IF AN ONTOLOGIST COULD SPEAK WE COULDN'T UNDERSTAND HIM

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1

In *On What There Is*, Quine introduced us to McX and Wyman, metaphysicians of the old school whose bloated ontologies offended those with a taste for desert landscapes [15]. These philosophers have long since retired; meanwhile a younger ontologist has taken up the debates with which they engaged. Dr Zedson is a very different character. He[1] shares Quine's taste for austerity. With Quine, he is wary of reading off ontological commitments from surface features of workaday true assertions in natural language.[2]

The purpose of the present paper is to take on Zedson, and the movement within contemporary analytic philosophy that he represents, sometimes called the *ontological turn*. My reasons for objection are rooted in the theory of meaning and focus on an area about which Zedson differs from Quine. In order to prepare the ground for what follows this difference needs to be laid out. I will do this before proceeding to the substantial arguments.

Zedson's fundamental distinctive thought is methodological. He is not concerned with what *exists* in the ordinary sense of the word 'exist'[3]. Such matters are trivial, and to be resolved by attention to our ordinary linguistic practices. But this is not serious philosophy: that discipline, in its metaphysical mode, concerns itself with the 'deep', 'fundamental' question of what 'really exists'.[4] This is not a question whose investigation will be helped

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[1]He is most definitely a *he*, not only because of the poor gender balance in theoretical philosophy, but also because some of his most prominent female peers pursue significantly different approaches [20] [21].

[2]Here, of course, he stands in wider analytic tradition going back to Russell's *On Denoting*.

[3]Or any of its ordinary *senses* if it possesses more than one.

[4]Here Zedson agrees with various of his peers [22] [4].

much, if at all, by attention to natural language, any more than the semantics of predication provide the Armstrongian realist with a route to the affirmation of universals [2]. The proper methodology for metaphysics, insists Zedson, applies standard scientific criteria of theory choice to distinctively ontological questions. Metaphysics postulates real existents (the 'real' is dropped once we get the point), those that carve the beast of reality at the joints, and it does so to the extent that they do explanatory work, in an elegant, economical, and consistent fashion.

Or at least metaphysics would postulate real existents, were it in a position to postulate anything. In his more angst ridden moments, Zedson denies his discipline even this privilege. Disregarding English 'exists' entirely, he focuses on defending the view that there *could* be a fundamental language, or perhaps there *is* such a language (where languages are abstract objects), in terms of which the ontic make-up of reality could be limned. Its quantifiers would carve reality at the joints and its singular terms would refer to genuine entities. This language Zedson calls Ontologese. Since I do not understand Ontologese, I am not in a position to adjudicate its merits as a vehicle for metaphysical disputes. However as a speaker of English I take it that if the claim is that 'exists' in Ontologese tracks reality in a way that 'exists' in English fails to do,[5] there must be some (non-magical) process in which I can be brought to understand the Ontologese word. This might be piecemeal, involving me in a chain of more joint-carving revisions of English 'exists',[6] at the end of which I have an expression with the same meaning as the Ontologese quantifier, but there must be some such process or else Zedson is not investigating any question I can understand.

At other times, Zedson is more concessive than in his Ontologese-advocating moments. English 'exists' is fine as it stands, so far as it goes. Indeed sentences made using it are

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[5]And questions framed in terms of English 'exists' are the ontological questions I am interested in, at least initially. If Zedson wants me to believe that there are other questions, properly called ontological, yet not expressible in natural languages of the sort we speak, he needs to provide me with a reason to believe that. He has further work to do subsequently to convince me that these questions are interesting.

[6]Here and throughout I'm assuming that 'exists' is synonymous with a particular quantifier for English. There are philosophers who deny this, distinguishing between the quantifier and existence concepts. See [5] and [1], as well as p. vi below. Nothing of importance here turns on this, and readers should feel free to alter my usage to aid agreement.

frequently true. Tables exist, for Zedson in this mood, as happily do you and I.[7] The problem is, according to Zedson, that cataloguing the existents using the customary sense of 'exists' is not philosophically deep or interesting. I learn nothing of value about the nature of reality in observing that it contains tables. What we need is an account of what exists *really*, *deeply*, *fundamentally*, or *ontologically*, that is what exists according to some restricted sense of 'exists' which carves reality at the joints. Let us call this *real existence*;[8] the ontologist is interested in what really exists. Given that, as we have seen, Zedson at his most extreme ought still to be required to introduce us to the Ontologese quantifier by means of restrictions of English 'exists', his apparently more ambitious project collapses into the moderate one. Zedson, in either manifestation, asks what really exists.

