AGAINST ONTOLOGICAL PERMISSIVENESS

ABSTRACT

Ontological Permissiveness is the thesis that there are few or no (or few or none worth bothering about) metaphysical questions of the form '∃xFx?' to which the answer is not 'yes, obviously'. According to Ontological Permissiveness numbers, properties, meanings, God(s)... all obviously exist. Ontological Permissiveness plays a role in the case Jonathan Schaffer and Kit Fine make for a particular sort of view about what the important, *non-obvious* metaphysical questions are. But this sort of view - according to which metaphysics seeks to classify entities as *real* or *unreal* or as *fundamental* or *dependent* - also plays a role in the case that can be made for Ontological Permissiveness, providing strategies for dealing with apparent counterexamples. This paper refutes Ontological Permissiveness by putting forward counterexamples that cannot be handled by these strategies: important, central, typical and non-obvious metaphysical claims of the form '∃xFx' that cannot be defused by passing off Fs as, at the least, unreal or dependent entities, and whose significance cannot be downplayed by maintaining that the definition of 'F' entails information about the status of Fs as fundamental or dependent, real or unreal.

1. ONTOLOGICAL PERMISSIVENESS

Jonathan Schaffer (2009) argues that allegedly controversial existence questions like 'do properties exist?' 'do meanings exist?' 'does God exist?' 'do fictional characters exist?' are *trivial*: the answer to each of these questions is 'yes obviously'. Schaffer takes it that the form of these questions is '∃xFx?' (Schaffer 2009 p. 359-360) Kit Fine in a paper in the same volume also maintains that 'quantificational questions' (Fine 2009 p. 157) of the form '∃xFx?' are largely trivial; from which he concludes that 'ontological questions' like 'do properties exist?' are not quantificational questions of the form '∃xFx?'

I will use Schaffer's name 'Ontological Permissiveness' for the position that there are few or no metaphysical questions (or few or none worth bothering about) of the form '∃xFx?' to which the answer is not 'yes; obviously'; the position, in other words, that there are few or no metaphysical claims (or few or none worth bothering about) of the form '∃xFx' that are not obviously true. Ontological Permissiveness is a bold thesis. And it is just as bold as it appears to be. Schaffer doesn't argue that '∃x(x is God)' is trivial, only to then reveal that his existential quantifier is not the regular existential quantifier. 'I am not introducing new quantifiers….' he says… 'I am invoking the one and only sense of existence….' (Schaffer 2009 p. 360)[1] I will take it that Ontological Permissiveness is a substantive, bold thesis that merits the attempt to refute it. This paper will make that attempt.

Ontological Permissiveness has it that obviously there are such entities as numbers,

---

[1] Schaffer also denies that Ontological Permissiveness is 'lightweight'…

'…at least in the sense in which the lightweight realist treats existence claims as analytic, grounded in allegedly analytic ampliative conditionals such as ''if there are particles arranged tablewise, then there is a table. I take no such deflationist stance on existence, offer no analytic claims, and say nothing of particles. Rather, I take entities like tables to be full-blown ''heavyweight'' entries on the roster of entities, and merely add that their existence is obvious.' (360)

properties, fictional characters, God(s).... The interesting, important questions in

metaphysics, if Ontological Permissiveness is true, cannot then be over whether there are

such entities. Schaffer thinks the important questions in metaphysics ask of properties,

numbers, fictional characters and God(s) whether they are *fundamental,* or if not, if they are

dependent, what *grounds* them? Ontological enquiry, according to Fine, concerns itself with

whether properties, numbers and so on are *real or unreal.* According to Fine, an ontological

question about properties, for instance, rather than asking '∃x(x is a property)?' asks '∀x(x is

a property → x is real)?'[2] (Fine 2009 p. 168-169)

    Schaffer and Fine's arguments that existence questions, interpreted as quantificational

questions, are largely trivial, are intended to support the sort of view they hold about what the

non-trivial questions of metaphysics/ontology are. But this sort of view, with its distinction

between entities that are real/fundamental and entities that are unreal/dependent, also plays a

role in the case that may be made for Ontological Permissiveness.

    Consider an apparent counterexample to Ontological Permissiveness: '∃x(x is God)'.

On the face of it this is not obvious. Schaffer argues that, on the contrary, '∃x(x is God)' *is*

obvious because even if God is not a deity, God is, at the least, a *fictional character*: a

species of dependent entity (Schaffer 2009 p. 359). Schaffer's treatment of '∃x(x is God)' is

an instance of what I will call the 'defusing strategy'. This is the strategy of defusing

apparent counterexamples to Ontological Permissiveness - claims of the form '∃xFx' that on

the face of it are non-obvious - by passing off Fs as, at the least, dependent or unreal entities.

If Fs can consistently be dismissed as merely dependent or unreal entities, then Fs are easy to

swallow and '∃xFx', it can be allowed, is obvious after all.

    The strategy of passing off controversial alleged entities as, at the least, dependent or

---

[2] Note that the positions in the debate, according to Fine, are not limited to the position that all properties are real and the position that no properties are real. There are intermediate positions (Fine 2009 pp. 168-169) according to which all properties that meet some further condition are real.

unreal items, can be backed up by another strategy for defending Ontological Permissiveness against alleged counterexamples: another strategy which like the defusing strategy draws on the distinction between entities that are real/fundamental and entities that are unreal/dependent.

