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Answerable and Unanswerable Questions

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While fights about ontology rage on in the ring, there's long been a suspicion whispered in certain corners of the stadium that some of the fights aren't real. Granted, the disputants all *think* they are really disagreeing—it's not the sincerity of the serious ontologists that's in question, but rather their judgment that they are engaged in a real debate about genuine issues of substance.

I will discuss two types of debates here: debates about the identity and persistence conditions and 'ontological category' of various sorts of things, and debates about what 'really' exists—e.g., are there (really) organisms, artifacts, mereological sums and the like. According to the participants, such 'deep' ontological debates cannot be resolved by ordinary empirical investigations such as journalists or scientists might engage in, and all the participants in such debates generally take pains to argue that their conclusions are not inconsistent with anything the *normal* person (journalist, scientist) would want to say. Nonetheless, they *are* supposed to conflict with things other serious ontologists say, and they are supposed to be resolvable—by philosophical argumentation rather than by investigative journalism or science. Most importantly, they are supposed to be substantive factual debates about the world—not shallow disputes about the meanings of our terms or pragmatic disputes about what conceptual scheme we should adopt.

I will try to give grounds for suspecting, however, that the debates among 'serious ontologists' cannot be understood in this way. I will do so by proposing a diagnosis of where many debates in contemporary metaphysics go wrong. At bottom, I will argue, many metaphysical debates turn out to be mere pseudo-disputes that arise from attempts to respond to defective, unanswerable questions. Say that a question is 'unanswerable' if no straightforward answer to it, stated in the same terms as the original question, is truth-evaluable—where

this failing is in principle; not a reflection of mere epistemic shortcomings but of deficiencies in meaning.

The proposed diagnosis relies on a certain view about reference, and I will begin in section 1 by very briefly sketching this position and some reasons for believing it. I will then draw out in sections 2 and 3 the implications of this view of reference for which metaphysical questions are answerable, and by what methods they are to be answered. The positive considerations in the first three sections will be brief, however,[1] for the main point of interest here is the way in which this view can provide a unified diagnosis of where numerous metaphysical debates go wrong, and can rid us of a great many apparently irresolvable puzzles. It also yields an alternative picture of metaphysics that provides a straightforward (if not always simple) method of resolving those metaphysical questions that really are answerable—a method in which conceptual analysis plays a central role.

1 Problems about Reference

Some might think that the very idea that conceptual analysis should play a central role in metaphysics is implausible, as causal theories of reference show that our terms may refer without the need for speakers to have any concept in mind about what kind of thing is to be referred to, making conceptual analysis irrelevant to the *real* truths about the natures of the objects and kinds referred to.

But as I have argued elsewhere (2007, 38–53), while causal theories of reference may have persuasively established that causal and contextual relations play a key role in establishing reference, we have good reason to think that that can't be the whole story. Causal theories of reference were introduced with a rather narrow range of examples—it does seem highly plausible that which person, or which biological kind, a term refers to (if any) is a matter of what person or sample the naming practice may be traced back to in grounding situations. But, as those who have raised the *qua* problem have made clear, the difficulties for pure causal theories become evident when we note that our terms may purport to refer to many different sorts of things, e.g. artifacts, lumps of matter, spatial or temporal parts of objects, events, kinds (whether biological, chemical, social, economic, etc.), and so on.[2]

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[1] I have, however, defended these views at greater length elsewhere (2007).

[2] Versions of the *qua* problem are discussed in Papineau (1979, 158–68), Devitt (1981), Sterelny (1983), Devitt and Sterelny (1999), Dupré (1981), Kitcher (1982), and Stanford and Kitcher (2000).

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So, suppose a new term, 'fillow', is introduced. Even if grammar makes it clear that 'fillow' is to be a noun rather than an adjective or adverb, it may remain completely indeterminate whether 'fillow' is to refer to a piece of copper, sum of copper atoms, a sculpture, an exhibition, a location etc., unless speakers somehow disambiguate the *ontological* type of entity to be referred to. In the standard cases considered by causal theories of reference, in which we ask what determines which *person* or which *species* a term refers to, this problem is hidden, since in formulating the question this way we already presupposed that the term is, e.g., a name for a person.

Now it might be suggested that, at least in cases like that imagined above, it simply *is* indeterminate which of these entities 'fillow' is to refer to. But notice that if it is—or wherever reference is ontologically indeterminate in this way—many standard metaphysical questions stated using the term 'fillow' will be unanswerable. 'Would fillow survive if a few small parts were removed? If it were melted down? Could fillow be in Cincinnati?' If it is indeterminate whether 'fillow' is a term for a lump of copper, a sculpture, a sum of particles, an exhibition, a location, etc., then all claims made in response to these questions will lack truth-value owing to the indeterminacy of reference for the key noun. As a result, questions apparently about the identity and persistence and other modal features of 'fillow' would simply be unanswerable questions.

In general, I think, it is not quite so indeterminate what our terms refer to. But if the causal and physical structure of the world alone cannot disambiguate among potential referents, this ontological disambiguation must come from us.[3] As I have argued elsewhere (2007, 39–45), two sorts of rules of use for our nominative terms aid in ontological disambiguation. First, there are what I have called 'frame-level application conditions' associated with our terms—certain very basic conditions under which the attempted grounding would or would not be successful in establishing reference. In learning to use a nominative term properly, we learn in what situations it is properly applied, and where it is to be refused—so we learn, e.g., that the term 'lump' may be applied wherever there is a cohesive, medium-sized quantity of tangible stuff (but not where there is a hologram or mirage), but that 'sculpture' may only be applied

Apparently, even Locke noted that this sort of problem would plague theories like direct reference theories. See Stanford and Kitcher (2000, 100).

[3] There may be those who feel that conceptual content is not needed to provide this ontological disambiguation, since *really* there is only *one* kind of thing there (e.g., a collection of particles, but no lump of stuff or sculpture). I discuss this objection elsewhere (2007, 39). There I also develop extensive criticisms of various arguments that there are no members of such common-sense ontological kinds as sculptures and lumps.

where the stuff was also intentionally arranged (or at least selected) by someone with artistic intentions. The application conditions in question are merely 'frame-level' conditions: they simply specify conditions that are *conceptually* relevant to whether or not reference is established, not all the conditions that may be *empirically* discovered as relevant. In fact, the frame-level application conditions may defer to further empirical conditions to be fleshed out, e.g. on some uses 'fillow' may only apply if there is a cohesive lump of stuff, but what physical conditions are necessary for stuff to cohere may only be discoverable empirically.

