Deflating Existence

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What Exists?

- Little agreement about the answer
- Standard methods for answering:
  - Quine’s approach
  - Substantive Criteria of Existence:
    - Causal powers
    - Mind-Independence
    - Trackable
    - Possessing a genuine nature…
If we accept 3 simple theses about language (+examples):

– We should reject Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment
– We should reject all common proposals for substantive criteria for existence
…and it also follows that:

- Paraphrases don’t help avoid ontological commitments.
- Most reasons for rejecting disputed entities are wrong.
- Existence questions are straightforwardly resolvable.
- There is little room for a philosophical discipline of Ontology.
The Plan:

- Plausibilify each of the 3 Theses
- Show how these conclusions follow
- The payoff: at least to see how the practice of ontology relies on denying (the conjunction of) certain theses about language.
Thesis 1: \( *K* \) refers iff \( Ks \) exist

A platitude about reference (for most general nouns):

- 1(a) (If \( *K* \) refers at all) \( *K* \) refers to all and only \( Ks \).
- 1(b) \( \forall x(*K* \text{ refers to } x \iff Kx) \)
- 1(c) \( \exists x(*K* \text{ refers to } x) \rightarrow \exists x(Kx) \)
- 1(d) \( \exists x(Kx) \rightarrow \exists x(*K* \text{ refers to } x) \)

Assuming \( Ks \) exist iff \( \exists x(Kx) \), we get Thesis 1
Objections to
“K” refers iff Ks exist:

- “K” could refer and yet Ks not exist, if “K” had a different meaning
- Ks could exist and while it is not the case that “K” refers, if the term “K” didn’t exist

Neither is a problem for our Thesis 1
Thesis 2: Speakers establish application conditions for our general nouns that determine what it takes for them to refer.

- The obvious cases:
  - Descriptive terms
  - Terms for institutional, legal kinds
Objections from Causal Theories of Reference:

- Reference determined not by conditions speakers associate with a term, but by real causal relations

- But do causal relations determine:
  - Whether a term refers?
  - To what it refers?
Can’t (alone) determine whether a term refers:

- There are always causal relations
- But sometimes our terms fail to refer
- We must allow that speakers establish basic grounding conditions, e.g. that there must be some type of creature instantiated by all or most of the sample
These grounding conditions yield application conditions:

- For ‘baublehead’ to refer (in C) the grounding condition must have been met, and there must (in C) be the same kind of animal as that referred to in the initial sample.
Application conditions:

- May be deferential
- Needn’t include speakers’ descriptive associations
- Don’t just play a role in reference-fixing-they must be fulfilled for the term to refer
Thesis 3: The fact that one statement is true may analytically entail that another is true.

A analytically entails B if a competent speaker/reasoner who grasps the meanings of the terms used and the truth of A could legitimately infer B from that basis alone.
Analytic Entailments:

Seem obvious; become evident through:
- Speaker commitments
- Redundancies

Given Thesis (2), traceable to interrelations in rules of use for our terms
Quine’s Objections to Analyticity:

Early arguments target the view that there is a behavioral criterion for distinguishing analytic/synthetic sentences across the board.
Responses to Quine:

- Accepting analytic entailments doesn’t presuppose that there is such a criterion
- Analytic entailments don’t require synonymy
- Room remains for understanding analytic entailments as grounded in relations in the rules of use for our terms, where these are collectively legislated by speakers.
Later Quine (1991) still has reservations:

- Carnap’s use of the notion in handling mathematical truth
- Speaking of analyticity “begets an uncritical notion of meaning, or synonymy, that can induce a false sense of understanding” (1991, 271).
But acknowledges:

- ‘Analyticity undeniably has a place at the commonsense level’ (1991, 270)

- A behavioural criterion: analytic sentences are those that the speakers learn the truth of just in coming to understand the relevant words
Our Analytic Entailments

- Are only the ‘manifest’ commonsense cases in ordinary language
- Our criterion for analytic entailment parallels Quine’s suggested behavioral criterion for analyticity
Consequences for Quine’s Criterion of Ontological Commitment

Quine: “we are convicted of a particular ontological presupposition if, and only if, the alleged presupposition has to be reckoned among the entities over which our variables range in order to render one of our affirmations true” (1953/2001, 13).

Also used as a decision procedure
Yields paraphrase strategy:

- if an apparently committing mode of speech can be paraphrased so “as to show that the seeming reference to [the offending entities] on the part of our bound variable was an avoidable manner of speaking”, then we are not really involved in ontological commitment to entities of that kind (1953/2001, 13).
Theses (1-3) (+ examples):

- Show that Quine’s criterion does not provide a necessary condition for ontological commitment
- Show that paraphrases don’t relieve a theory of ontological commitments
Existence-Introducing Analytic Entailments:

(a) A van collided with a car
(a*) There was a collision between a van and a car

■ (a*) redundant with respect to (a), analytically entailed by it
■ But carries different ontological commitments
Suscipions of existence-introducing entailments?