There are some examples of 'F' such that Fs cannot be passed off as, at the least, dependent or unreal entities. One sort of example is examples of 'F' such that 'Fx' is inconsistent. This sort of example though is unthreatening to a 'broad ontological permissiveness' that holds that there is no claim of the form '∃xFx' *worth bothering about*, that isn't trivially true. Schaffer identifies another sort of example. If the definition of what it is to be F 'entail[s] grounding information,'(Schaffer 2009 p. 359) then it may not be obvious that Fs at the least are dependent entities. Define 'transcendent' as '*independent* of minds and concrete substances' and '∃x(x is a transcendent number)' (Schaffer 2009 p. 365) is not trivially true. This sort of gerrymandered example though, Schaffer maintains, is unthreatening to a broad Ontological Permissiveness, because although '∃x(x is a transcendent number)' is controversial, it is *only* controversial because it is controversial whether numbers (which according to Schaffer obviously exist) are transcendent. Answer 'Are numbers transcendent?' and the answer to '∃x(x is a transcendent number)?' follows trivially. Once it is established whether numbers are transcendent or not the claim that transcendent numbers exist is either trivially true, or trivially false and not worth bothering about,

Schaffer downplays the significance of controversial propositions of the form '∃xFx' like '∃x(x is a transcendent number)' by maintaining that the definition of what it is to be an F entails information about whether Fs are fundamental or dependent, and that it isn't obvious that there are Fs, only because it isn't obvious that *this* part of the definition of what it is to be F is satisfied. Schaffer adopts this strategy in response to gerrymandered examples

like '∃x(x is a transcendent number)'. But this strategy - I will call it the 'downplaying strategy' - can be applied beyond obviously gerrymandered examples. It can be maintained that in the case of *every* proposition of the form '∃xFx' that is not obviously true (and not contradictory and so obviously false), the definition of 'F' entails grounding information or reality/unreality information and '∃xFx' is only controversial because it is controversial whether that information is true.

<div align="center">*</div>

I will not be able, in this paper, to get to the bottom of what it supposedly is for an entity to be dependent or fundamental, or real or unreal. But I will put forward examples of controversial claims of the form '∃xFx' that, I will argue, cannot be defused by passing off the controversial alleged entities as merely dependent or unreal, and whose significance, I will argue, cannot be downplayed by maintaining that the definition of 'F' entails reality/unreality information or grounding information and '∃xFx' is *only* controversial because this information is controversial.

The questions that these claims answer affirmatively are important, central and typical questions in metaphysics; so they refute a broad ontological permissiveness that maintains that what non-trivial existence questions (interpreted as quantificational questions) there are in metaphysics are few and uninteresting. These examples are the most important part of my case against Ontological Permissiveness; I will set them out in section 3.

First, in section 2, I will address arguments Schaffer and Fine make to the conclusions that particular examples of claims of the form '∃xFx' are obviously true. Arguments for the truth of just a few particular examples of claims of the form '∃xFx' don't establish Ontological Permissiveness; but the sort of arguments Schaffer and Fine make suggest

something like a template for arguments for the truth of conclusions of the form '∃xFx'. The conclusion I will draw about these arguments, however, is that they fail, *unless* the alleged examples of Fs invoked by the premises can be passed off as, at the least, merely dependent or unreal. The arguments fail, that is, unless the defusing strategy succeeds in defusing the premises of the arguments. The defusing strategy and the backup downplaying strategy, it will become clear, are the most important part of the case for Ontological Permissiveness, which stands or falls with them.

2. ARGUMENTS FOR PERMISSIVENESS ABOUT PROPERTIES, NUMBERS....

Schaffer puts forward arguments for permissiveness about numbers, properties, parts and fictional characters, each of which draws its conclusion from a single premise, a 'truism' (Schaffer 2009 p. 357) according to Schaffer, to which he attributes 'Moorean certainty' (Schaffer 2009 p. 357). (Fine puts forward arguments of the same sort for permissiveness about numbers and chairs[3].) The conclusion in each of these arguments follows straightforwardly from the premise and so, according to Schaffer, is also obviously true. The

---

[3] '…given the evident fact that there is a prime number greater than 2, it trivially follows that there is a number (an x such that x is a number); and similarly, given the evident fact that I am sitting on a chair, it trivially follows that there is a chair (an x such that x is a chair).'(Fine 2009 p. 158)

The arguments that these and other quantificational claims are trivial are part of Fine's case for denying that ontological questions have the form '∃xFx?' Another argument has it that ontological questions are philosophical but 'are there numbers?' and 'are there chairs or tables?' are not philosophical: the first being a mathematical question and the second 'an everyday matter that is to be settled on the basis of common observation.'(158) This is disputable. Another argument urges that if we 'go along with the mathematician' (159) in answering 'yes' to 'are there numbers?' that shouldn't prevent us from holding 'there is no realm of numbers "out there" to which our talk corresponds' (159). It shouldn't, I would reply, if our going along with the mathematician was an engagement with the fiction of mathematics. But then we haven't agreed that 'there are numbers' is literally true; there is thus no reason to suppose that the 'ontological question' still in dispute isn't 'are there numbers?' Fine's fourth argument contends that if ontological claims are quantificational claims then the position that there are integers is weaker than the position that there are natural numbers (165). Interpreted as quantificational claims these positions have it respectively that there is at least one integer and that there is at least one natural number. Obviously if we define the integers as including the natural numbers then the claim that there is at least one integer is no stronger than the claim that there is at least one natural number. But that doesn't show that realism about integers isn't a quantificational claim. There are several ways that realism about integers can be understood as a quantificational claim that make it a stronger position than realism about natural numbers: for example, as the claim that there are both positive and negative numbers.