The second sort of rule of use that contributes to disambiguation involves what I have elsewhere (2007, 40–4) called 'coapplication conditions', rules for using nominative terms which establish under what conditions we may use the term to refer again to the same entity. If 'fillow' is a term for a sculpture, it may not be properly reapplied after a melting, but if it is a term for a quantity of copper, it may be. Again, the rules of use in question provide only 'frame-level' coapplication conditions—those that are conceptually relevant to whether the term may be successfully reapplied to one and the same thing, not all of those that may be empirically discoverable (e.g., we might discover that 'fillow' cannot reapply after certain increases in temperature that would cause a melting). The coapplication conditions must be distinguished from application conditions, since two terms may share a set of sufficient application conditions while diverging in coapplication conditions. Thus, for example, 'book' (used as a term for an individual copy) and 'book' (used as a term for a literary work) apply in the same circumstances, but the coapplication conditions vary, as the second, but not the first, may be successfully reapplied (to one and the same work) even where there is lack of spatio-temporal continuity (Dummett 1973/1981, 74–5).

The term 'sortal' is commonly reserved for general nouns that are associated with rules of these two types, so where a general noun is a genuine sortal term, it is guaranteed to come with both of the sorts of rules that aid in ontological disambiguation (though sortals may come with greatly varying degrees of specificity—see Thomasson 2007, 41–4). Names, too, may acquire the relevant disambiguation through association with a sortal term (e.g., assuming that 'Nixon' is a name for a person). So I will have occasion to speak of 'sortal' terms below, as shorthand for speaking of terms that come associated with both of these sorts of rules of use. But while it is sufficient for ontological disambiguation that a term is (or is associated with) a sortal, what is really doing the work of ontological disambiguation is at bottom the presence of these two basic types of rules of use—application conditions and coapplication conditions. For, as we will see shortly, it is these that help fix the ontological

category of entity the term is to refer to (whether, e.g., it is to be a term for a person, a lump of stuff, or a sum of particles).

2 Questions about Identity and Persistence

This hybrid view of reference has important consequences for metaphysics. For on this view, the reference of our nominative terms is only ontologically determinate to the extent that these terms are associated with disambiguating application and coapplication conditions. And these in turn determine the most basic, frame-level, conditions of existence, identity and persistence—and therewith also the basic ontological category—of the object the term is to refer to, should the term succeed in referring.

Assuming that our language contains the general noun 'fillow' (and holding its meaning constant), 'fillow' applies just in case a fillow exists, and so the conditions under which 'fillow' applies are those conditions in which it is true to say 'a fillow exists'. Thus, the conditions of application for the term may be transformed into object-language expressions (using rather than mentioning the term) of conditions under which an object of the kind exists. On the same assumption, supposing the term 'fillow' to be successfully applied on two occasions, the conditions under which it is true that 'fillow' is applied (in both cases) to one and the same object fix the conditions under which the first is the same fillow as the second. Thus, the coapplication conditions for a sortal term may be transformed into object-language expressions (using rather than mentioning the term) of identity conditions for objects (if any) of the kind referred to.[4] Moreover, since a member c_n of a category C persists from time t_1 to time t_2 only if a c_1 exists at t_1, a c_2 exists at t_2, and c_1 is identical to c_2, persistence conditions for entities of a given category may be derived from their existence conditions and identity conditions, and thus are also ultimately fixed by the application and coapplication conditions associated with the relevant term. It is in this way that the rules of use for the terms of our language yield a 'categorial conception' determining what ontological category of object is to be referred to by the term. Categorial conceptions may be expressed in categorial terms (such as 'animal', 'artifact', etc.), which are just highly general sortal terms.

[4] Saying that identity conditions for the things (if any) we refer to are fixed by the coapplication conditions associated with the term is not, however, to subscribe to Peter Geach's (1962/1980) view of relative identity. For discussion of the differences between these views, see my (2007, 210−11n3).

The resulting view of reference is a hybrid view that takes reference to be *ontologically* disambiguated only to the extent that those who attempt to ground (and reground) the reference of their terms associate these terms with frame-level conditions of application and coapplication. But it should not be mistaken for a purely descriptive theory of reference; *which* person, lump, or sum of particles we refer to remains determined by the chain of reference that reaches back to a causal relation to an entity baptized, and even if it is fixed by the rules of use that 'Gödel', say, is a person-name, speakers may still be ignorant or in error about any of the referent's personal characteristics, achievements, history, etc.[5]

If we accept this sort of hybrid theory of reference, then where or to the extent that the rules of use for our terms do not yield such a categorial conception, the reference of the terms in question is indeterminate, and metaphysical questions stated using these terms are unanswerable. Moreover, where they are answerable at all, questions about the most basic (frame-level) identity and persistence conditions for entities of various kinds may be answered by a kind of conceptual analysis. The properly metaphysical side of answering questions about identity and persistence conditions simply involves uncovering frame-level identity and persistence conditions by way of analyzing the rules of use for the terms used in stating the question, and their application and coapplication conditions, and expressing these in the object language, using rather than mentioning the terms in question. While there may be other factors entering into the full, detailed, empirical identity and persistence conditions, these are questions for the natural sciences, not metaphysical questions proper.

Questions about what ontological category a certain sort of thing (person, work of music, law of state …) belongs to, or about whether things of one kind may be reduced to things of another (bodies, sound structures, propositions) also centrally involve the question of whether the identity and persistence conditions for things of the former sort are the same as those of the latter sort. For if they aren't then, say, a body might survive while a person does not, preventing the two from being identical. Thus, these metaphysical questions, too, must be approached by beginning from a conceptual analysis of the rules for coapplication of the terms in question and drawing out the consequences for the metaphysical status of the object (if any) referred to.

Some may fear that this places implausible demands on speakers, objecting that we can't expect competent speakers to know enough metaphysics to

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[5] Those who think that this still allows too little room for ignorance and error are referred to the discussion in my (2007, 48–53).

ontologically disambiguate what sort of object their terms are to refer to. But this is a misunderstanding. The relevant conditions of existence, identity and persistence for the objects to be referred to are determined by the application and coapplication conditions for the terms speakers use—all that is required of speakers is competence with these rules of use for their terms, not knowledge of the metaphysical conditions that may be read off of them.

Yet, the objector might continue, the same problem arises here, for we cannot suppose speakers to have in mind these application and coapplication conditions for their terms, since 'normal' speakers can't recite any such conditions. This, too, is a misunderstanding: competent speakers must only be able to *follow* those rules and enforce the following of them by others—through training children by encouraging them to use the terms in some circumstances but not in others, correcting or expressing puzzlement to those who misuse the terms, etc.—they need not be able to *state* these rules. And they are capable of following these rules as long as they are capable of determining, in various actual and possible situations, whether or not the term would apply (or apply again to the same thing) (cf. Chalmers and Jackson 2001). Just as competent speakers must be able to *follow and enforce* rules of grammar, but are seldom able to explicitly *state* those rules (that work being left to linguists); so must competent speakers be able to follow and enforce the rules for when nominative terms may be applied and reapplied, but they need not be able to explicitly *state* these rules. Indeed, there may *be* such rules even if they are not *stateable* (except disquotationally) at all. The work of making explicit what these rules are, and (more importantly) making explicit what the correlative existence, identity, and persistence conditions of the objects (if any) referred to are, is left to metaphysicians. And even where the relevant rules cannot be fully stated in other linguistic terms, metaphysicians often can offer insight into at least some of the relevant conditions, so that elucidation and application to novel cases is often possible even where reductive analyses are not. In any case, the view on offer is not the implausible view that we cannot speak until we do metaphysics; on the contrary, it is to suggest that the truths properly uncovered by metaphysics are just ways of making explicit the ontological implications of the rules we master in learning to use expressions.