Zedson will sometimes claim the mantle of Quine. It is certainly true that he may give the impression of sharing with that philosopher a view of metaphysics as primarily concerned with ontology. It is doubtful, however, that Quine himself would have absolved Zedson of the charge he lays at the feet of Wyman, being 'one of those philosophers who have united in ruining the good old word "exist"'[15, 23]. Nor does the author of *Word and Object* sit as lightly to linguistic considerations as does Zedson. Similarly, the philosopher behind *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* is hardly an ally of the view that there are distinctively metaphysical explanations. However, failure of Quinean piety is the least of Zedson's problems. My worry is that he is trying to use the word 'exist', as deployed prefaced with the adverb 'really', in a way that makes it mysterious how any word with such a usage could both be meaningful and have been acquired by language users such as ourselves. *Serious Ontology*, as I shall term Zedson's project, therefore violates a compulsory constraint on an acceptable metaphysics, that it doesn't generate mysteries about language of this sort.[9]

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[7]Note, for example, that van Inwagen is happy to allow that 'Tables exist' as uttered in ordinary conversation expresses a truth. When said *in the ontology room*, however, it is false [23, 2].

[8]The expression is Ross Cameron's [4, 8]. A good sense of the register in which this form of ontological enquiry is conducted is supplied from an external perspective by Tim Button, '[The ontologist] points out that this is the ontology classroom, and not the Clapham omnibus. She says that '*really*' should be read as italicized, or with a capital-R, or in SHOUTING-CAPSLOCK. She thumps the desk' [3, 215].

[9]In this I follow Dummett in [7] and [6].

The complaint here is not that the Serious Ontologist uses the word 'exists' in a manner that varies from common usage.[10] Adapting or precisifying word meanings for technical philosophical purposes is often both useful and acceptable.[11] In cases where this is the case we have reason to believe, however, that genuine thoughts can be expressed using the adapted expression. To see where Serious Ontology goes wrong in this respect, let us consider a case of acceptable meaning adaptation and contrast it with the Serious Ontologist's attitude towards 'exists'. [12]

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The word 'property' is part of ordinary, everyday, English. We admire artworks for their properties, doubt that the properties of gold make it a good material out of which to construct car engines, and so on. We can discourse intelligibly and usefully about these matters. Philosophers do, furthermore, interest themselves in properties in just this everyday sense: these are abundant properties, in Lewis' terminology, where there is an abundant property for every predicate in the language[11]. However, there might be good reasons for taking a philosophical interest in a privileged subclass of the abundant properties. Perhaps, for example, I am interested only in those properties of which indispensable mention is made in the laws of nature (in the sense that it would not be *possible* to truly state all and only the laws of nature without mentioning those properties[13]), or which lend causal efficacy to concrete particulars. Alternatively, I might be concerned to assay all and only those properties that form a minimal supervenience base for the abundant properties.

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[10]A Serious Ontologist might choose to frame the matter not in terms of the meaning of 'exists' but, for instance, in terms of the contribution of the modifier 'really'. In effect this gives us a version of the restriction strategy. The criticism below still has purchase here, so I ignore the distinction in what follows. Thanks to Naomi Thompson for discussion here.

[11]I bracket from consideration here the question of word individuation: is the Serious Ontologist's 'exists' a token of the same word-type as orindary English 'exists', or is it a distinct word with a related, perhaps analogously, meaning? The present discussion doesn't require us to decide this question.

[12]'The symbol '∃' is after all, essentially an abbreviation for the English 'there are" [24, 29]. Ignoring the elision of singular and plural quantification, given van Inwagen's commitment earlier in the cited article to the position that being is the same as existence, this gives us that the quantifier in the language of regimentation 'essentially' captures existence. But this looks incompatible with what van Inwagen has the ontologist say 'in the Ontology Room'. Tables, after all, exist. There has to be a suspicion that a game of bait and switch is being played here. We are introduced to '∃' by means of our familiar friend 'exists' before being tempted into an unfamiliar desert landscape that frustrates our actual linguistic resources.