abundance of the sort of 'truisms' Schaffer draws on in the construction of this sort of argument raises the prospect of an abundance of arguments, establishing the obviousness of every allegedly controversial existence claim. Here are two of these arguments:

> '1. There are prime numbers.
>
> 2. Therefore there are numbers.
>
> ….
>
> 3 There are properties that you and I share.
>
> 4 Therefore there are properties.' (Schaffer 2009 p. 357-358)

Let me distinguish between Schaffer's premises (I'll take the numerals: '1', '3' to refer to these) and the sentences that express the premises. While typical utterances of these sentences carry the flavour of platitudes, what needs to be shown is that this is down to the truth of Schaffer's premises and not down to something else. In the case of 'there are prime numbers' it is arguable that typical utterances of this sentence seem platitudinous not because of the truth of 1 – the proposition expressed by the sentence - but because utterers of the sentence are playing a game of make-believe – this is what we do when we engage with fiction (cf. Walton 1990) – a game whose rules prescribe that utterances of the sentence should be endorsed.

If 'there are prime numbers' is ever used to convey a truth, it can be maintained that this truth is the proposition concerning the fiction of numbers that according to the fiction of numbers there are prime numbers. Schaffer, anticipating this move, remarks that '…presumably this is a way of saying that 1 is false, and only some suitable paraphrase is true. But 1 is obviously true, as stated.' (Schaffer 2009 p. 357) This response echoes the response Fine makes to the suggestion that 'there is a prime number between 8 and 12' is not 'strictly and literally true'. Fine says: 'In claiming that there is a prime number between 8

and 12 or that there is a chair over there, I would appear to have as good a case of a strict and literal truth as one could hope to have.' (Fine 2009 p. 162)

What are we to make of these responses: that 1 is obviously true 'as stated' and that the proposition that there are prime numbers between 8 and 12 is the very paradigm of strict and literal truth? We can evaluate 1 'as stated' - we can try to ascertain whether it is strictly and literally true - by ignoring the platitudinous flavour of 'there are prime numbers' in its usual context of utterance; this could be down to something other than the truth of the proposition that $\exists x(x$ is a prime number$)$. This proposition, the proposition that there are items of a certain type - prime numbers - should be considered simply as such.

But if we are to consider 1 simply as the proposition that there are items of a certain type, it is puzzling why Schaffer feels the need to have us consider 1, the proposition that there are items of a certain type - prime numbers - in order to infer the conclusion that there are items of a certain type: numbers. The latter proposition is less specific and so its obviousness should be at least as apparent. The same thing can be said about 'there are properties that you and I share' and 'there are properties'. If the acceptability of the former in its usual contexts of utterance is set aside and it is considered solely as the assertion that there are entities of a certain type that you and I both possess, then its obviousness is no more apparent than the obviousness of the assertion that there are entities of that type.

Perhaps Schaffer intends us to recognize the obviousness of 'there are prime numbers' and 'there are properties that you and I share' through our familiarity with the specific entities - prime numbers and our own properties - that 1 and 3 say that there are. But of course the deniers of the existence of properties and numbers will deny that we are familiar with any such entities. Is it obvious that we are familiar with these entities to the extent that we recognize them, without doubt, *as entities*? We must not take the acceptability of 'there are prime numbers' and 'there are properties that you and I share' in typical contexts of

utterance as establishing this. If we resist this temptation then, I suggest, it is not evident that we are familiar with such entities as our own properties and prime numbers, to the extent that we recognize them, without doubt, as entities.

The supposed obviousness of Schaffer's premises 1 and 3 and other such supposed truisms 'as stated,' I conclude, is not any more apparent than the supposed obviousness of Schaffer's conclusions 2 and 4. But these are not obvious! There are powerful reasons, adduced by Nominalists about numbers and Nominalists about properties - perhaps not ultimately telling but not to be lightly dismissed - to deny 2 and 4, and to deny 1 and 3 when these propositions are clarified as propositions that entail 2 and 4.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

The force of Nominalists' objections to 2 and 4 and 1 and 3 indicates that these propositions are anything but obviously true. Or does it? Is it the propositions 2 and 4 and 1 and 3 that are the target of the objections? The strategy of defusing apparently controversial claims of the form '∃xFx' by passing off controversial alleged existents as, at the least, merely dependent or unreal denies this. This strategy can be implemented by maintaining that the objections that may appear to attach to the proposition that there are properties and the proposition that there are numbers in fact attach to the proposition that properties are fundamental or real and the proposition that numbers are fundamental or real. Once it is acknowledged that numbers and properties may be dependent or unreal items it becomes clear that 1 and 3 and 2 and 4 are obviously true, after all. So the defuser urges.

I will not accept that the defusing strategy succeeds in these cases. If a property, as 3 suggests, is something that can be *shared* by you and I, then this arguably disqualifies it as an unreal item, and as a *mind*-dependent item. But I don't want to pursue this point now. I will

have more to say about properties in the next section. The point I want to make now, about

the arguments Schaffer and Fine make from alleged truisms like 1 and 3 to conclusions of the

form '∃xFx', is that these arguments fail, or at any rate they don't all succeed, *unless* they can

be rescued by the defusing strategy. The 'truisms' and the conclusions that follow from them

are all trivial and obvious only if the defusing strategy succeeds.

