

Two Sorts of Realism about Ontology

John M. Bunke
University of Toronto

Johns Hopkins, 16 November 2018

1 Introduction

- *Ontology* is concerned with what exists (it is a part of metaphysics), whereas *metaontology* focuses on how we determine what exists and what the status of disputes in ontology are.
- One way of saying what ontology is: it is concerned to determine which *existence sentences*—that is, sentences of the form ‘There are Φ s’ are true.
- In this talk I will attempt to delineate several elements of a “realist” approach to ontology and show how these can come apart; at the end, I will (briefly) outline what I call *moderate realism*, which is distinct from the currently-popular *extraordinary realism*.
- Example: Are there coffee mugs? That is, is the existence sentence
(1) There are (coffee) mugs.
true, or is it false?
 - On the one hand, aren’t there really just a bunch of atoms (separated by huge open spaces) which repel one another in a way that produces macro-level rigidity (unless hit with sufficient force) and which can counteract the force of gravity acting on a liquid (more atoms)?

¹ See also: Fine (2001, 2009), Schaffer (2009), and many others.

² Did you know that there are over 1,000 chemical compounds in coffee? Me neither.

- But on the other hand: so what if physics tells us some surprising things about the composition of material objects like mugs? There are still mugs, and there are sieves, and mugs hold coffee in them and sieves don’t; so thankfully the world has some mugs in it!

2 Extraordinary Realism and Deflationism

- You might think that to be a realist about ontology is to hold that questions like ‘Are there coffee mugs?’ have determinate, objective answers; it is to hold that (1) is either (objectively) true or false.
- In contemporary metaphysics, however, philosophers have tended to assume that to be a realist about ontology you must endorse something like the following (for reasons that will become clearer shortly):

The world has a distinguished structure, a privileged description. For a representation to be fully successful, truth is not enough; the representation must also use the right concepts, so that its conceptual structure matches reality’s structure. There is an objectively correct way to ‘write the book of the world’ (Sider 2011, vii).¹

- I call the view expressed in this passage (and those which are related to it) *extraordinary realism* (about ontology). I will use the abbreviation “PCRJ” for “perfectly carves reality at its joints” (Sider 2011, 5, and throughout).
- In the case of (1), the extraordinary realist idea is that of the following two sentences, both might be true, but only one “uses the right concepts” (i.e. the PCRJ ones):
 - (2a) This mug contains coffee.
 - (2b) The atoms arranged mug-wise hereabouts are located around some atoms arranged homogenous-suspension-of-water-caffeine...-wise² and the if the atoms arranged mug-wise remain sta-

tionary, then the atoms arranged coffee-wise do not lose altitude.³

- (1) follows from (2a), but not from (2b); so, if (2b) is PCRJ but (2a) isn't, then (1) is (strictly speaking) false, although it might be true in a “loose” sense.
- The reason why “truth is not enough,” then, is that different languages can be constructed which can “describe the same facts” (in an intuitive sense) but which differ in their implications for what exists. The extraordinary realist says that what there is follows from the true sentences in the PCRJ language, not from other languages which (intuitively) “describe the same facts.”⁴
- As I see it, the core claims of extraordinary realism are as follows:
 - TRUTH: Some existence sentences are (literally) true.
 - PRIVILEGE: Only those (true) existence sentences stated in a privileged language (or languages) are relevant to determining what exists (in a metaphysical sense—if this is distinct from the ordinary sense).⁵
 - OBJECTIVITY: It is an objective fact of the matter which language (or languages) is (are) the privileged language(s) (in a particular context).
 - WORLDLINESS: It is some feature of the non-human world (e.g. its “structure” (Sider 2011) or what “fundamentally exists” (Schaffer 2009) or what is “real” (Fine 2009)) that determines which language is the privileged language (in a context).⁶
- One could deny TRUTH for a range of reasons; for instance, an *ontological fictionalist* (e.g. Yablo 1998) could deny TRUTH and instead say that (many) existence sentences are true only within a fiction (i.e.

they aren't literally true). Or, an *ontological expressivist* (e.g. Flocke, forthcoming) could say that (certain) existence sentences don't even purport to represent how things are—they have a different communicative purpose.

- But I am interested in views that endorse TRUTH though which may deny one or more of PRIVILEGE, OBJECTIVITY, or WORLDLINESS.
- One such position is *deflationism* (e.g. Hirsch 2010; Thomasson 2015), which has also been described as “lightweight realism” (Chalmers 2009, 97–98; see also: Thomasson 2015, 145).
- In its core form, deflationism accepts TRUTH but rejects PRIVILEGE as well as OBJECTIVITY and WORLDLINESS as a result.
- The deflationist rejects PRIVILEGE: there's no “right” or “wrong” language, just—at the most—better and worse ones (given certain sorts of aims): these views take inspiration from Carnap (1950). So it really only makes sense to ask what exists *having specified a particular language* (Hirsch 2002b); if you haven't yet specified a language, then a dispute over what exists will be merely verbal (Hirsch 2009, 231–232; Thomasson 2015, 31–34).
- I say “in its core form” because both Hirsch and Thomasson have places where they seem to suggest that there might be a privileged language, but for very different sorts of reasons than an extraordinary realist would point to.⁷
- I am attracted to realism but I recoil from certain aspects of extraordinary realism; for example, the claim that there is a “quantificational aspect of reality” which we ought to match in the particular meaning we give to ‘ \exists ’ in our language (Sider 2011, 91), or the claim that someone who doesn't speak in terms of atoms-arranged-*x*-wise is doing something wrong (Sider 2011, 61–62). On the other hand,

³ Note that ‘mug-wise’ and other such constructions are really just short-hand for some complex description in terms of spatio-temporal relations.