[13]This qualification is needed in acknowledgement of the possibilities of error and ignorance with respect to the laws of nature.

Each of these criteria (and there are no doubt others) yields a *sparse* concept of property, a proper restriction of the abundant concept of property, the investigation of the extension of which promises to be illuminating.

When contemporary metaphysicians talk about properties, they often have in mind an adapted meaning of the ordinary English 'property' corresponding to one of these sparse concepts. Consider, for example, the kind of trope theorist who views property instances as the atomic constituents of all entities. She will routinely write, as I just did, of tropes as properties ('particular properties', 'property instances'...). Whatever problems there might be with trope-theoretic metaphysics, that the word 'property' lacks a meaning when used in this manner is not one of them.[14] Moreover, it is not in the least mysterious how our ontologist could come to acquire the usage of the word 'property' such that it has this adapted meaning. Call 'property' in this adapted sense *property$_2$*. The introducer of *property$_2$* to the language undertakes a process of semantic refinement of the sort sketched in the previous paragraph: say, 'for present purposes, I'm going to use "property" to pick out only those properties of which indispensable mention is made in statements of laws of nature'. The use of *property$_2$* is then passed on to other language users. In the normal course of things, a technical usage of this sort will be transmitted explicitly – the lecturer tells her undergraduate metaphysics class that she will use 'property' as *property$_2$*. On other occasions, however, a language user might acquire the usage without explicit initiation into the linguistic practice of its use – the graduate student going along to a seminar on the problem of universals gets a sense of how the word 'property' is being used, notices the kind of situations in which it is appropriate to make assertions of the form ⌜There is a property, F-ness⌝, and to refrain from making them, and so learns how to use the word with the restricted sense.[15] Either way, there is nothing mysterious about the manner in

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[14]I note, without adjudicating, the question whether a string which uniformly lacks meaning in grammatically appropriate contexts is properly described as a *word* at all.

[15]I take it that the end result of linguistic acquistion is *knowledge how* to use a word in sentential context, and do not assume – contra [19] – that this reduces to propositional knowlege. Indeed in the case where the undergaduate is explicity introduced to the usage, it looks as though she comes to know how to use the word (that is comes to possess the same ability as her graduate colleague) through knowing *that* the word means such-and-such. Nothing of present importance turns on this, however.

which the usage is acquired.

Can we imagine a similar process by which an adapted sense of 'exists' might be developed and transmitted? One immediate worry is that 'exists', unlike (syntactic) quantifiers does not seem to admit restrictions. We are familiar with cases like 'All of the beers are in the fridge', but in the unhappy situation where an utterance of this sentence was rendered inappropriate by my not having bought any beer, I would not say 'No beers exist'. English 'exists' is a grammatical predicate, and whilst predicates sometimes admit restricted usages – consider 'is a property' used by a metaphysician concerned to investigate the sparse properties – there are no obvious acceptable uses of 'exists' with a restricted sense in ordinary life. This might be thought of little importance, since we *can* restrict quantifiers, and it could be argued that, since 'exists' is satisfied by all and only the entities within the range of the particular quantifier formalised as '∃', the non-restrictability of the existence predicate is a superficial feature of natural language of no metaphysical importance. Indeed, it could be further insisted, it is precisely because we have quantificational devices available that the existence predicate does not need to admit restriction.