3. COUNTEREXAMPLES TO ONTOLOGICAL PERMISSIVENESS

One of the arguments in Schaffer 2009 argues from the alleged truism:

      '7. Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes.'

…to the conclusion:

      '8. Therefore Sherlock Holmes exists' (Schaffer 2009 p. 359)

Schaffer explicitly attempts to defuse 7 and 8. Considering denials of the reality of fictional

characters, he maintains that these amount to denials that fictional characters are 'basic'

(Schaffer 2009 p. 360).

      If fictional characters, due to their status as non-basic and merely 'mind-dependent'

(Schaffer 2009 p. 360) are easy to swallow, so is anything that can be passed off as, at the

least, a fictional character. This is what Schaffer tries to do to God. He maintains that

atheists agree with theists that there is such an entity as God. What atheists take exception to,

he says, is the suggestion that God is a deity: 'The atheistic view is that God is a fictional

character. The atheist need not be committed to the claim that there are no fictional

characters!' (Schaffer 2009 p. 359)

This attempt to defuse '∃x(x = God)' is objectionable on a number of grounds. The ontological/metaphysical view about fictional characters it invokes, according to which fictional characters like Sherlock Holmes are 'created' is dubiously coherent[4]. But Schaffer's attempt to defuse '∃x(x = God)' also relies on a further questionable assumption about the semantics of talk about fiction. Even if it is granted that, when used to say something like 'Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes' the name 'Sherlock Holmes' refers to a dependent entity, it need not be granted that 'Sherlock Holmes' always, in the mouth of every user of the name 'Sherlock Holmes', refers to such an entity. It can be maintained, on the contrary, that 'Holmes' refers to a dependent entity only when knowingly used to refer to such an item or when used in a name using practice instigated by such a knowing use.

This is the view defended by Kripke (2013) and Van Inwagen (1977)[5]. According to this view 'Sherlock Holmes' as used by Conan Doyle in telling the Holmes stories, and as used by someone laboring under the mistake that the stories are true, and as used by someone who, to correct that mistake, utters the negative existential statement 'Sherlock Holmes doesn't exist', is a *non-referring name*.

This view needs to be ruled out. Otherwise the attempt to defuse '∃x(x = God)' doesn't succeed. Even if it is granted that 'God' in the mouth of a cultural critic ('God is the creation of pre-scientific societies') refers to a dependent entity, it is 'God' in the mouth of the theist that is most relevant. It is the theist's claim: '∃x(x = God)' rather than that of a literary or cultural critic that is the prima facie counterexample to ontological permissiveness. Suppose atheism is correct. Then the theist is in the position of the individual who mistakenly takes the Holmes stories to be true, and the atheist, when denying the theist's

---

[4] See Brock 2010 for objections.
[5] Thanks to (name withheld) for drawing my attention to this view. The contrary view is held by Salmon 1998 and Thomasson 1999.

claim '∃x(x = God)' is in the position of the individual who tries to correct the mistake. According to the view that needs to be ruled out, if atheism is correct, when the theist says '∃x(x = God)' and the atheist denies this, 'God' in their mouths is a non-referring name, and therefore '∃x(x = God)' is not true, never mind obvious.

*

Schaffer's attempt to defuse '∃x(x = God)' succeeds only if his undefended assumption about the semantics of fictional names is correct, and the alternative view I have outlined isn't. I don't intend to argue here that Schaffer's assumption is incorrect, however, because it is possible to sidestep the issue about the semantics of fictional names.

What are theists arguing for and atheists arguing against? 'God exists' conveys the theist position to everyone who is aware what sort of entity the alleged entity - God - allegedly is. But what if the theist were explaining her position to someone unfamiliar with the name 'God'? She would use a description in place of the name 'God'. This is because the theist position is not just that the 'list of beings' includes a being named 'God'. The theist position is also not just that a being named 'God' is fundamental or real, rather than dependent or unreal. Theism is the view that there is a being that created and sustains the universe, possessing qualities that play a part in theistic explanations of morality and the significance of our existence. The question over the truth of theism then is the question whether there is such a being. The proposition that there is such a being - '∃x(x is a benevolent, omnipotent creator of the universe (for short))' - is my first counterexample to Ontological Permissiveness.

My second counterexample comes from the metaphysical debate over properties. According to Schaffer 'both the realist and nominalist accept the existence of general

properties. The dispute is over whether properties are fundamental, or whether they are derivative.' (Schaffer 2009 p. 362) I am not sure what is meant by 'general properties'. Can 'general properties' be used in such a way that even ostrich nominalists agree that such items exist? I am not sure; but I am sure that no nominalist would wish to agree that there are *universals*. A universal is supposedly a repeatable item, an item that can be multiply realisable or wholly present in two places at once. This is the definition of a universal. 'Universal' has a definition because 'universal' is a theoretical term that is descriptive of an alleged entity that is fit to play a certain theoretical role. The role is as an explanans of qualitative similarity: of how two things can be, in a way, the same. A universal is supposed to be literally something that two things can have in common. '∃x(x is a universal: that is a repeatable item)' is my second counterexample to Ontological Permissiveness.

