Implicit Commitment

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1. Introduction

Quine’s rejuvenation of the metaphysical project

The role of ontological commitment is to spell out what a theory says exists.

This is a subclass of what that theory says as a whole.

The Quinean understanding of metaphysics is as a tidying up of my own theory: metaphysics is housekeeping in the home theory.

So if we are worrying about a theory’s ontological commitments then we are worrying about what according to that theory exists.

This is special case of the problem of the consequences of the theory as such.
1. Introduction

In the statement of the theory there are explicit commitments. Further, unless the theory is closed under consequences, there are implicit commitments, commitments which follow from the explicit commitments.

On this picture of theories there is the total set of commitments, explicit and implicit and you get that total set by closing the explicit commitment under some sort of consequence relation.

The consequence relation in question is agreed by just about everyone as entailment.

But what is entailment?

There is a whole lot of debate about that.
1. Introduction

So far I think I am being faithful to Quine.

Ontological commitments are a species of commitment of a theory.

We get the total commitments of a theory by closing under entailment.

There are issues about which theory to endorse but those are separate questions.

It is a further question to what ontological commitment is whether I should have in my home theory a commitment to mereological sums, or whatever.

A theory has commitment to every existential claim that gets into it.
1. Introduction

Of course we can use multiple theories.

For different purposes we might use different theories with different standards for claims to ‘earn their keep’.

These standards are, like the degrees of confidence we use in testing statistical hypotheses or the degree of precision we use in making measurements, a pragmatic choice and not liable to be false.

But the question of what a theory has as its ontological commitments is a completely separate question from the question of whether we should endorse it, or whether we should rationally adopt it given where we are and what evidence we are confronted with.

Mostly, I will be talking about what a theory’s ontological commitments are.
2. Quine’s Account

We have seen that a theory’s ontological commitments are existential statements which are in the closure of the theory under entailment, but what is entailment.

Quine’s account of entailment: a narrowly formal notion

Identifies valid inferences as those which substitution of non-logical vocabulary never takes us from true premises to false conclusion. (similar to Bolzano’s account)

There is no clear account of a formal consequence for our natural language.

For that reason that he needs to get the theory in question regimented into a first order language.

The crucial thing to note is the role of this account of entailment.

Ontological commitment is a feature of the theory itself not a extra-theoretical notion.

Accepting “There are F’s” is the ontological commitment.
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3. Quine’s Account

The ontological commitment is the sentence itself.

The sentences of the home theory are the base in terms of which we make sense of all else, including our semantic theory.

So Quine’s account says look for the consequences of the theory by looking for the narrowly formally valid consequences.

Among those look for the ones with the form “There are F’s”; those are the theory’s ontological commitments.
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2. Quine’s Account

I and Jackson and Lewis think Quine is right about the basic picture of ontological commitments: they are a species of commitments in general.

I and Jackson and Lewis disagree with Quine’s account of consequence in general.

I will see what Jackson and Lewis say about that consequence relation try to show that their account is mistaken.
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4. Jackson’s alternative account of entailment

Frank Jackson broke ranks with Quine over the question of the nature of entailment.

Frank emphasizes the notion of necessitation.

According to Frank Jackson, P entails Q iff P necessitates Q.

I.e. P entails Q if the set of P worlds is contained within the set of Q worlds.

This fits with our telling our students that an argument is valid iff it is impossible for the premises to be true while the conclusion is false.
5. Jackson’s defence of necessitation against an objection
Consider the following arguments:

B1 Materialism is true.
B2 Materialism is ontologically committed to non-actual possible worlds.
BC Non-actual possible worlds exist.

C1 Modal realism is true.
C2 Modal realism is ontologically committed to non-actual possible worlds.
CC Non-actual possible worlds exist.

If there are non-actual possible worlds that is necessary so both arguments would be necessitations.
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5. Jackson’s defence of necessitation against an objection
   But the objection is that Lewis who is both a modal realist and a materialist is surely committed to possible worlds by his modal realism in a way that is different from the way his materialism commits him to possible worlds.

   Jackson feels the intuitive force of this objection and tries to explain that intuition.
5. Jackson’s defence of necessitation against an objection

Jackson focuses on the dynamics of commitments.

He accepts that both arguments are according to Lewis’s total theory necessitations.

Doubt about the conclusion reflects differently in the two arguments.
5. Jackson’s defence of necessitation against an objection

B1 Materialism is true.
B2 Materialism is ontologically committed to non-actual possible worlds.
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C1 Modal realism is true.
C2 Modal realism is ontologically committed to non-actual possible worlds.
CC Non-actual possible worlds exist.

Doubt about non-actual possible worlds reflects on C1 and to B2.

Jackson shows that there is an asymmetry that reflects the intuitive sense that materialism and modal realism, even for Lewis, have different sorts of commitments to non-actual possible worlds.
5. Jackson’s defence of necessitation against an objection

The phenomenon Jackson notes is importantly right.

The phenomenon he has identified is a problem not just for the necessitation accounts of entailment but all of them.

Jackson’s solution is important as a way of finding an asymmetry in structurally similar arguments.

Note how doubts about the conclusion can reflect on the premises asymmetrically.

But there are other problems which are just problems for the necessitation account of entailment.
6. The failure of necessitation as an account of consequence

B1 Materialism is true.
B2 Materialism is ontologically committed to non-actual possible worlds.
BC Non-actual possible worlds exist.

C1 Modal realism is true.
C2 Modal realism is ontologically committed to non-actual possible worlds.
CC Non-actual possible worlds exist.