This is too quick on at least two counts. First, it is not obvious that the quantifier *is* co-extensive with the existence predicate. Whilst this is certainly something approaching meta-ontological orthodoxy, and is explicitly defended by van Inwagen in [25], there are clear problems with the claim. There are, are there not, some things that don't exist, like Pegasus? Less controversially, there are some things that no longer exist, like the USSR and Henry VIII. For this reason a number of philosophers maintain that whilst existence and the range of the quantifier overlap they do not do so with no remainder [5, Ch. 2] [12]. Second, even if it were the case that 'exists' – or something doing the same semantic work as it – admitted restriction, that is far from enough for the Serious Ontologist's purposes. Not just any old restriction will do. Suppose that we are content with restricting the quantifier, taking this to represent existence. Then in order to pursue Serious Ontology we need there to be a restriction of it, which we can be brought to understand, such that it carves

reality at the joints, ranging over all and only the privileged entities that are of particular interest to ontologists (the 'fundamental', 'basic' or 'real' entities). The mere fact that are *some* restrictions of the quantifier available does not establish this. And in the absence of reassurance that we could acquire an understanding at least of what it would be to restrict the quantifier in the Serious Ontologist's favoured fashion, we have no reason to believe that the claims she makes about the subject matter of Serious Ontology are meaningful, let alone of philosophical interest.

But perhaps there is a suitable restriction at hand. When we looked at the metaphysician of properties restricting property-talk to property$_2$, we noted that the properties$_2$ are those properties of which indispensable mention is made in the statement of laws of nature. Could a similar restricted use of 'exists' be introduced? Seemingly:

> **E** Some entity x *exists*$_2$ iff x exists and indispensable mention is made of
> x in the laws of nature.

Assuming a satisfactory account can be given of what it is for indispensable mention to be made of x in the laws of nature, which we allowed the property theorist, then **E** picks out a (presumably proper) subplurality of the existents. Can the Serious Metaphysician rest content? I think not; for one reason external to his metaphysics and other internal to it.

Taking these in order, it is far from clear that existence$_2$ is conceptually continuous in any interesting way with *existence*. For sure, the extension of 'exists$_2$' is a subplurality of that of 'exists', but it is hardly unique in this respect. Unless those philosophers acknowledged above are correct, after all, everything exists: *existence* is a universal concept, and so any restriction of the quantifier whatsoever will be a restriction of the existents – it hardly follows that all restrictions of the quantifier correspond to interesting existence concepts. So, for example, presumably the extension of 'is, at the present moment, spatially located' will pick out only existents at any given time, but it would be bizarre to therefore claim it as an existence concept. The sense of 'is, at the present moment, spatially located' has

nothing to do with existence. Nor, on the face of it, does that of 'exists$_2$'. Do not be mis-led here by the occurence of 'exists' in **E**. What is at issue here is precisely whether **E** is an (implicit) *definition* of 'exists$_2$', as opposed to simply a true biconditional. To see the difference, consider the old example beloved of philosophy of language lecturers:

> **G** 'Grass is green' is true iff grass is green and Fermat's Last Theorem is true.

It would be haywire to take **G** as giving an interpretive truth-condition of 'grass is green'. Now suppose that I am shown **E** and decide to start using '*exists$_2$*. As I go about the world I listen to the scientists and, armed with **E**, conclude that leptons '*exist$_2$*' as do quarks. How have I come to this conclusion? Not by first hearing the scientist's verdict on what features in laws of nature, and then doing a further check to see if those things *exist*: how would I establish that, over and above performing the scientific investigations that establish their theoretical role? In any case scientists don't aspire to talk about what doesn't exist (remember, this is now the ordinary English sense of 'exists'). The existence conjunct in (E) is playing no role in fixing the extension of 'exists$_2$', and so is no part of the sense. The fact that (E) is true (as it is, by stipulation) no more means that it gives the meaning of 'exists$_2$' than the truth of (G) means that it gives the truth-conditions of 'Grass is green'.

Even if this were not the case, (E) is irrelevant to assessing the position of the Serious Ontologist. All sorts of things feature in laws of nature: there are laws of nature relating to the reproductive cycles of organisms, the temeparture at which reactions occur and much else besides. Are the laws of mathematics to be understood as laws of nature? What about psychological laws – we are, after all, surely part of nature ourselves? It is apparent that on a liberal understanding of 'laws of nature', approximating to the ordinary extension of the expression, the desert landscape beloved of the Serious Ontologist will become cluttered with the ontological equivalent of cacti if '*exists$_2$*' is taken to capture his *real existence*. At this point he might protest that the things that really exist are those that feature in *fundamental* laws of nature. This is a case of seeking to illuminate the dim with the obscure.