My counterexamples are examples of controversial and non-trivial claims of the form '∃xFx' that, I will show, cannot be defused by maintaining that Fs are, at the least, merely dependent or unreal entities and thus easy to swallow. I will also show that the significance of the counterexamples cannot be downplayed by maintaining that the definition of 'F' includes 'grounding/reality' information, and '∃xFx' is controversial only because this part of the definition is controversial. The defusing and the downplaying strategies both fail with these examples.

<div align="center">*</div>

I will first show the failure of the defusing strategy. Consider '... is a universal: that is, a repeatable item'. It is controversial that *anything* is repeatable: capable of being in two places at once. Locke insisted that everything that exists is a particular. According to Keith Campbell the suggestion that there are repeatable items is a 'scandal' (Campbell 1981, p477).

The basic nominalist objection to realism is that the very notion of a universal is incoherent: there are only particular things and there could be no such thing as a universal. It is not a blatant contradiction, of course, to say that there are universals. '∃x(x is a universal: that is a repeatable item)' is not obviously, trivially false. But the grip of the basic nominalist objection suggests it is far from obviously true.

The nominalist objection objects to the very idea of a universal. It insists that *nothing* could be a universal. How can it help then to maintain that universals are, at the least, dependent or unreal things? Claiming that a putative universal – roundness say – is at the least a dependent or unreal item won't satisfy nominalists; unless this claim is a way of saying that the putative universal isn't really a universal. The nominalist objection is not an objection to items that are putatively or fictionally universals – for instance characters in a realist fiction – so long as these items are only putatively, and not really, universals. However if the suggestion that putative universals are, at the least, dependent or unreal items is a way of saying that putative universals are, at the least, not really universals, then it fails to defuse '∃x(x is a universal: that is a repeatable item)'. This says that there are items that are universals, not merely that there are items that are putatively or fictionally universals.

'∃x(x is a universal: that is a repeatable item)' cannot be defused by passing off universals as, at the least, dependent or unreal items. Next consider '∃x(x is a benevolent, omnipotent creator of the universe)'. It is controversial that the universe was created: atheists argue that it wasn't. And it is controversial that anything is omnipotent and that, given the existence of evil in the universe, there is an entity that is both benevolent and omnipotent. Atheists argue that there couldn't be an omnipotent, benevolent being. But there are lines of defence available to theists against the atheists' charges of incoherence. The description 'benevolent, omnipotent creator' isn't a blatant contradiction, or blatantly inconsistent with obvious truths. It isn't obviously, trivially false that there is a benevolent,

omnipotent creator of the universe. But the power of the atheist objections suggests it is far from obviously true.

If the description 'is a benevolent, omnipotent creator of the universe' is incoherent, as atheists charge, then nothing – real or unreal, dependent or independent – can satisfy the description. If the description is inconsistent with the known fact (if it is a known fact) that the universe wasn't created, then nothing – real or unreal, independent or dependent – can satisfy the description. It is superfluous to point out, though I will nonetheless, that a merely dependent or unreal item is particularly ill equipped to satisfy the description 'is a benevolent, omnipotent creator of the universe.'

How can it help then to maintain that a benevolent, omnipotent, creator of the universe is, at the least, a merely dependent or unreal item? Claiming that a putative benevolent, omnipotent creator of the universe is at the least a dependent or unreal item won't satisfy atheists unless this claim is a way of saying that the putative benevolent, omnipotent creator is really no such thing. The atheist objection is not an objection to an item that is putatively, or fictionally, a benevolent, omnipotent creator – for instance a character in a theist fiction – so long as this item is only putatively or fictionally, and not really, a benevolent omnipotent creator. However if the suggestion that a putative benevolent omnipotent creator is, at the least, a dependent or unreal item is a way of saying that a putative benevolent, omnipotent creator is, at the least, no such thing, then it fails to defuse '∃x(x is a benevolent omnipotent creator of the universe)'. This says that there is an item that is a benevolent, omnipotent creator of the universe, not merely that something putatively or fictionally counts as a benevolent, omnipotent creator.

'∃xFx' in both cases, I conclude, cannot be defused by passing off Fs as, at the least dependent or unreal entities. The difference, of course, between these examples and Schaffer and Fine's examples, is that 'F' in my examples is not a predicate like 'is a property' or 'is

God' with unspecified satisfaction conditions. 'F' is a description with satisfaction conditions that arguably cannot be met. The permissivist cannot pass off Fs in these cases as unreal or dependent entities unless it is plausible that unreal or dependent entities satisfy, rather than just putatively or fictionally satisfy 'F'. But it is arguable that nothing – dependent or independent, real or unreal – satisfies 'F'.

I see only one way out for the permissivist. There is a conception of 'unreal' merely fictional entities, according to which an unreal entity can count as a universal, or as an omnipotent benevolent creator of the universe, even if the notion of a universal is incoherent, and the notion of an omnipotent, benevolent creator of the universe is incoherent or inconsistent with known facts. For *Meinongians*, for all predicates 'F' there is a real or unreal entity that is F. If 'Fx' is incoherent or contradictory or contradicts known truths then, even though no existent real entity is F, there is still an unreal entity that is F. The way out for the permissivist is to try to pass off universals and an omnipotent, benevolent creator of the universe as Meinongian non-existent objects.