⁴ It's not just debates about composition. Similar comments apply to the debate between perdurantism and endurantism, for instance.

⁵ I will generally speak in terms of languages, but I think much of this discussion could be translated into talk about concepts.

⁶ Note that which language is privileged might be constant across contexts.

⁷ In Thomasson's case, see Thomasson (2017). In Hirsch's case, Hirsch (2002a) argues that considerations of charity in linguistic interpretation ought to privilege a language which vindicates the beliefs and assertions of non-philosophical speakers. This view would accept PRIVILEGE but reject OBJECTIVITY (assuming Hirsch accepts Davidson's (1973) contention that what counts as charitable interpretation is relative to the interpreter's own beliefs) and also reject WORLDLINESS.

it's fairly easy to design languages which can express truths—recall the examples of ‘grue’ (Goodman 1955) and ‘incar’ (Hirsch 1976)—so accepting TRUTH may not be all that significant a commitment.

3 Moderate Realism

- In any case, I want to spend the time that remains outlining a *moderate* form of realism that I favor. This view endorses TRUTH, PRIVILEGE, and OBJECTIVITY, but rejects WORLDLINESS. What's more, it does so for good reason (or so I claim).
- On this account, the privileged languages in a context c are those languages that enable and enhance communication in c . In all likelihood this criterion won't isolate a single privileged language in c , but it will certainly sort some languages into the privileged category, and some into the non-privileged category (although there may still be borderline cases).
- On this view, it is existence sentences stated in (one of) the privileged languages that are relevant to determining what exists, where privilege is determined by facts about communication, such as who the participants (i.e. the speaker and audience) are, what sorts of standards or practices are in place (perhaps implicitly), and other features of the context.
- On this view, many existence sentences are (literally) true (TRUTH), some languages are privileged in a context, though which ones are privileged depends on the context in question (PRIVILEGE), and it is an objective matter of fact which languages are privileged, since it is an objective matter of fact what will enable and enhance communication (OBJECTIVITY).
- But it is facts about the particular (human) agents in a communica-

tive context, their goals and interests, and the social practices in which they are enmeshed that determine which languages are privileged, so WORLDLINESS is false.

- In the case of the coffee mug versus the atoms arranged mug-wise, (2a) will count as privileged, whereas (2b) clearly won't. So, in ordinary contexts, it would be correct to assert (1)—and someone who refused to do so would be (objectively) *making a mistake*.⁸
- One straightforward way of seeing this is that (2b) is extremely inefficient—and, though this feature may be outweighed by others, efficiency enhances communication (other things being equal). Perhaps even more important, however, is the fact that medium-sized material objects are essential parts of what I think of as the home case of communication: exchange of information about objects to which speaker and audience are jointly attending. (Saying more on this point would take us far beyond the scope of this talk.)
- In any case, I hope the contrast between *moderate* and *extraordinary realism* is clear: both endorse the idea that ontology is determined in part by which existence sentences, stated in a privileged language or languages, are true (and this is an objective matter). But the *reasons why those languages are privileged* are quite different: in the one case it is because that is the way the world is structured⁹ and in the other because of facts about what we are trying to do with language which is, after all, a human creation.

⁸ There's a bit of trickiness about context-sensitivity here. Although I'm happy to say that *which existence sentences are true* depends on context, *what exists* does not. I'm not currently fully decided on how to deal with this issue.

⁹ As Dasgupta (2018) emphasizes, this calls out for explanation: *Why* is it that *we ought to mirror the structure of the world*, assuming that such a thing is possible? I part company from Dasgupta because while he argues that *nothing* could explain this (beyond mere dogmatism), I think arguments could be made here, though Dasgupta is right that as of yet, extraordinary realists haven't clearly done so.

References

- Carnap, Rudolf. 1950. "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology". In *Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic*, Second edition, 205–221. University of Chicago Press.
- Chalmers, David J. 2009. "Ontological Anti-Realism". In *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. by David J. Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, 77–129. Oxford University Press.
- Dasgupta, Shamik. 2018. "Realism and the Absence of Value". *Philosophical Review* 127 (3): 279–322.
- Davidson, Donald. 1973. "Radical Interpretation". In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 125–140. Oxford University Press.
- Fine, Kit. 2001. "The Question of Realism". *Philosophers' Imprint* 1 (1): 1–30.
- . 2009. "The Question of Ontology". In *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. by David John Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, 157–177. Oxford University Press.
- Flocke, Vera. Forthcoming. "Ontological Expressivism". In *The Language of Ontology*, ed. by James Miller. Oxford University Press.
- Goodman, Nelson. 1955. *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*. Harvard University Press.
- Hirsch, Eli. 1976. "Physical Identity". *Philosophical Review* 85 (3): 357–389.
- . 2002a. "Against Revisionary Ontology". *Philosophical Topics* 30 (1): 103–127.
- . 2002b. "Quantifier Variance and Realism". In *Quantifier Variance and Realism: Essays in Metaontology*, 68–95. Oxford University Press.
- . 2009. "Ontology and Alternative Languages". In *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. by David John Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, 231–258. Oxford University Press.
- . 2010. *Quantifier Variance and Realism: Essays in Metaontology*. Oxford University Press.
- Schaffer, Jonathan. 2009. "On What Grounds What". In *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. by David Manley, David J. Chalmers, and Ryan Wasserman, 347–383. Oxford University Press.
- Sider, Theodore. 2011. *Writing the Book of the World*. Oxford University Press.
- Thomasson, Amie L. 2015. *Ontology Made Easy*. Oxford University Press.
- . 2017. "Metaphysics and Conceptual Negotiation". *Philosophical Issues* 27:364–382.
- Yablo, Stephen. 1998. "Does Ontology Rest on a Mistake?" *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 72 (1): 229–283.