What does 'fundamental' mean? It is no using telling us that the fundamental laws of nature are those whose quantifiers carve at the joints; that is arguing in a tight circle indeed. And attempting illumination by appeal to metaphysical concepts themselves in urgent need of explication, such as *grounding*, is an exercise in deferral, rather than solution, of a difficulty.[16] As yet, we have no reason to believe that we understand, or can be brought to understand, the word 'exists' in the Serious Ontologist's sense.

Might the Serious Ontologist opt for a middle way here, and argue that the real existents are all and only those entities of which indispensable mention is made in the laws of *physics*? He might, and it would stand in need of argument that he had thereby delineated an interesting class of entities privileged in any way with respect to *existence* (rather than just choosing to use the word 'exists' in a peculiar way, after the fashion of Humpty Dumpty). In actual fact, however, the Serious Ontologist often retains for himself the option of holding that even the laws of physics do not go deep enough. Ontology might concern purported entities, expressions for which do not feature in assertions outside the bespoke discourse of metaphysics. Or it might even be claimed that the real existents are hidden from us, that we cannot know (or have justified beliefs about) which entities really exist, and must content ourselves *qua* metaphysicians with providing a general picture of the structure of reality, constructing toy examples, or assaying possibly instanced ontologies.[17] In the latter case we should simply maintain that we cannot come to acquire the word 'exists' in the Serious Ontologist's sense. In the former case, 'exists' as being used as something akin to a theoretical term. This will be our next item of business.

3

Theoretical terms in the sciences for instance acquire their meaning within the context of that theory, and language users may be brought to understand them through being introduced to the relevant theory. A term like 'positron' acquires meaning through serving a certain role within physical theory. The theory provides us with canonical uses of the

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[16]On grounding, see [21] and [26].

[17]My own experience is that a fair proportion of those engaged with questions of ontology take the marking out of modal space, as opposed to investigating what *actually* exists, to be the project in which they are engaged.

word, a sense of the structural role of its referents, experimental identification criteria, and so on, and so equips speakers with the resources to understand the term. It is unthinkable, by contrast, that an understanding of 'positron' might be obtained without a complementary at-least-partial grasp of the theoretical context in which it is embedded. Might the same thing be claimed for the Serious Ontologist's 'exists'? The problem here is that, according to this understanding of theoretical terms, a given theoretical term is meaningful only if the claims of the theory, or at least a sufficient number of them, *as a whole* are meaningful. How can this be assured? I suggest that a promising criterion (afforded more space, I would argue the *only* one) is that they represent a coherent pattern of potential use, underwriting criteria for asserting and denying the theory's sentences. These need not be uniformly empirical, although it is a striking feature of scientific theories that they do admit empirical confirmation (and this might be thought to *anchor* theoretical language in the wider network of discourse about the empirical world), but must determine the correct usage of the relevant theoretical terms. Here at least is one brief sketch of an account of theoretical terms in science that explicates their meaningfulness. Could something similar be achieved for the term 'exists'?

The theoretical context in which the Serious Ontologist's 'exists' occurs is that of metaphysics. A Serious Ontologist might claim that tropes are the only entities which exist, in his sense, and go on to explicate the world of our experience and language through relationships of grounding, truthmaking, mereological composition, and so on – perhaps gesturing towards a semantics for ordinary English 'exists'.[18] In the course of his theory building he might touch on matters of modality, causation, free will, and other topics from the metaphysics syllabus. Unlike the physicist, however, there is no sense in which the Serious Ontologist's metaphysical investigations can be viewed as converging towards consensus with his peers.[19] On the contrary, metaphysics as a discipline is characterised by widespread disagreement, which shows no sign of abating with the progress of time. Not only that, but this disagreement extends to the question on what basis first-order theoretical

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[18]A 'metaphysical semantics' in Sider's sense [18, 112-4].
[19]For considerations along these lines see [20, 15-22]

disagreement should be resolved (is simplicity to be preferred to deductive power; how are each of these to be assessed?) Nor will empirical evidence help to resolve the dispute, or to anchor metaphysical language in a wider web of meaning, for metaphysics does not admit empirical evidence.[20] *If* the theoretical embedding of 'exists' succeeds in conferring any meaning on the expression at all, then, it seems that as used by any given metaphysician the word will have such bespoke assertion and denial conditions, and hence meaning, that its particular extent extends little beyond the speaker's own idiolect. It will be near useless for the purposes of genuine communication and argument (as distinguished from making noises in a thoughful fashion), and in particular there is no reason to believe that it will have sufficient continuity of meaning with ordinary English 'exists' for Serious Ontological debates to be considered streamlined versions of more workaday existence disputes ('Mummy, can we see the Loch Ness monster?'. 'No, don't be silly, it doesn't exist'. 'It does too, I read a book about it'.).