This escape route may not appeal to Schaffer or Fine. Schaffer denies that his proposal is 'Meinongian' (Schaffer 2009, p359). Fine denies that his 'unreal' entities are Meinongian unreal objects. However the reason Fine gives for this denial doesn't settle the question. He maintains that his view doesn't rule out that Meinongian 'non-existent objects' are real: that is, are 'genuine constituent[s] of the world' (Fine 2009 p. 168). But the Meinongian definition of a non-existent object may rule this out. It is certainly not out of keeping with the sorts of thing Meinongians say about non-existent intentional objects to deny that these are genuine constituents of the world. Fine can't just say that 'Finean unreal object' and 'Meinongian non-existent object' aren't necessarily co-extensive. He has to give a definition of 'Finean unreal object' that is different from the definition Meinongians would give of 'Meinongian non-existent object'. He doesn't do this.

In any event, even if Fine and Schaffer are not Meinongians, the Meinongian interpretation of Ontological Permissiveness is an available interpretation. It is necessary, to close off every avenue of escape for the permissivist, to show that the descriptions 'is a universal (that is, a repeatable item)' and 'is an omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent creator of the universe' are not obviously satisfied by Meinongian objects.

Of course Meinongian objects are not easy to swallow. And the variety of Meinongianism needed to save the defusing strategy is perhaps the most objectionable variety of Meinongianism. Let me clarify. There are three varieties of Meinongianism, each with its own way of explaining, for instance, how, even if the universe wasn't created, something could nonetheless count as a benevolent, omnipotent creator of the universe. One variety (Zalta 1983) explains that the alleged benevolent, omnipotent creator counts as such because it 'encodes', rather than instantiates the properties of being an omnipotent, benevolent creator. A second variety (Priest 2005) explains that the alleged benevolent, omnipotent creator of the universe has these properties in another world (but not actually). These varieties of Meinongianism can't save the defusing strategy because the claim it aims to defuse - '∃x(x is a benevolent, omnipotent, creator of the universe)' - can be clarified as the claim '∃x(x is actually a benevolent, omnipotent, creator of the universe (i.e. it actually instantiates the relevant properties)).'

The variety of Meinongianism that the defusing strategy needs to invoke is Meinong's own variety, more recently defended by Terence Parsons (1980), according to which, even if the universe wasn't created, there is an entity that actually instantiates the 'nuclear' properties of being a benevolent, omnipotent creator of the universe. But this version of Meinongianism faces a powerful objection. The objection - which persuades even authors such as Zalta and Priest and Author (article date), who acknowledge non-existent objects or 'Meinongian objects' that non-existent objects don't actually instantiate 'nuclear' properties like *being a*

mountain, being a horse and whatever properties are involved in being the creator of the universe - is that these properties are *existence or reality entailing*.

If something is a horse or is a mountain or has what it takes to really count as a creator of the universe (rather than just being thought of as having these properties or, while actually lacking them, having them in some other possible or impossible situation) then that thing exists: it is real. If something is a horse or is a mountain or is omnipotent and benevolent and has what it takes to really count as a creator of the universe, then it must count as a 'genuine constituent of the world', and can't be merely unreal, and is certainly not easy to swallow.

This version of Meinongianism was the last hope for the defusing strategy. It must be rejected and so the defusing strategy, I conclude, fails with both examples.

*

My counterexamples to Ontological Permissiveness cannot be defused. I will now show that the backup strategy available to Ontological Permissiveness in the face of apparent counterexamples - what I called the 'downplaying strategy' - also fails. The downplaying strategy seeks to downplay the significance of controversial claims of the form '∃xFx', by maintaining that the definition of what it is to be F contains or implies 'grounding/reality' information, and '∃xFx' is controversial only because this part of the definition is controversial.

Allow me to quickly dismiss the suggestion that controversial claims of the form '∃xFx' are controversial only because the definition of 'F' implies *reality* information. In arguing against Meinongianism just now I maintained that unreal objects don't have 'nuclear' properties – the properties we characterise things by - because these properties are

existence/reality entailing. Let 'G' stand for such a property. Substituting 'there are real Gs' for 'there are Gs' doesn't result in a more controversial claim. Say we define Fs as 'Gs that are real'. Nobody except Meinongians will maintain that 'there are Fs' is controversial but 'there are Gs' isn't.

Let me focus then on the suggestion that controversial claims of the form '∃xFx' are controversial only because the definition of 'F' contains or implies *grounding* information. To say that something is a creator of the universe (that it actually instantiates the relevant properties) is to imply grounding information. The definition of a universal I have supplied doesn't explicitly include any such information but arguably 'there are universals' would only be an interesting claim if this definition were supplemented by the information that universals are the ground of similarities in the world.

Even if it is granted though that the definition of 'F' in my examples implies grounding information, the success of the downplaying strategy requires more than this. The downplaying strategy maintains that '∃xFx' is non-trivial *only* because it is controversial whether the grounding information entailed by the definition of 'F' is true. It maintains that the grounding information is the *only* controversial part of the definition. Schaffer, as mentioned above, imagines gerrymandered cases in which questions about whether entities are fundamental or dependent are turned into existence questions by 'packing grounding information into the description of a candidate entity' (Schaffer 2009 p. 365). Imagine that it is established that there are Gs; but it is in question whether the Gs are fundamental or merely dependent. The question 'are Gs fundamental or dependent?' can be dressed up as the question '∃x(x is a non-dependent G)?' But my examples are very different from such gerrymandered cases.