- Mollified by theses (1) and (2):
  - (2): application conditions for *collision* guaranteed met if (a) is true
  - (1c) the quantificational claim is true
  - (1) collisions exist
Existence-introducing entailments:

- Rife in ordinary talk of existence (marriages, churches)
- Available for many disputed entities (composite objects, properties, states)
Problems with Paraphrase:

- Eliminativists paraphrase claims like \((a^*)\) in terms of claims like \((a)\)
- But if \((a)\) may be transformed to \((a^*)\), this paraphrase only hides--doesn’t avoid--the implicit commitment.
- Rejecting the transformation involves treating sentences that seem equivalent as lacking the same truth-value
Rejecting Quine’s Criterion:

- Reject the idea that:
  
  “a man frees himself from ontological commitments of his discourse...[if] he shows how some particular use which he makes of quantification, involving a prima facie commitment to certain objects, can be expanded into an idiom innocent of such commitments” (1953/2001, 103)
Commitment to entities not avoided by avoiding certain terms or concepts:
  – If a theory treats sentences as true which (when a new term K is introduced) analytically entail that there are Ks, the theory is committed to Ks

Quantification not necessary for commitment
Of course:

- (Early) Quine would reject Thesis (3)---along with analyticity

- But those who find (1-3) plausible have reason to doubt Quine’s criterion and reject the paraphrase technique
Consequences for Existence

Conditions

Proposed criteria for existence:

- Causal Powers (Armstrong et al)
- Mind-Independence
  - Lakoff: “Existence cannot depend in any way on human cognition”
  - Azzouni: Our society’s criterion is ontological independence from “any psychological or linguistic process whatever”
Other proposed criteria:

- Possession of a real nature (Elder 2004)
- Epistemic robustness, trackability, observability...
Given (1) and (2), each is wrong if:

- The standard application conditions for some term *K* are fulfilled
  - By (2) *K* refers; by (1) Ks exist
- But Ks don’t meet the proposed existence criterion
Rejecting Mind-Independence:

- Consider terms: *Table*, *painting*, *baseball*, *money*
- Associated conditions apparently met
- But require intentional actions/practices
- So the entities referred to can’t be mind-independent
Reconstruals of ‘mind-independence’?

- Requiring a mind-independent nature, or epistemic independence?
- Artifacts also violate these criteria (see my 2003, 2007)
- Adopting mind-independence as a criterion just begs the question against these entities
Rejecting the Eleatic Criterion:

Interpreted as requiring *novel* causal powers:

- Eliminativists argue ordinary objects fail
- But ordinary application conditions for *table*, *stone* nonetheless fulfilled
- By (2) and (1), they exist
Eleatic criterion 2:

Interpreted as requiring some causal powers:

- Application conditions for *law*, *debt*, *story*, *symphony* apparently met
- By (2) and (1), they exist
- But they lack causal powers
The underlying mistake:

- Finding an existence criterion suitable for things of one kind (e.g. basic physical entities) and adopting it across the board

Different terms have different application conditions, yielding different existence conditions for different sorts of things
As a result:

- Prospects dim for finding a single universal requirement for application
- Given (1-2) we should reject most arguments for eliminating things of various sorts
Consequences for Ontology

- If we can’t use Quine’s criterion or any of the standard substantive criteria, how can we address existence questions?
- Must we accept the existence of any old thing? (Phlogiston? Witches?)
Do Ks exist?

- Determine the frame-level application conditions for *K*
- Determine whether or not these are fulfilled--if so, (by 2) the term refers, and (by 1) Ks exist. If not, not.

(Substantive conditions vary)
No phlogiston, witches

- Application conditions not fulfilled
- Speakers made a mistake in thinking they were
- So there’s room for denials of existence, but not on grounds of failure to meet some philosophical criterion
Existence Questions Deflated

- Answerable straightforwardly through conceptual analysis + empirical enquiry
- Little room for ontology as a *philosophical* enterprise of figuring out what *really exists*
What’s left?

- Analysis
  - Of individual terms/concepts
  - Of relations among these

- Semantic descent
  - Existence conditions
  - Relations among entities referred to (if any)
Conclusions:

- Those who find the conclusions intolerable must reject the conjunction of (1-3)
- Those who find (1-3) plausible have reason to be suspicious of the way ontology has been done; seek a new understanding of the work of ontology