At this point the Serious Ontologist may wish to invoke the name of Quine. We are making a mistake, he can be imagined insisting, in regarding the relevant theoretical context as consisting solely of metaphysics. Rather it is within the context of total science that 'exists' acquires the salient meaning. Allowing Quinean meaning-holism for the sake of the immediate argument, this does not get the Serious Ontologist what he needs. For whilst this approach will no doubt have it that there is *some* sense of the word 'exists' as used for the purposes of total science – perhaps regimented in terms of the first-order quantifier after the fashion of [16] – this will not be the required 'deep' sense. Which naturalistic criteria internal to the practice of the sciences themselves make Γ' a better theory than Γ, where Γ accounts for the totality of experience acquired via retinas and ear-drums, elegantly theorised, put through the mills of logic and mathematics, and subjected to experimental test, whereas Γ' adds to Γ the assertion that the only things that really exist are mereological simples plus sentences detailing how non-fundamental ontology can be constructed out of

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[20]There might be thought to be apparent counterexamples, with perhaps the philosophy of time providing the best *prima facie* cases. In brief, it is difficult to see how – for instance – General Relativity constrains the assertions of the metaphysical community as a whole. Any claim about the *nature* of time can be made to fit the physics somehow, in the last resort by changing the subject ('we do not mean by "time" what the physicist means'.)

these? On whatever basis we respond to the generic problem of the underdetermination of theory by evidence, surely a compulsory question for the philosophy of science, it looks like Γ' is going to come off worse than Γ. The alternative scenarios will be ones in which adding assertions of the existence of mereological simples to theories is treated differently from a theory-choice perspective than adding assertions of the existence of unobserved pink elephants. But the justification for this move is going to be distinctively metaphysical, thereby contradicting the claim that the Serious Ontologist is working naturalistically within total science.

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Tim Button begins his recent book on the realism/ anti-realism dispute by quoting William James, 'Metaphysicians long for magic' [3, 1].[21] If all other attempts to show how a language user could be brought to acquire an expression with the sense of the Serious Ontologist's 'exists' are in vain, there is always the option of having recourse to magic. The most popular contemporary form of wizardry is *reference magnetism*. Following Lewis on natural properties, metaphysicians have had recourse to the claim that, given a number of competing candidate meanings for a referential expression, meanings which deliver more natural referents are correspondingly more eligible [9][18, 21-3][8]. The metaphor of joint carving often reappears in expounding the view: highly eligible meanings carve the beast of reality near the joints. So, for instance blueness is more eligible to be the referrent of a colour term than grueness,[22] rabbits to be the referrent of a animal term than undetached rabbit parts.

There are many problems with the idea of reference magnetism, which would occupy another paper of their own. My own view is that it is at best the expression of a problem rather than a solution to it. We no doubt very often do desire the result that expressions have those meanings that the reference magnetist would describe as joint carving; although the

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[21]The thought that metaphysical realists tend to fall back on *magical theories of reference* is derived from Putnam's [14].

[22]Or so, at least, the point is often put. It seems to me that there is something to be said for the view that 'grue' is a colour term (what else is it?). And if that is right then on any reasonable understanding of eligibility grueness is a no less eligible meaning for it than blueness.

interest relativity of communication might cause more problems here than many suppose. We name entities in order to communicate with one another, and the general purposes for which we communicate therefore conditions our referential practices. Putnam's imagined Martians, who have reason to discourse about undetached-organism-parts on a regular basis would be surprised to learn that rabbits are highly joint-carving candidate referrents [13, 46-54]. Merely pointing out that 'rabbit' is supposed to be an animal term does little to assuage the interest-relativity here; instead it transfers the issue from species to genus.[23] But let's allow that there is an interest-independent fact of the matter about which are the most eligible meanings for at least some referential expressions. The most urgent philosophical question this poses is *how* those meanings are possessed by expressions in a fashion that is compatible with meaning being public, communicable, acquirable, and in some sense at least manifest in the use of sentences containing those expressions. Simply to assert that the meanings are indeed thus possessed does not answer this question. To do this merely tacitly stipulates that it can be answered; hence the accusation of magic.