While this view does hold that certain rules of use for our terms are established by the normative practices of speakers, it does not entail that these rules of use for our expressions are entirely arbitrary or merely conventional. It may be that members of our species naturally begin from certain 'default' categories, intending their original or basic terms to refer, e.g., to organisms or artifacts—and perhaps interpreting the terms of others as terms for entities of these sorts, unless there are clues suggesting otherwise. It may also be

that the conditions of application and/or coapplication for some terms are built upon others (as, e.g., the conditions for application and coapplication of nation terms may be built upon those for person-terms, land-mass terms, etc.), making some more basic than others. But even if some categorial conceptions may be 'default', more 'natural', or more 'basic', that does not undermine the point that reference is only determinate to the extent that a term is associated with a categorial conception (whether the default one or some other) determined by the application and coapplication conditions associated with our terms—even if that association comes quite automatically for creatures like us.

But if the application and coapplication conditions for our terms are just those embedded in the rules of use mastered by competent speakers, others may object that this simply is not enough to generate answers to all of our metaphysical questions. This, I think, is true: the conditions for application and coapplication—at least for most of our ordinary or common-sense terms—are typically vague, and often highly incomplete. Even supposing 'fillow' to be a term for a sculpture (not, say, for a lump of stuff or collection of particles), it may be indeterminate whether 'fillow' could be reapplied after a loss of 10,000 particles or 100,000. So to say that these conditions do some work in disambiguating is not to say that they *fully* or *uniquely* disambiguate among all of the possible referents of the term—only that they narrow things down somewhat from where we would be without any such categorial conception, and make at least some metaphysical questions answerable.

What, then, about the more detailed metaphysical questions about identity and persistence conditions that cannot be answered by this kind of conceptual analysis? Can't we allow that metaphysics may make genuine discoveries there? I think not. For if it is indeterminate which of various possible referents (with various possible identity and persistence conditions) our term 'fillow' refers to, then there will be no determinate answer to questions about which of the precise conditions of identity and persistence the term's referent has: those will simply be unanswerable questions.

We can, of course, offer various proposals about how the term might be precisified in ways that would make these questions answerable, and those proposals might have various virtues in terms of clarity, consistency with other practices, etc. There is room for genuine debate about what the best way might be of precisifying the application or coapplication conditions for our terms in order to serve various possible purposes, though these debates are generally the province of lawyers, judges, and legislators (who might, e.g., seek to precisify a term like 'child' by specifying that it ceases to apply after the eighteenth birthday). Nonetheless, there is no reason philosophers cannot weigh in and

make recommendations that may or may not be adopted. In any case, such debates are clearly *pragmatic* debates about how we ought to revise the rules of use for our terms, not factual debates that can legitimately purport to yield discoveries about what the relevant detailed conditions *really are*.

In general, on this view many questions about the frame-level identity conditions, persistence conditions, and ontological category of entities of various kinds are answerable, but not by looking deep into the world, but rather by way of conceptual analysis—where this is understood as a matter of making explicit the rules of application and coapplication for our terms, and transforming these into object-language statements of the existence, identity, and persistence conditions for the things referred to by our terms, if our terms refer at all. Where questions about identity and persistence conditions are so fine-grained that analysis of our ordinary conceptions can provide no answer, they are simply unanswerable questions, and claims made in answer to them are indeterminate in truth-value—a point that can explain why attempts to state detailed identity conditions for persons or persistence conditions for works of art yield such radically different responses, and seem to promise so little hope of resolution (cf. my 2005). Or rather, these detailed metaphysical questions are not answerable in the sense that some fact of the matter may be discovered and stated—though they may be 'answerable' in the sense that various *proposals* may be offered about how we could precisify our terms in ways that would provide (useful, detailed, consistent…) answers to these questions.

In short, then, disputes about the frame-level identity or persistence conditions of things of various sorts must be understood either as shallow verbal disputes arising from disagreements about what conditions are associated with the relevant term, as pseudo-disputes based in attempts to answer unanswerable questions, or as practical (not factual) disputes about what (perhaps more precise) conditions *should be* associated with it. Questions about the derivative, empirical persistence conditions (etc.) of different sorts of things may be answerable, but these are to be answered by combining the conceptual analysis that gives us the only possible insight into frame-level conditions with empirical investigations into non-modal facts—investigations that are the task of science, not metaphysics.

3 Questions about Existence

Of course not all metaphysical questions revolve around issues of identity, persistence, and ontological kind. Perhaps the most central metaphysical

questions are questions simply about what exists. I will divide these into two sorts: Specific existence questions concern whether entities of a given sort—say, tables and chairs, sticks and stones, animals and persons, exist. These of course have been the subject of substantial controversies in recent years. Beyond these are what I will call 'generic' existence questions: questions about what 'things/objects/items/individuals' exist (in general or in a particular situation), where the sort of thing at issue is left completely open (these thus include the classic completely generic metaphysical question: What exists?).

But claims about existence and—more particularly—nonexistence have long posed philosophical problems. Singular nonexistence claims such as 'Santa Claus doesn't exist' seem pre-theoretically to be meaningful and (at least as uttered in some contexts) true. But if we take them to be simple subject-predicate sentences, it seems that direct reference theorists must hold that for them to be meaningful at all, the singular terms in question must refer to some entity. But then it seems all singular nonexistence statements must be false if they are meaningful, since we can't meaningfully deny the existence of an entity unless that entity exists so that we can refer to it. Similarly, it seems that a general term like 'goblin' would have to refer for a general nonexistence claim such as 'Goblins don't exist' to be meaningful—but then it, too, would be false.

The standard response to this problem for direct reference theorists has generally been to take a metalinguistic approach to nonexistence (and existence) statements, according to which (roughly—and assuming that the term 'N' exists and holding fast its meaning) 'N doesn't exist' is true just in case 'N' doesn't refer.[6] On causal theories of reference, traditionally understood, a term fails to refer if the name-use chain leads back to a situation in which the attempted grounding failed—or, in Keith Donnellan's terms, the history of the uses ends in a 'block' (Donnellan 1974, 25). But this just raises another puzzle for pure causal theories of reference: there is always something with which a speaker is causally in contact (even if only the earth at her feet and the food in her stomach), so how can an attempted grounding fail, and a term fail to refer? Donnellan simply says that a referential chain ends in a block when it ends with the introduction of a name in a work of fiction, a mistake, an act of imagination, etc. But why should we not in those cases still allow that a term refers, and just insist that it refers to something

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[6] Another common approach is the 'gappy proposition' view developed, e.g., by Braun (1993), Reimer (2001), and Adams et al. (1997). I have argued elsewhere (2003) that metalinguistic approaches, suitably modified, are preferable to gappy proposition models.

else that is present at the grounding, e.g., to a story, a brain state, or the speaker's clothing?

