Quinean) account of ontology “the claim that there are F’s fails to give proper expression to a commitment to F’s” (8).

This discussion of thin being leads me to the conclusion that Merricks's conception of being is minutely thicker than van Inwagen's. Being, as Merricks understands it, is not as completely divorced from everyday life. He says,

When I say 'there is a statue of a Roman emperor', I mean that there are things arranged statue-of-a-Roman-emperor-wise. Generally, when I say 'there is an F', when alleged Fs are supposed to be non-living macroscopica, I mean that there are things arranged F-wise. In such context I am using 'there is' in a misleading or loose or even wrong way. I am using 'there is' deviantly.... The folk and I have different ontological beliefs. (2001, 186)

This passage shows that, while Merricks's eliminativist ontology leads to a deviant conception of what there is, and thus a deviant interpretation of the world, his conception of being is nonetheless connected to that interpretation, such that Merricks expresses his ontology in his day-to-day utterances.

Because the conception of being that van Inwagen presents to us in his meta-ontology and philosophy of language is deliberately cut off from experience outside of the ontology room, such that our natural language utterance cannot express positive existence propositions, there is disagreement between Merricks and van Inwagen about the nature of being.

David Chalmers (2009) describes the role of meta-ontology as determining whether there are "objective answers to the basic question of ontology" (1). According to him, the basic question is "What exists?" Is the disagreement between Merricks and van Inwagen that I have identified meta-ontological by these lights? It is because one has to appeal to the nature of being in order to determine whether there are objective answers to the question "What exists?" Chalmers offers the following example of a meta-ontological question: Say there are two cups on a table; the meta-ontological question is *whether there is an objective fact of the matter about whether there is a mereological sum of the two cups—call it a cupcup—on the table as well.* Figuring this out requires one to figure out the nature of being, or the correct meaning of the

existential quantifier. I am at a loss to think of anything else that one might appeal to. According to Chalmers's view, while the disagreement between Merricks and van Inwagen might not be *basically* meta-ontological, it is nonetheless meta-ontological.

#### 4. Conclusion

Recognizing meta-ontological disagreement within the eliminativist school of ontology, especially between Merricks and van Inwagen, is valuable for at least two reasons. First, the meta-ontological disagreement between van Inwagen and Merricks has been carried out until now in terms of the philosophy of language, specifically in terms of what contextual restrictions apply to positive existence propositions. This debate about context is ultimately an example-driven discussion of the meaning and truth value of sentences that contain what Merricks calls "folk" ontological claims.

Consider van Inwagen's discussion of a conversation about a chair (2014e, 10, presented in §1 of this paper) as well as the following example from Merricks: "I recently remarked to my 5-year-old daughter, while at a museum, 'there is a statue of a Roman emperor.' Was I lying? Did I say something false? No and no" (Merricks 2001, 186). Furthermore, consider how van Inwagen (2014e, 5) writes the following dialogue between two brothers in order to explain the meaning of "Chairs exist" in ONL:

"You and I may be brothers, but no two people could be less alike. *I* have devoted my life to working for peace and justice, and *your* only goal in life is to get rich selling furniture."

"What can I say? I deal in reality and you deal in dreams. Chairs exist. Peace and justice don't and never will."

Van Inwagen gives this example of a dialogue featuring the sentence "Chairs exist" in order to argue that, outside of the ontology room, such sentences are not used to assert positive existence propositions, but for emphasis or other rhetorical purposes. Merricks's example is meant to

show, on the other hand, that one can assert metaphysically-informed positive existence propositions while outside of the ontology room.

I do not see how the debate can move beyond this point, so long as it is carried out in terms of what contextual restrictions apply to positive existence propositions. However, by showing that Merricks and van Inwagen disagree about meta-ontology and language that can express positive existence propositions, I have shown how their disagreement goes beyond context restriction. Thus, in the search for the correct meta-ontology there is an opportunity for determining the correct eliminativist philosophy of language.

Second, I have shown that there is meta-ontological dissent within the Quinean school of ontology. Both Merricks and van Inwagen appeal to Quinean ontological values. In *Objects and Persons*, Merricks appeals to them when he affirms the univocacy of being:

Folk uses of ‘chairs exist’ should be taken literally and straightforwardly. All along, I have been assume that this implies—given eliminativism—that such uses of ‘chairs exist’ express falsehoods. And so they do. But one might object to this assumption. The objection I have in mind begins by supposing that there is more than one equally literal and equally straightforward meaning of ‘exist’. (2001, 168)

He further affirms the Quinean approach to ontology when he argues that inanimate macroscopica are theoretically unnecessary as they are causally ineffective, thus relying on Quine’s view that our ontological claims should follow from the ontological commitments of our best scientific theories: “For while I deny the existence of inanimate macroscopica—statues, baseballs, rocks, stars, etc.—their problem is not that they are inanimate. Their problem is, among other things, that were they to exist, their causal powers would be at best redundant” (2001, *viii*). Compare Merricks’s discussion of redundant causal powers with the following, from Quine:

The tendency of our own reflections has been...to belittle molecules and their ilk, leaving common-sense bodies supreme. ...If we have evidence for the existence of the bodies of

common sense, we have it only in the way in which we may be said to have evidence for the existence of molecules. The positing of either sort of body is good science insofar merely as it helps us formulate our laws—laws whose ultimate evidence lies in the sense data of the past and whose ultimate vindication lies in the anticipation of sense data of the future.” (1976, 250)

Thus Merricks is following Quine’s paradigm as he dismisses those bodies which are causally redundant from his ontology. To keep such bodies in his ontology would be to include bodies vindicated more by common-sense intuition than their capacity to anticipate future sensory experience, and redundancy would arise from keeping them *and* the molecules that are *needed* to explain and predict past and future sense data. Van Inwagen explicitly affirms the Quinean meta-ontological position throughout his work. Provided that Quinean ontology begins with Quine’s (1948) paper “On What There Is” or his 1946 lecture on Nominalism (2008), it has been understood for the past seventy years that between two Quinean ontologists there is no meta-ontological dissent. Quinean ontologists have only been expected to disagree about what there is and not about what it is to be there. Recent evidence of this expectation is found in Berto and Plebani’s *Ontology and Metaontology* (2015) which designates Quinean meta-ontology “The Standard View” (51), separating it from other metaontologies such as grounding theory, fictionalism, and Meinongianism. But the view is not yet standardized. While Quineans agree there is only one way of being, they can debate the nature of that single way, just as they can argue with grounding theorists, fictionalists, and Meinongians.

One might argue that, since van Inwagen’s conception of being is thinner than Merricks’s, it is therefore more Quinean. I do not agree with this claim, since Merricks’s conception of being does not contradict any of the five theses that van Inwagen uses to summarize the Quinean meta-ontological position in “Being, existence, and ontological commitment” (2014c). (Those are: (T1) being is not an activity, (T2) being is the same as

existence, (T3) existence is univocal, (T4) the single sense of being or existence is adequately captured by the existential quantifier of formal logic, and (T5) a general endorsement of Quine's ontological method.) While Merricks's conception of being is thicker, it is thicker only in that it presents itself in everyday experience outside of the ontology room. I have shown that if being is "among the most barren and abstract of all categories" (van Inwagen 2014c, 56), there are nonetheless at least two equally Quinean conceptions of being.

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