We can avoid these concerns by developing an account of eligibility which ties the notion to the satisfaction of sortal concepts, although it will turn out that this does not help the Serious Ontologist make a case that there is a uniquely eligible meaning for an existence predicate, which is not picked out by any natural language existence predicate.[24] In describing the eligibility of rabbits and blueness we noted that 'rabbit' and 'blue' each fall under some more general sortal, 'animal' and 'colour' respectively. The reason that rabbits are more eligible to be referents of 'rabbit' than are undetached rabbit parts is that the former are animals and the latter are not, and that language users introduced and persist in using the word 'rabbit' to pick out animals. This is simply a witness to a more general rule: an adequate account of the meaning of an expression is constrained by the use of the word within the language. 'Rabbit' is used to refer to a animal, 'π' is used to refer to a real

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[23]Of course noting the potential interest-relativity of eligility does not licence an anything-goes-relativism. Nothing said here is incompatible with there being some comprehensible sense in which reality has 'joints' (it's just, as in orthopaedics, which joints matter depend on what you're trying to do), still less with there being serious external constraints on our referential practices.

[24]Thanks to N for raising issues discussed in this paragraph.

number, 'janvier' to a month, and so on.[25] What about the Serious Ontologist's 'exists'? Parallels with singular and common nouns are strained here. It doesn't seem to make sense to speak of existence as a case of a more encompassing kind: what would that be? Perhaps, on the assumption that sentences containing 'exists' should be analysed uniformly as quantificational in logical form[26] a meaning-theoretic genus could be supplied in the form of inference rules for the quantifier:

$$\frac{\phi(t)}{\exists v\ \phi(v)}\ \exists I$$

$$\frac{\exists v\ \phi(v)}{\phi(t)}\ \exists E$$

With the usual restrictions on terms (including variables).

This does not help: the only way to individuate species under this genus is by varying restrictions on the admissible semantic values of substitutends for the term metavariables t. In context asserting that there could be a specification of the most eligible such restriction is equivalent to asserting that it could be known what *really* exists, but if we already clear that we were in a position to know *that* the present worry would be moot. If 'exists' is understood as a predicate, the prospects are no less bleak for Serious Ontology. In this case the Lewisian account of natural kind terms is directly applicable. Real existence is a magnet for our metaphysician's 'exists' (although not, interestingly, for English 'exists'). A fundamental language would pick out those privileged entities that exist, independent of mind and reality, at a fundamental level out there in reality.

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[25]Objection: don't we get a revenge problem here? Why should we assume that there is a uniquely eligible meaning of the sortal noun 'animal'? This is an interesting question, but the absence of a satisfactory answer will only make things worse for the Serious Ontologist, so we can leave it to one side here.

[26]But, see fn. above.

This pseudo-Lewisian response is deceptively reassuring. That this is so trades on our having forgot the dialectical position. We were seeking reassurance from the Serious Ontologist that his 'exists' could have a sense. It is worth being a little precise about the worry here. Most partisans of the view do not claim that we have access to an expression with this sense: an admission that already raises questions for me about the amount of interest the investigation of real existence ought to attract. Rather the concern is that no language user, however idealised or possible (whatever possibility might amount to here), could acquire a fundamental language. Consider a language user with unlimited cognitive and memorial resources and who speaks a 'language' in which every object serves as its own name, called Lagadonian after *Gulliver's Travels* [10, 145]. Furthermore, if it doesn't already stretch comprehensibility too much, imagine that in this particular Lagaonian language every property serves as the corresponding predicate. Could this being speak a fundamental language? It depends entirely on whether there is such a property as *real*, thought and language independent existence. If there is no such property, our preternaturally expressive speaker is no more in a position to predicate it than we are.