Look at these two arguments again. I suggest that there is another difference between them: the role of the second premise in each case.

The second premise is necessary so redundant. But the first argument looks invalid without it. This is a general feature of necessitation.
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6. The failure of necessitation as an account of consequence

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<td>D1</td>
<td>Fa</td>
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<td>D2</td>
<td>a = b</td>
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<td>D3</td>
<td>Fb</td>
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In this argument the second premise is necessary, and so by the lights of entailment as necessitation is redundant.

But the argument without D2 is not persuasive. It is not valid without D2.

It is no rational failing not to know D2 and so no rational failing not to infer D3 from D1.

Since there are necessary truths which are not eliminable from the premise sets of arguments to make them valid, necessitation is not an account of entailment.
7. An alternative account of consequence

Failing to acknowledge your commitments is a rational failing.

But on the necessitation account there will be commitments of a theory which are not rationally accessible.

So the necessitation account fails to make sense of the way commitments are tied up in rationally assessing agents.

To make sense of that it is important that our notion of consequence is tied to what is rationally accessible.

A fancy term for that: a priori
7. An alternative account of consequence

We should by now be familiar with the fact that the a priori and the necessary are different not just in intension but extension.

Morton White showed us the former, Saul Kripke showed us the latter.

Necessitation fails to give an account of logical consequence since it fails to give an account of the way failing to acknowledge commitments is a rational failing.

On the necessitation account there are commitments which are not rationally accessible but for these the failure to acknowledge them does not show the agent to be in any way less than rationally ideal.

If you like you can define the a priori consequences of an interpreted sentence to be the consequences a rationally ideal agent would acknowledge.

Note rationally ideal agents are not omniscient.
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7. An alternative account of consequence

Note the further question of the nature of the a priori is not a question I will deal with here.

Except to say that the two dimensional account is clearly wrong.

Quick refutation: The diagonal proposition is either necessary or contingent.

So on the two dimensional account every sentence is either a priori or a posteriori depending on whether it has a necessary diagonal or not. (a priori includes a priori false, here)

The two dimensional account partitions the set of interpreted sentences into a priori and a posteriori.
7. An alternative account of consequence

But a priori and a posteriori partition not the set of interpreted sentences but the set of knowable sentences.

There may be sentences which are not knowable.

They are neither a priori knowable nor a posteriori knowable.

So 2Dism fails.

(note further that the set of sentences with contingent diagonals can contain intuitively a priori sentences so the 2D approach can fail to get the extensions wrong of both a priori and a posteriori)
7. An alternative account of consequence

There is a stronger case to make against necessitation if we can show that there are inferences which are entailments which are not necessitations.

In that case this would block a reply to my account which says that what we need to do to get things right is to add an epistemic restriction to the necessitation account. Say, for example, that we say entailments are those necessitations which are such that the agent who assents to the premises while denying the premises is rationally criticizable.

But if there are examples of the contingent a priori then we can find cases of a priori consequences which are not necessitations.

I think there are so I think necessitation, though an interesting relation, is utterly hopeless as an account of entailment.
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Now that we have an account of what a theory’s ontological commitments are we need to pay some attention to the attitudes we can take to theories.

We take on the commitments of theories we are believe.

But we can take many sorts of attitudes to theories. Not all of them commit us to the theories.

Arguably, someone who is committed to the Einstein’s theory of relativity and who is using Newtonian theory to design a bridge is not for that reason really committed to the Newtonian theory.

Van Fraassen has suggested that the attitude to theories we should take is one of acceptance, an attitude he thinks falls short of belief.

We accept a theory when we believe it is empirically adequate and that we commit to doing research using that theory.
I suggest that it is far from clear that this is not belief.

But this strategy is a very common one in the history of philosophy:
Ancient Scepticism

Sextus Empiricus distinguishes between the way a sceptic assents and the way a dogmatist assents to the very same impression.

Michael Frede suggests this is a distinction among attitudes not contents. Myles Burnyeat suggests that this is really a distinction among types of contents.

However you read the sceptics, and I think Frede was right in suggesting how to read Sextus, there is a difference alleged in the attitude taken to the content in question.
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But we can take many attitudes to theories:
   we can entertain them.
   we can act as if they were true while professing to disbelieve them if asked.
   we can treat them as a fiction
   ...

Taking these attitudes do not commit us to the commitments of the theories.
   (Except in cases where the theories are committed to theories and we incur
    that commitment because in, say, entertaining a theory, we commit ourselves
    to theories. Let us ignore that sort of case.)

Although many accounts proliferate non-committing attitudes and I do want to
   allow them in principle, I think that typically they work by overly restricting the
   nature of beliefs.

I don’t think it is obvious that the physicist building the bridge does not believe
   Newtonian theory when using it.

That is a further topic and I won’t discuss that here.
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So in summary:

Ontological commitments of a theory are a subset of the commitments of the theory.
Metaphysics is housekeeping in the home theory.

The commitments are the entailments of the theory.

Quine’s narrowly formal account not much much chop.

Jackson and Lewis argued for necessitation.

Necessitation not much good either.

Need an account that makes sense of the way failing to acknowledge commitments is a rational failing, so commitments must be epistemically accessible: a priori.
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There are two types of analysis we had to give of our ontological commitments:

first we had to give an account of what theories say exists;
then
second we had to say what is involved we believe a given theory.
But we also needed an account of what it is to believe a theory.

I have not offered anything like that here but believing would seem to be implicated as the ‘ground of all our actions’ [Hume] and ‘maps of neighbouring space by which we steer’ [Ramsey] but that is another story....