The answer seems obvious, but its very obviousness again suggests the need for a hybrid, as opposed to purely causal, theory of reference. If I attempt to ground the name 'Harry' as a term for the bear outside my tent last night and there were only rustling leaves, then 'Harry' doesn't refer to the rustling leaves, my brain state, or my pajamas, even though each of those are present at the attempted grounding, since (put informally) those aren't the sort of thing I intended to infer to. Put more precisely, if we adopt a hybrid theory of reference according to which our nominative terms are associated with basic, conceptually relevant, application conditions, then, despite the fact that a speaker may be causally in contact with plenty of things, an attempt to ground the reference of a term may fail if the frame-level application conditions the speaker associates with the term are not met.

As mentioned above, the frame-level application conditions for a term 'N' yield frame-level existence conditions for N, since (provided we have the term 'N', as we evidently must to state existence claims using that term), 'N' refers just in case N exists. So the application conditions for a nominative term yield the truth-conditions for a simple nonexistence claim made using that term: simple nonexistence claims made using a term 'N' are true just in case the frame-level application conditions for 'N' are not met in the grounding situations.[7] On this model, then, we can determine the truth-value of claims of existence or non-existence using two steps: first, undertaking a conceptual analysis to determine what the associated frame-level application conditions for the term in question are; second, establishing whether or not they are fulfilled. If they are, the existence claim is true; if not, it is false.

Thus, if we accept a hybrid view of reference like that advocated above, it turns out that, whether the questions concern the identity and persistence conditions for entities of various sorts or the existence of entities of a given kind, conceptual analysis plays a key role in addressing metaphysical questions. This is of course not to say that conceptual analysis alone can give us answers to existence questions—for there is also the factual issue of whether or not the relevant application conditions are fulfilled. Nor does it alone yield answers to all possible questions about identity and persistence conditions—some

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[7] Of course, existence and nonexistence claims may also be made for stuff terms ('fairy dust doesn't exist'). While these terms are not associated with categories strictly speaking, since they don't come with identity conditions, they still (to avoid the qua problem) must come associated with application conditions, which must similarly be used in evaluating the truth of existence and nonexistence claims. I will leave such existence claims to one side here, to focus just on claims using thing terms rather than stuff terms.

questions may require that we combine the frame-level conditions accessible through conceptual analysis with empirical enquiry, and others may simply be unanswerable. Nonetheless, the philosopher's share of work on each of these metaphysical topics is based on undertaking a form of conceptual analysis.

4 Specific Existence Questions

In section 3 I offered a view about what the truth-conditions are for existence claims, and for how their truth-value is to be established. I have tried to suggest (however briefly) that this is a view that is independently motivated by problems with reference, and have argued for this approach to existence claims more extensively and defended it against various objections elsewhere (2007). I will leave that further defense and explication to the side here, since here I wish to focus on the ability of this hypothesis about existence claims to show where many of the core ontological debates that occupy contemporary metaphysicians go wrong.

First, if we accept this general understanding of the truth-conditions of existence claims, we may be led to reevaluate apparent debates among metaphysicians about whether or not artifacts, organisms, mereological sums, and the like exist. For on this view, evaluating the truth of specific existence claims that use a nominative term involves determining whether the history of uses of that term leads back to a grounding situation in which the term's application conditions are fulfilled; if they are, then the existence claim is true.

So consider an apparent disagreement about a specific existence question, e.g. that between the common-sense ontologist and the eliminativist (organicist, nihilist, or what have you) about whether or not tables exist. This question must be answered by first determining what application conditions are associated with the sortal 'table', and then examining whether or not they are fulfilled;[8] if they are, then tables exist, since the frame-level application conditions for the term 'table' establish the existence conditions for tables. And if the dispute between the eliminativist and common sense ontologist is to be a substantive (rather than merely verbal) dispute they must both associate 'table' with the same application conditions, for otherwise they are not really disagreeing, but merely talking past each other, when the former denies and the latter affirms that there are tables.

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[8] General common-sense terms like 'table' (unlike proper names of historical figures) seem to be continually regrounded by speakers, so to avoid unnecessary complications I will drop reference to 'in a grounding situation' in the discussion below.

Yet if the eliminativist and the realist use the same term 'table' and each associate it with the same application conditions (those that competent speakers associate with it), it becomes difficult to find a difference between their views. For the eliminativist accepts that there are situations in which well-bonded particles 'arranged woodwise' are then assembled by an artisan with the intention of creating a device to be used in dining, etc. The eliminativist also holds that these 'particles arranged tablewise' collectively fulfill those intended functions of tables. This enables the eliminativist to mimic what the realist wanted to say about tables by talking about particles arranged tablewise, distinguishing her view from the 'madman's' view that there are no tables, and enabling her to account for some sense in which common sense claims like 'there are two tables in the next room' are true (or, as Merricks (2001, 171−85) puts it, 'nearly as good as true').

But once the eliminativist allows all that, it is hard to see on what grounds she can deny that there *really* are tables. If we approach existence questions by asking whether or not the application conditions ordinarily associated with the term are fulfilled, it seems the eliminativist should allow that there *are* tables. For it seems that competent speakers would consider the term 'table' to be properly applied in any conditions under which the plural term 'particles arranged tablewise' applies.[9] The eliminativist wants to say that she is merely using 'table' in its ordinary sense, and yet she denies that it applies when 'particles arranged tablewise' applies—and so, we might ask, supposing that there are particles arranged tablewise in a given situation, what more is it supposed to take for there to be a table?

The eliminativist actually has a standard response to this: the eliminativist may claim that (although ordinary folk have failed to notice this) there is a necessary condition for the application of the common-sense word 'table' that is not fulfilled in situations in which particles are 'arranged tablewise'—namely, that there be some (one) *thing/object/individual* composed by the particles. As van Inwagen puts it:

There are certain properties that a thing would have to have to be properly called a 'table' on anyone's understanding of the word, and nothing has all of these properties.

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[9] This is *not* to say that 'table' is *defined* as 'particles arranged tablewise'—a move Sider (this volume,) rejects as ungrammatical and making 'no sense'. Instead, it is to say that (simple and complex) terms have application conditions, and that there may be interrelations among the application conditions of our terms, so that one term may be guaranteed to apply in any situation in which the other does. According to the ordinary rules of application for the term, it seems that 'table' would apply in any circumstances in which the eliminativist's plural term 'particles arranged tablewise' would, but this is not to say that 'table' means the same as 'particles arranged tablewise' nor that the terms apply to one and the same 'thing' (since the latter is a plural term).

If anything did have them, it would be real, a true object, actually a *thing*, a substance, a unified whole, and something more than a collection of particles. But there are no tables. (1990, 100)

In short, since there is no *thing* composed by the relevant particles, no single object in that space (but only a collection of particles), there is no table.