Consider '∃x(x is a benevolent, omnipotent, creator of the universe)'. The controversy over theism isn't just over whether there is a ground of all being. Atheists don't

just object to the idea of a ground of all being (Schaffer suggests that 'the whole concrete cosmos' (Schaffer 2009, p378) may ground all being). Atheists object to the idea that there is an entity with the properties - benevolence, omnipotence and so on - that would equip it for the explanatory role that theists posit it to occupy.

And consider '∃x(x is a universal: that is a repeatable item)'. Even if the definition of a universal is taken to include the information that universals are the ground of similarities, this isn't the only controversial part of the definition. It is part of the definition of a universal that a universal is *repeatable*.

Or is it? That's how 'universal' is usually defined. But perhaps in insisting on this definition I am blocking a legitimate permissivist reply. Let me elaborate. Universals are defined as repeatable items because the theoretical role that universals are defined to fill requires items that can explain how two things can have something in common. But can 'universal', perhaps, be defined differently compatible with this role: without mention of repeatability? Can realists dispense with the notion of repeatability by making use of the notion of dependence? Remember Schaffer's characterisation of the debate between nominalists and realists. Both sides, he maintained, agree that there are 'general properties'; the question is whether general properties are fundamental or derivative. Perhaps I haven't done justice to the possibilities inherent in this suggestion. Can a universal, for instance, be defined as a general property that is not dependent on any particular thing?[6]

This definition counts both Aristotelian universals (generically dependent on individuals but independent of any particular individual) and Platonic universals as universals, and it distinguishes universals from classes of individual concrete objects and from classes of tropes[7]. But it doesn't distinguish universals from *concepts* if these can count

---

[6] Thanks to (name deleted for blind review) for pressing me to consider permissivist attempts to reframe the debate over universals and suggesting this form of that attempt.
[7] Schaffer 2001 takes 'general properties' to be resemblance classes of tropes.

as 'general properties'. If concepts are mind-independent abstracta - inhabiting Frege's 'third realm' - then universals can't be distinguished from concepts by defining them as general properties that are not dependent on particular things *or on minds*. If concepts can count as 'general properties' then the attempt to redefine universals falters. But why can't concepts count as 'general properties', unless it is built into the notion of a general property that a general property is something that is repeatable – an item that many individuals instantiate rather than an item that many individuals fall under? If this is built into the notion of a general property then I could just as well have used 'there are general properties' as a counterexample to ontological permissiveness, and the attempt to redefine universals fails to redefine universals without mentioning repeatability.

I continue to maintain then that the controversy over universals is over whether there are repeatable items, not just over what grounds what. In the case of both examples, I have shown that whatever grounding information is entailed by the controversial definition is not the only controversial part of the definition. But the point I want to make can be best made as a general point. The counterexamples to Ontological Permissiveness are propositions of the form '∃xFx' such that 'F' has descriptive/definitional content. Even if this content includes or implies grounding information, it includes more. If F is an alleged property that would equip something that instantiated it to explain an apparent feature of the world, then even if being F involves being the ground of the explanandum, being F involves more than this. An 'explanation' that said no more than that something exists which is the ground of the explanandum would be no explanation.

But the additional information involved in the definition of 'F' is bound in many cases - cases where puzzling phenomena or apparent phenomena are to be explained - to be controversial. The similarity of distinct individuals is puzzling: Realists are prompted to posit repeatable entities as part of the explanans. And these are controversial. The existence

21

of the physical universe and apparently of moral values is puzzling: theists are prompted to posit a being with the sorts of features that would equip it to occupy the role of explanans. And this is controversial. But think also of substrata, Cartesian egos, monads.... All posited to explain something, all defined so as to equip them to fill the role of explanans, and all controversial on account of these definitions.[8]

My counterexamples, and more examples of the same sort, I conclude, cannot be defused and their significance can't be downplayed.

4.   CONCLUSION

The examples of questions of the form '∃xFx?' that I am putting forward as counterexamples to Ontological Permissiveness are among the most central, most important, and most typical questions in metaphysics and ontology. They are not just 'exceptions to the rule' (Fine 158). This qualifies them as counterexamples.

These counterexamples, as I have said, are examples of '∃xFx?' such that 'F' purports to describe a sort of entity suitable to explain something. These putative Fs are putative entities posited by philosophers. There are other kinds of putative Fs and other kinds of existence/quantification questions. There are questions like 'are there chairs and tables?' and 'are there persons?' 'F' in these cases of '∃xFx?' is not a description devised by philosophers for theoretical purposes in philosophy. 'F' expresses an everyday concept. The application

---

[8] Schaffer maintains that the debate between bundle theorists and substratum theorists is over which of objects and properties are 'prior' (Schaffer 2009 p. 364) and the 'debate ... over mind is not a dispute over whether mind or matter exists, but rather over whether mind is based in matter.' (p365) On Schaffer's view the sole participants in the debate over mind are dualists and non-reductive physicalists. In reality eliminativists and identity theorists deny that there are minds in the sense of subjects of experience, in addition to brains. For the latter minds aren't based in matter: they *are* matter. For the former there are no minds. Schaffer's take on the debate between bundle theorists and substratum theorists also fails to acknowledge that some bundle theorists and bare particular theorists disagree over how many things there are (and not just how many things are fundamental). Bundle theorists who *identify* objects with bundles of properties make fewer posits than substratum theorists who posit something (the controversial substrata) in addition to bundles of properties.

conditions of such everyday concepts are often hard to determine. But that doesn't stop

metaphysicians. Metaphysicians can identify *necessary conditions* for the application of 'F'

and question whether they are satisfied. For instance 'is a chair', it can be maintained, is

satisfied by something only if it is plays a certain causal role. Metaphysicians have argued

that there are no chairs by arguing that the necessary conditions for counting as a chair aren't

met: by arguing for instance (cf. Merricks 2001) that there aren't things that play the causal

role chairs are supposed to play.