Perhaps though God is in such a position; theological metaphors abound in Serious Ontology. The thought then would be that for God to name an object just is to constitute it as a real, mind and language independent existent. Leaving aside momentarily the problems of the suggestion that God is a language user, or has a mind, this does not establish the legitimacy of Serious Ontology. God's language, on this story, would not be mind-independent *for God* (compare Berkeley). Might there be some relative sense in which the entities God says *exist* are the targets of a creaturely fundamental language: the real, language and mind independent existents out there in the world, which are not necessarily the same things we pick out with English 'exists'? My inclination is to diagnose this as surrender under the disguise of rescue: to say that Serious Ontology would be possible for us were we God is just to admit that we cannot do Serious Ontology, and simply noting that God could do Serious Ontology (if we can make sense even of this) is poor motivation for the pursuit of a philosophical research programme. Yet even this strikes me as over optimistic,

for I doubt that we in working through the paragraph thus far have in fact succeeded in grasping a thought that does the Serious Ontologist's required work. We have been using familiar expressions, 'language' and 'thought', with respect to circumstances distant from their ordinary use, namely the life of God. These conditions are ripe for grammatically well-formed sentences creating the illusion of understanding where there is none.[27] There is no merit in defending an esoteric sense of 'exists' by appeal to equally esoteric senses of 'language' and 'thought'.

Where does this leave us? This paper has been a fast-paced and broad-brush engagement with the worldview of the Serious Ontologist. For this I make no apologies, because I do not think the problems with that worldview subsist in the details but in the very project as conceived, understood as issuing from the picture on which the proper subject of ontological investigation is existence in a privileged metaphysical sense – *fundamental*, or *real*, or *deep*, whatever it may be. The philosopher who engages in such a project needs to at least supply some reason to believe that a language expressing such a sense of 'exists' could be acquired. In the absence of any such reason there must be a concern that it is not possible to say, nor to think, that anything exists in the Serious Ontologist's sense. This being so, the question, asked by him, 'what exists?' is not meaningful; nor – more to the point – is 'What exists in the sense 'exists' would have in a joint-carving variant of English?'. The complaint is not that the Serious Ontologist has no justification for any particular answer to this question. Serious Ontologists themselves generally concede as much and content themselves with sketching toy theories, outling possible ways the world could be. Rather, before we even get to the stage of limning the fundamental furniture of the universe, actual or possible, the enquiry is out of order, since it is not addressing an intelligible question. Even the perfunctory Quinean response 'everything' would be out of order in this context, since there is no question to which it is the answer.[28]

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[27]A defence here would be an appeal to analogy. I think this is unpromising in these cases, but discussion would take us too far off track. Note that *metaphor* will not suffice here. The metaphor of God writing the book of the world is uncontroversially in order, but to say that 'God writes' is metaphorical is, in the current philosophical theologicalsense of metaphor (as distinguished from analogy – see for instance Aquinas at STh I,Q13,A3.) amongst other things to say that it is *false*.

[28]Of course, in response to 'What exists?' asked in English, 'everything' is a perfectly acceptable answer.

My contention, on the basis of the preceding considerations, is that this is not possible. This in no way an anti-metaphysical conclusion. As several authors have noted, the elision of metaphysics with ontology is of recent vintage [20, Ch. 1] [17]. Nothing said here rules out attention to the categorisation of entities, their identity and persistence conditions, the relationships of dependence between them, or unearthing the irreducible commitments of the special sciences. It is far from clear that the loss of Serious Ontology is damaging to the prospects for investigating the characteristic metaphysical questions in the philosophies of time, mind, and religion. The burgeoning and important field of social ontology would only be helped by a move away from Serious Ontology: understanding, say, class or gender is both more interesting and of greater political salience than enquiring after whether these *really exist*. With regard to mathematics, the kind of project that asks whether mathematical entities are fundmanental (which has been common of late), is ruled out of court, but this leaves open the door to renewed debates about realism and anti-realism, the relationship of mathematicalia to other entities, and much else besides. There remains plenty of work for metaphysicians to do.

Zedson could abandon Serious Ontology without joining McX and Wyman in retirement. Perhaps he should.[29].

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