That line of response would make the truth-conditions for specific existence questions depend on those for generic existence questions. As a result, if we accept the proposed understanding of existence questions, then it seems that there can be genuine debates about specific existence questions only if there are genuine debates about generic existence questions. For as we have seen, if disputants differ in the application conditions they associate with the term used in a specific existence question, their dispute is merely verbal. If the application conditions associated are the same, it is hard to see how the eliminativist and realist arrive at different answers to the specific existence question *unless* they differ about whether or not there is any (one) 'thing' there at all—i.e., unless they genuinely disagree about the answer to a generic existence question. So the time has come to examine generic existence questions and investigate the prospects for finding genuine metaphysical debates there.

5 Generic Existence Questions: Three Ways of Looking at Things

Generic existence claims and questions like 'Is there some object composed by these particles?' play a central role in a wide variety of metaphysical debates. For example, the special composition question requires us to say, of various situations (e.g., when atoms are arranged baseballwise), whether or not there is some (one) thing composed of various simpler things. Similarly, debates among universalists and nihilists are often cast as debates about how many things are in a certain situation, while debates between friends and foes of constitution are often put as debates about whether the many things (particles) in a certain place constitute some other thing (a cloud). Moreover, as we have seen, even debates about specific existence questions at bottom rely on the idea that there are genuine debates about generic existence questions. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that the majority of debates in contemporary ontology rely on debates about generic existence questions about whether there is some 'thing' in a certain situation or how many 'things' there are—and it is interesting in itself to see this common presupposition of these apparently diverse metaphysical disputes.

In consequence, a great deal relies on the idea that generic existence questions are answerable questions. Interpreting generic existence claims and questions is a tricky matter. For (as I have argued elsewhere (2007)), terms like 'thing' and 'object' have a variety of uses, divisible into at least three groups: (1) sortal uses, (2) covering uses, and (3) the (alleged) neutral use. I will discuss each of these uses in turn, in an attempt to evaluate whether any of them can enable us to understand disputes about generic existence questions as genuine disputes that can ground other disagreements in metaphysics.

5.1 Sortal Uses

It has often been said that 'object', 'thing', and the like are not sortal terms[10]—and I think, as commonly used in philosophy, that is true (non-sortal uses include the latter two uses—the 'covering' and 'neutral' uses I will discuss below). Nonetheless, 'object', 'thing', and the like clearly may be used as sortals if the speaker associates them with at least high-level application and coapplication conditions outlining what it would take for there to be an *object* or *thing* in a given situation, and under what conditions we could refer to the same object or thing again. It is the presence of application conditions that enables us to answer existence questions like 'is there any thing there?', while the presence of coapplication conditions enables us to derive the identity conditions needed to count 'things' and answer questions such as 'how many things are there?'[11]

There do seem to be some widely accepted conditions of application and coapplication often associated with these terms in standard English—perhaps including medium-sized lumps of stuff well bonded together but independently mobile from surrounding stuff... It is conditions like these that enable us to agree about when there is (and isn't) something in the fridge, and to count 'things' and have a pretty good idea what we should expect to pay when we bring our purchases to the counter at *Everything's a Dollar*.

Nonetheless, insofar as normal English speakers do associate these highly general terms with application and coapplication conditions, there seems to be a great deal of variation in assumptions about what the associated conditions are. So, for example, I might claim that there's something in my eye, and be vindicated when I remove an eyelash (suggesting that the application conditions presupposed for 'thing' in that context were fulfilled). But if I claim that there's something in the fridge, and all that there is is an eyelash or

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[10] Hirsch 1982, 38; Lowe 1989, 11–12, 24–25.

[11] I will leave to one side here the problems with counting 'things' in order to focus on the problems with existence questions. I discuss counting problems elsewhere (2007, 114–15 and 154–5).

other specks of dust, I am proven wrong (and if I insist on the point, I will be answered with the groan that accompanies bad jokes). Similar variations seem to arise for coapplication conditions, leading to differences in how we count 'things': while a child's dinnerware set might count as a single 'thing' in *Everything's a Dollar*, it might well count as several once it's home and being washed by the child (who must wash five things before she can go play).

FN:12   If serious ontologists do (whether tacitly or explicitly) associate 'object' or 'thing' with application conditions,[12] then their existence claims may be straightforwardly truth-evaluable, and the corresponding existence questions answerable. But while generic existence questions, so understood, may be answerable, they can't provide the basis for genuine metaphysical debates. If both disputants *were* associating 'object' with the same application conditions, then any remaining disagreements about whether or not there is an object in a certain situation would have to be based on at least one of the disputants being mistaken about whether or not the agreed upon conditions were satisfied. But that would make their dispute a resolvable matter for investigative journalists or scientists—not a matter to be resolved by philosophical argumentation, and so it wouldn't be a disagreement of the right character to preserve 'serious ontological' debates. On the other hand, if they were associating 'object' or 'thing' with different application conditions, then differences of opinion about whether or not there is any *thing* composed in a situation (e.g., of particles arranged tablewise) would be merely verbal disputes; they would not be deep disputes about what there is (cf. Sidelle 2002, 141−2; cf. Hirsch 2002b, 106).

    Since it so obviously cannot be used to ground metaphysical debates, a sortal use is clearly *not* the use of 'thing' and 'object' the serious ontologist intends to employ when she denies that there is, e.g., any thing composed by the particles arranged tablewise. If we are looking for a way to make sense of metaphysical debates about generic existence questions, we must look elsewhere.

5.2 The Covering Use

'Object' and 'thing' may also be used in other ways than as sortal terms. One such standard use is the 'covering' use, where 'object' or 'thing' is used as a place-holder for any genuine sortal term, and is guaranteed to apply given

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[12] Leaving aside the issue of whether or not they associate them with coapplication conditions as well. While these are relevant to the issue of whether or not counting questions are answerable, it is the application conditions that are relevant for whether or not existence questions are answerable.

FN:13

the application of any genuine (first-order) sortal term (or at least most such terms).[13] On this use, if there is an eyelash, a six-pack of beer, or a domestic dispute, we are licensed to infer that there is something in my eye, something in the fridge, or something going on at the Johnson residence. Restricted covering uses may also be employed, e.g., licensing the inference that 'there is some thing' only from the application of certain sortals—say those for substances rather than events or processes, or those for medium-sized edibles, etc., which is why I speak of covering 'uses' rather than simply of a (single) covering 'use'.

Whether or not 'thing' applies on a covering use must be determined by way of determining whether or not the sortal terms covered apply: if 'table' applies then 'thing' applies. As a result, specific sortals like 'table' must be supposed to have application conditions that don't themselves appeal to the existence of some *thing* in the relevant situation (cf. Thomasson 2007, 41). But then, on these rules of use for 'thing', the eliminativist can't deny that there is a table in a certain situation *on the grounds that* there is no *thing* there.