At least that is an obvious interpretation of how they have argued. Is there another

interpretation? Can it be maintained that eliminativist arguments about tables and chairs and

persons grant that the necessary conditions for satisfying 'is a table', 'is a chair' and 'is a

person' are met, but then urge that they are not met by 'real' or 'basic, non-dependent'

entities? This interpretation is hard to sustain. The arguments clearly argue that the

conditions are not met. They argue that the conditions are at most fictionally met. But only

Meinongians take fictional chairs to be chairs.

Examples of '∃xFx?' where 'F' expresses an everyday concept are not, I would

contend, largely trivial[9]. In this case I expect some disagreement. You may feel that there is

a class of Moorean truths and 'there are hands', 'there are tables' and so on belong in this

class: to deny this, you may feel, is 'madness' (Schaffer 2009, p372). I won't press the point.

In any event, at the least, the examples set out in section 3 stand as counterexamples to

Ontological Permissiveness. Ontological Permissiveness, I conclude, is untenable.

<center>*</center>

---

[9] I don't expect agreement. Recall, from footnote 1, the 'lightweight realist' position, which Schaffer distances himself from, that has t that '∃x(x is a table)' is 'analytic, grounded in allegedly analytic ampliative conditionals such as 'if there are particles arranged tablewise, then there is a table.'' (Schaffer 2009 p. 360) This position maintains the triviality of '∃x(x is a table)'.

What does this conclusion commit me to? Ontological Permissiveness has it that questions of the form '∃xFx?' are trivial. If Ontological Permissiveness is true these are not the most central and important questions in metaphysics and ontology. Schaffer's and Fine's arguments for Ontological Permissiveness are intended to support views about what the important questions in metaphysics and ontology *are*. For Schaffer, the questions at the heart of metaphysics include questions about dependence. Schaffer opposes his 'neo Aristotelian' view of metaphysics to a 'Quinean' view according to which questions of the form '∃xFx?' are the *only* questions in metaphysics. According to this 'Quinean' view the role of metaphysics is to 'extract existence commitments from our best theory' (Schaffer 2009 p. 348). The role of metaphysicians is to look at our best theory, which according to Quine is a scientific theory, and analyse what entities there would have to be for this theory to be true, the fruit of this labour being a 'list [of] beings'(Schaffer 2009 p. 353).

Is this where the case against Ontological Permissiveness takes us? Clearly no. This 'Quinean' view doesn't allow metaphysicians, while doing metaphysics, to devise and evaluate theories. The counterexamples to ontological permissiveness that I have been emphasising involve theoretical terms devised by metaphysicians. A less self abnegating view - a sort of 'Quinean' view but without Quine's Scientism - allows that metaphysics can involve coming up with and evaluating theories with the aim of describing and explaining the world: that metaphysics and science share this aim. It also can involve criticising our naïve conceptual scheme (which may be understood as a primitive theory): for instance questioning whether anything corresponds to everyday concepts like 'chair', 'table' and 'person'. On this view of metaphysics, there are any number of metaphysical questions of the form '∃xFx?' that are anything but trivial.

Bibliography

Author (article date)

Brock, Stuart (2010). 'The Creationist Fiction: The Case against Creationism about Fictional Characters' *Philosophical Review* Volume 119, Number 3: 337-364

Campbell, Keith (1981). 'The metaphysic of abstract particulars'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 6 (1):477-488

Fine, Kit (2009) 'The Question of Ontology'. In Manley, Chalmers & Wasserman (eds.), *Metametaphysics.* Oxford; OUP.

Kripke, Saul (2013) *Reference and Existence: The John Locke Lectures*. Oxford; Oxford University Press.

Merricks, Trenton (2001) *Objects and Persons*. Oxford; Oxford University Press.

Parsons, Terence (1980) *Nonexistent Objects*, New Haven: Yale University Press

Priest Graham (2005) *Towards Non-Being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*. Oxford; Oxford University Press.

Schaffer, Jonathan (2001). 'The individuation of tropes.' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 79 (2):247 – 257.

-   (2009) 'On What Grounds What'. In Manley, Chalmers & Wasserman (eds.), *Metametaphysics.* Oxford; OUP.

Sainsbury, Mark (2005) *Reference without Referents*, Oxford; OUP

Salmon, Nathan (1998) 'Nonexistence'. *Noûs* 32 (3):277-319.

Thomasson, Amie L (1999) *Fiction and Metaphysics*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press.

Van Inwagen, Peter (1977) 'Creatures of Fiction', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (4):299 – 308.

Walton, Kendall L. (1990) *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the*

Representational Arts. Harvard MA; Harvard University Press

Zalta, Edward (1983) *Abstract Objects: An Introduction to Axiomatic Metaphysics.*

Dordrecht; D. Reidel,