As a result, on covering uses of 'thing', generic disagreements about whether there is some 'thing' must be based on specific disagreements about whether or not there are things of a given sort or sorts (e.g., whether there are artifacts or organisms or …). But, as I have argued above, substantive (as opposed to merely verbal) disagreements about specific existence questions (e.g., about whether there are artifacts, organisms, persons, etc.) can only arise if there are genuine and substantive disputes about generic existence questions, e.g. regarding whether or not there is some 'thing' here. So, in short, while there may be legitimate covering uses of terms like 'thing' or 'object', they cannot enable us to revive metaphysical debates about specific existence questions. Moreover, since (on the covering use) debates about generic existence questions must be based on disagreements about specific existence questions, if we can't revive disagreements about specific existence questions, we can't revive debates about generic existence questions either.

5.3 The Alleged Neutral Use

All hopes for reviving metaphysical debates about existence questions thus hinge on the idea that there is some other, purely neutral use of 'thing' or 'object' in questions about whether some 'thing' exists in various circumstances. Whatever this use is, it must not involve treating 'thing' as a covering term,

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[13] Some restrictions may in any case be required to avoid paradox. See my (2007, 121−5).

the application conditions for which depend on those for first-order sortals (since, as we have seen, that cannot help us revive debates about existence). It also must not involve turning the term into a sortal of its own, or even associating it with frame-level application conditions (since, as we have seen above, that would threaten to make the debates shallow). Call this the (alleged) 'neutral' use of 'thing', 'object', and the like, since it is supposed to be sortally-neutral.

This alleged neutral use of 'thing', 'object', and the like is essential to making sense of debates about specific existence questions, of debates directly about generic existence questions about what 'things' or 'objects' exist in a certain situation, and of all of the other metaphysical debates that are apparently built around different answers to these questions—so much is at stake for the serious ontologist in making sense of this neutral use.

But the method proposed above for understanding the truth-conditions for existence claims gives us reason to think that existence questions stated using such a 'neutral' use of 'thing' or 'object' are defective and unanswerable questions. For on that view, existence claims of the form 'there is a P' or 'P(s) exist' are true just in case the frame-level application conditions for the term 'P' are fulfilled in the grounding situation(s). But 'thing' and 'object' on the neutral use are not supposed to have application conditions. For, as we have seen, if they did, that would threaten to turn the debates about whether or not there is some 'thing' into mere verbal disputes based on differences in what application conditions each disputant associates with the term, or simple factual debates about whether or not the associated conditions are fulfilled. But if 'thing' and 'object' do not have application conditions, we cannot evaluate the truth of simple existence claims stated using these terms (such as 'there is an object' or 'some thing exists') by considering whether or not these application conditions are fulfilled.

It is easy to underestimate the importance of this point, replying that of course one should never have thought that application conditions for such basic metaphysical terms as 'thing' and 'object' could be stated in other terms—these, if anything, are basic. But the requirement that the noun terms in existence questions come associated with application conditions is *not* a requirement that application conditions for these terms be (reductively) *stateable* in other terms—indeed, we should not presume that that's possible for very many English terms at all. As discussed above, for a term to have application conditions is for competent speakers to be able to evaluate various actual and hypothetical situations as ones in which the term should be applied or refused—it is *not* for anyone to be able to *state* the application conditions for one term by using other terms.

Once we can see that that is all that is required for terms to have application conditions, we can also see just how radical it is to deny that 'thing' and 'object', in their properly *ontological* uses, have application conditions at all. We can also more readily see why, if these terms don't have application conditions, simple existential claims made using these terms might not be truth-evaluable. For if 'thing' and 'object' are being used in ways that entirely lack application conditions of their own, and are not guaranteed to apply given the application of some genuine sortal term(s) (which do have application conditions), then it seems competent speakers would have no idea of under what sorts of conditions these terms should be applied and when they should be refused. Indeed, there seems nothing to determine whether or not these terms refer, and no way to evaluate the truth-values of existence claims that use these terms. And if simple existence claims made using these terms are not truth-evaluable, then the very generic existence questions on which so much of ontology is based turn out to be unanswerable questions.

These questions are unanswerable not in the sense that (whether in practice or in principle) we can't find out the answer,[14] but rather, because—although they have the superficial form of proper questions—on closer examination they are incomplete pseudo-questions. Some pseudo-questions are familiar as bad jokes, e.g. 'How long is a piece of string?' or (after reading an advertising flier) 'Do Dell computers *really* help you get more out of now?' In these cases, it is clear that we should respond to unanswerable questions by asking for a more specific or better-stated question—not by providing an answer put in the same terms as the question ('six inches'—'no, twelve feet!'). Apparently differing answers to questions like 'is there some thing here' should not be taken as expressing genuine conflicts any more than we would take differing responses to 'how long is a piece of string' to express genuine conflicts.

6. Quantification and Existence Questions

A natural reply may come to mind here: the above troubles with generic existence claims arise from difficulties with the natural language terms 'thing', 'object', and the like. But the generic existential claims ontological debates are made of need not be expressed in natural language at all. The natural language claim 'There is some thing,' for example, may be rephrased just using the

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[14]   This would be something like Karen Bennett's (this volume) epistemicist approach to metaphysical debates.

quantifier and identity sign, as the claim '∃x(x = x)'. Thus, as Sider points out (this volume,), the debate between realists and eliminativists about composite material objects may be restated in sentences just using the quantifier, identity, and truth-functional connectives (cf. Chalmers this volume,). The quantifier, in turn, he suggests, need not be understood as a substitute for the (perhaps loose or variable) English term 'existence'. Instead, he suggests that serious ontologists may preserve the genuine character of their debates by insisting that they are not speaking English at all, but rather 'ontologese'. They may introduce 'ontologese' by stipulating that they are using a 'strict' meaning for the quantifier, '**existence:** being a P such that something has P''• (this volume,)

● Q1

Clearly we can and often do state metaphysical debates in a formal or artificial language rather than in natural language. But does this help revive genuine metaphysical debates? The symbolisms employed in quantified logic are introduced by giving their meaning in the terms of a familiar natural language. As Peter van Inwagen has argued, '[t]he meaning of the quantifiers is given by the phrases of English—or of some other natural language—that they abbreviate' (this volume,). For example, the source of the meaning of '∀x (…x…)' is the English phrase 'It is true of everything that it is such that …', and the source of the meaning of '∃x(…x…)' is 'It is true of at least one thing that it is such that …' (van Inwagen 1998, 238). But if the meaning of quantificational expressions is given by way of English expressions that use the term 'thing', then whatever problems there were for understanding the debates involving generic existence claims as genuine and substantive when expressed in English carry over to the technical formulation.

Sider's ontologists who attempt to stipulate a strict meaning for the quantifier in ontologese similarly rely on the bare, neutral idea of a 'something'—so, again, any problems that arise in making sense of a purely neutral use of 'something' would seem to carry over to the attempt to secure a debate about **existence**, with its meaning stipulated in ontologese. This gives us reason to think that the problems raised above for making sense of debates involving generic existence claims as expressed in English are only papered over, not resolved, by restating the debate using only the quantifier and identity, or by appealing to a special 'ontologese' meaning for the quantifier.

Indeed we have more general reason for thinking that the truth-conditions for formal claims rely on the meanings of natural language terms—for on the standard ways of doing semantics, quantified claims are only fully semantically complete and truth-evaluable when some or other domain is specified.[15]

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[15] Van Inwagen (this volume,) denies that the notion of a domain of quantification is essential to understanding quantification. But he does so based on his argument (just discussed) that quantification

But this domain of quantification is not itself specified using the formal
language; instead, it must be done in other terms, e.g. using a natural
language like English, asking us, for example, to consider the domain of all
the natural numbers, or all the people in Michael's office (Bergmann et al.
1998, 260). So our metaphysical claims, stated using quantified expressions,
likewise are only semantically complete and truth-evaluable when we also
specify some domain of objects over which we are quantifying.[16] The serious
metaphysician will quickly reply that she is happy to specify her domain:
it is the domain of *everything* or *all objects*. But if this is her only way of
specifying a domain, then all of the earlier difficulties regarding the different
uses of the term 'object' and 'thing' come back into play: If the domain is
specified using 'thing' or 'object' in a sortal or covering sense, the claims
are truth-evaluable but not suitable for reviving substantive metaphysical
debates about what exists. But if she attempts to specify the domain using
'thing' or 'object' in a neutral sense, then we have reason to think that
she has failed to specify a domain at all, leaving her quantified claims not
truth-evaluable.

This is, of course, not to deny that we can sensibly make metaphysical claims
in quantificational terms, nor to deny that such claims are truth-evaluable.
On this view, quantified claims are (as we always thought) truth-evaluable
provided that we specify a domain—the only caveat that must be registered is
that we cannot do so using a 'neutral' sense of 'object' or 'thing'. But we can
perfectly well specify a domain of all the natural numbers, or all the people
in Mike's office, or all even of all the 'things' or 'objects' if we use 'thing' in
a sortal sense (that comes with application and coapplication conditions). We
can even specify a domain of 'things' or 'objects' by using these terms in a
covering sense, as long as it is clear what first-order sortals are supposed to be
covered. (I think this is the best way of understanding most general existence
claims and questions about what things there are.[17]) In short, existence claims
formulated quantificationally are complete and truth-evaluable provided a

may be understood by explaining the meaning of quantificational expressions in English. So if that is
the way to understand quantification without appeal to a domain of quantification, then (on our above
assumptions) it will not help revive substantive metaphysical disputes.

[16] Chalmers (this volume,) offers a similar reply to this argument of the serious metaphysician's.

[17] We can here remain neutral on the issue of whether absolutely universal quantification is possible,
noting only that, if it is, on this view it would be arrived at by allowing 'object' to 'cover' all possible
first-order sortal terms. Certain difficulties arise with the thought that we can build up an absolutely
universal form of quantification, since Russell-style paradoxes threaten. I discuss these issues in my
(2007, chapter 6). So some restrictions might be required on the sorts of term that can count as
well-formed categorial terms and over which we quantify. But as these restrictions are not relevant to
the present debate, I will ignore them below.

domain is properly specified, where that involves specifying (or at least tacitly presupposing) what sort or sorts of entity we are talking about.[18]

Of course there are other methods of doing logic that do not require specifying a domain of quantification—e.g., substitutional forms of quantification, which don't take the variable to range over objects in a domain, but rather to be replaceable by any of a range of singular terms. On this view, existentially quantified claims of the form $\exists x(\Phi)$ are true just in case Φ is true in some substitution instance, and universally quantified claims are $\forall x(\Phi)$ are true just in case Φ is true in every substitution instance.

But on the hybrid view of reference defended above, singular terms have determinate reference only to the extent that they are associated with rules of use that determine what category of entity they are to refer to, and existence claims made using a singular term are true if and only if the term's frame-level application conditions are fulfilled. Given that the variable is to be substituted by each of a number of singular terms (which may be associated with different frame-level application and coapplication conditions), we should thus take the quantified claim $\exists x(x = x)$ to be true if and only if the associated application conditions for any substitutable singular term are fulfilled.[19] Thus, this way of understanding simple quantified claim makes a claim such as $\exists x(x = x)$ most closely analogous to the English claim 'there is some thing (which is self-identical)' where 'thing' is employed in the *covering* sense, though here we are most immediately covering a range of singular terms (which have determinate reference only to the extent that the are associated with the application and coapplication conditions that come with sortal terms) rather than a range of first-order sortals. So, if we employ substitutional quantification to avoid the problems with specifying a domain, for a quantified claim to be semantically complete and truth-evaluable, we must presuppose a range of terms that are substitutable for the variable. And if we accept the above hybrid view of reference, then these terms in turn supply the frame-level application conditions needed to make each substitution instance truth-evaluable, thus making the quantified claim as a whole truth-evaluable.[20]

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[18] This view of quantification should not be confused with what Hirsch (2002a, 51–2) has called 'the doctrine of quantifier variance'—that is, the view that the notion of 'existence', and with it the quantifier, have 'a multitude of different uses rather than one absolute "meaning"' (Putnam 1987, 19). For discussion of the difference between quantifier variance and the current proposal, see my (2007, 118–19).

[19] I put aside here the complications that arise if one uses a free logic, since of course my opponents, who think that deep debates about existence can be phrased in quantificational terms, take the quantified statement '$\exists x(...)$' to be equivalent to the phrase 'there exists some x such that ... '

[20] We can again remain neutral about whether or not there is absolutely universal quantification. (Cf. note 15 above.) On this method of understanding quantification, if there is, it is built up out of

If that is the correct account of the truth-conditions for substitutionally quantified claims, then we again cannot use differences of opinion about quantified claims (like whether, in a given situation, it's true that $\exists x(x = x)$) as the basis for reviving genuine metaphysical debates. As on the covering use of 'thing', the eliminativist cannot, e.g., deny that there is a table here on grounds of denying that it's true that here $\exists x(x = x)$. For if we have a table-name ('Mervin', say), then 'Mervin' refers just in case the application conditions associated with table-names are fulfilled in the grounding situation. And so supposing they are (following the argument of section 4 above and noting that we cannot deny that they are fulfilled on grounds that it's not true that here $\exists x(x = x)$) it is true that Mervin exists, and thus true that here $\exists x(x = x)$ and that here $\exists x((Table)x)$.

So whether we take a referential or substitutional approach to quantification it seems that—if we take on board the hybrid theory of reference defended above and with it the points made earlier about the different uses of 'thing' and 'object'—we cannot avoid the problems for making sense of substantive ontological debates about what exists by shifting to state the debate in the terms of first-order quantified logic.

7 The Metaphysician's Work

It has seemed to many, perhaps even most philosophers apart from the disputants themselves, that something is wrong with many of the contemporary debates in metaphysics. Even the disputants must acknowledge the expanding range of diverging opinions about central metaphysical questions, and the lack of unanimity even about how to determine the correct answer to these questions. The primary aim of this paper has been to propose a diagnosis of where these debates have gone wrong, why there is little agreement about them, and less hope of finding a solution. The hypothesis is that many metaphysical debates have gone wrong by being based, at bottom, on attempts to answer unanswerable questions—whether these are overly precise questions about conditions of identity, existence, and persistence, or overly generic questions about what 'things' exist, using 'thing' in a supposedly 'neutral' sense. If this hypothesis is accepted, a great many of the problems and puzzlements of metaphysics dissolve—and at least to those without a stake in prolonging the debates, that is a great benefit.

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implicitly allowing the substitution of all terms of all possible categories (with all possible application conditions), and then over their compliants.

But will it do away with metaphysics entirely? Not at all. The point here is not to declare the death of metaphysics, but rather to try to achieve some clarity about what we're doing in metaphysics—more particularly, about what sorts of questions are answerable, and how we can hope to go about answering them.

I have argued that metaphysical questions about identity and persistence conditions, where they are answerable at all, are answerable by way of a form of conceptual analysis that begins by making explicit the conditions for application and coapplication of our terms, and draws out what the corresponding existence, identity, and persistence conditions for their referents (if any) must be. Other, more detailed, questions about conditions of existence, identity, and persistence are answered simply by combining those results with those of straightforward empirical investigation. Any questions about these conditions the answers to which cannot be determined by this combined method of investigation (e.g. 'how many words can be changed while a novel survives?') are simply unanswerable questions.

This view may be disappointing to those metaphysicians who liked to think of themselves as discovering potentially surprising answers about the 'real metaphysical natures' of various kinds of things, which could show our standard practices in applying and refusing the relevant terms to be radically wrong. But, while it may be a disappointment to some, it certainly does not leave the metaphysician with nothing to do. Just as the linguist works to pull out and make explicit the grammatical rules speakers follow and enforce by their behaviors (without speakers being able to describe them and state them), so may the metaphysician work to elucidate the application and coapplication conditions for our terms and, more importantly, to make explicit the existence, identity, and persistence conditions they lay out for the objects—if any—our terms refer to.

That, to use Strawson's terminology, is at least some of the work of 'descriptive metaphysics'. But as we have seen in section 2, there may also be room for something like *revisionary* metaphysics insofar as metaphysicians may propose ways of revising our extant terms and concepts, replacing them with ones that apply more cleanly, with less vagueness, with clearer interrelations among their uses, etc. Such efforts in revisionary metaphysics involve making practical proposals about which set of concepts (or revisions of our current concepts) would best serve some particular set of purposes (e.g., simplicity, precision, etc.). It may be quite reasonable to engage in debates about the merits of these various proposals, though it would be misguided to think of these as substantive factual debates about the world.

What then about ontological debates about what exists? As Sider notes, the approach I have here proposed to handling existence questions does not

'make all the ontological questions go away' (this volume,). We can, e.g., still ask 'granted that there exist subatomic particles that are arranged personwise, do there exist people in addition?' (this volume,). Nonetheless, if we accept the proposed approach to existence questions, we know how to go about answering such ontological questions: first, by undertaking conceptual analysis (to determine the application conditions for the associated sortal term or terms), and then by seeing whether or not these are fulfilled. So, to pursue the example, we first note that, according to the application conditions associated with the term 'subatomic particles arranged personwise', the fulfillment of those is sufficient for the application conditions normally associated with 'person'. Thus, if we do assume that there exist subatomic particles arranged personwise, 'there exists a person' is true.[21]

In general, while there may be genuine debates about specific existence questions, these must either be shallow debates based on disagreements about what the application conditions for the term are, or straightforward debates about whether or not these conditions are actually fulfilled. Some of the 'shallow' debates may, of course, be very earnest and of great philosophical relevance—debates, e.g., about whether or not there is a soul might involve debates about whether that only requires the 'animation' of the body, or also requires some eternal spirit, and this difference in meaning may make all the difference to how we answer the question. Similarly, metaphysical debates about the existence of free will hinge in large part on whether the possession of free will only requires the ability to do as one chooses (as compatibilists insist) or something more. So, accepting this view of existence questions by no means vitiates all classical metaphysical debates, though (by dividing the questions into two steps) it does clarify where many disagreements come in (with, e.g., the difference between the compatibilist and the hard determinist a difference about the relevant application conditions, while the difference between the hard determinist and libertarian is a difference in whether each thinks the relevant application conditions are fulfilled). More general existence questions about what 'things' there are in a given situation are likewise answerable, provided we use 'thing' in a sortal or covering sense (and are clear about which sense it is used in).

While much traditional metaphysical discussion remains relevant and of interest on this view (even if we have to sometimes reinterpret what it's up to), the upshot of the above discussion is that we should regard with severe

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[21] We should add to the response, however, that it would be misleading to say 'there exist people *in addition*'. To avoid being misleading, we should drop the clause 'in addition' from both the question and answer. See my (2007, 75–8).

suspicion many recent ontological debates about whether or not there are 'really' artifacts, universals, mereological sums, temporal parts, organisms, and the like—at least to the extent that they rely on debates about whether or not there is some 'thing', or how many 'things' there are (using 'thing' in an allegedly neutral sense).[22] If the above is correct, it is no accident that serious metaphysicians attempting to locate a dispute speak in these terms since, as we have seen, the only hope for preserving debates about specific existence questions is in terms of debates about generic existence questions. But if the above is correct, we have reason to be very suspicious of any supposed metaphysical debates that ultimately have to be stated in terms of differences in what 'things' or 'objects' exist in a given situation. For, if these terms are used in a 'neutral' sense, the debates that use these terms arise from misguided attempts to answer unanswerable questions. If ontological questions are properly expressed (by using these terms in a sortal or covering sense), there is far less room for disputes to arise, since the method of addressing *answerable* existence questions is straightforward, and at least in many cases, if we follow that method, the answers to our existence questions become obvious.[23]

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[22] For example, Peter van Inwagen attempts to pin down the difference between his eliminativist view about composite inanimate material objects and that of the realist by insisting that on *his* view 'there is no one thing that just exactly fills [the] region of space [said by realists to be occupied by a composite object]' (1990, 104). Trenton Merricks similarly describes the difference between his view and a view on which there are statues in the following terms: in a situation in which a million atoms are arranged statuewise, ' … suppose we ask how many (non-subatomic) things there are in that region. My metaphysical opponents would say that there are at least one million and one (the atoms and the statue). I would say there are only one million' (2000, 48). Ted Sider likewise marks the difference between the nihilist, chaste endurantist, and believer in temporal parts as a matter of whether they would say there are at least two, three, or four things in a situation with exactly two electrons (2001a, 203; cf. 2001b, xx).

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Queries in Chapter 15

Q1. Single quotes openning missing please clarify