Ontology, identity, and modality

Essays in metaphysics

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Contents

Introduction

Almost all my philosophical work falls into four general areas: the problem of free will, ontology, the metaphysics of material objects, and the philosophy of modality.[1] As its title implies, this collection comprises essays on the last three of these subjects. (The essays on the metaphysics of material objects are primarily concerned with their "identity," either their identity across time or their identity "across space" – that is, their unity at a moment. Hence "Identity.") In this Introduction, I will say a few words to tie the essays in each group together.

ONTOLOGY

Ontology, says tradition, is the science of being as such.[2] Ontology, says the present-day analytic philosopher, is . . . What?

I will try to answer this question.

Many philosophers use "ontology" as a name for the study of the most general structures displayed by objects – "object" meaning "object of (possible) perception that exists independently of the mind." In this sense of the word, if Alicia says that a chair is composed of a bare particular and assorted tropes, and Fritz disputes this characterization, saying

[1] I have often heard myself described as a philosopher of religion. Although I have written a few papers in this area – "Ontological Arguments" and "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," for example – I don't think I have done enough work in the philosophy of religion to justify this description. The description is probably due to my having written extensively on Christian apologetic. In my view, my apologetic writings are either – depending on how one sees the boundaries of philosophy – not philosophy at all or "applied philosophy." If they are applied philosophy, then the first sentence of this Introduction should read, "Almost all my *pure* philosophical work . . ."

[2] Although the word "ontology" is a seventeenth-century coinage, the tradition can be traced back to Aristotle's statement, in the opening sentence of the fourth book of the *Metaphysics*, that there is an *episteme* that investigates being as being. "Ontology" was invented to be what "metaphysics" could no longer be: an appropriate name for the science of being as such.

that a chair is rather a bundle of universals, their disagreement belongs to "ontology." I will use "B-ontology" for this sense of "ontology." ("B" for "Bergmann.") I do not understand much of what B-ontologists write. I do not understand their key terms ("trope," "bare particular," "immanent universal," "bundle"). And I do not understand the sense of "structure" in which they claim to be investigating the structures of objects. For me, structure (< *structus*, pp. of *struere*, to heap together, arrange) is at root a spatial concept, and the questions about the structure of a chair that I can understand are questions to be answered by carpenters, chemists, and physicists. I concede that the concept of structure, spatial in origin, has intelligible non-spatial extensions in many areas, such as logic, linguistics, and mathematics. I do not object to the B-ontologists' use of "structure" on the ground that it is an extension of a spatial concept to a non-spatial domain. I object to it on the ground that it is an extension I do not understand of a spatial concept to a non-spatial domain. I understand (thanks to the explanations of logicians, linguists, and mathematicians) what it is for a proof, a sentence, or an algebra to have a structure, and I can follow their descriptions of the particular structures that are ascribed to these objects, and I can see why "structure" is an appropriate thing to call them. What I cannot see is how a chair could have any sort of structure but a spatial or mereological structure. And, in the matter of mereological structure, I cannot see how a chair could have any parts but smaller spatial things – bits of wood and the more esoteric spatial things we learn about from chemists and physicists. To take one example, I have never been able to think of "tropes" – which most of their proponents say are parts of the things whose tropes they are – as anything but idealized coats of paint. B-ontology, therefore, is no part of this book.

Now a second point about the word "ontology": the word is used not only as a mass term but as a count-noun. A philosopher will say, for example, "My ontology contains only material objects and sets." And ontology, ontology the study, is frequently understood in this sense: it is the study that is productive of ontologies. Ontology in this sense, the study that is productive of ontologies, we may call "A-ontology." ("A" for "all.") The A-ontologist attempts to say what there is, to give a sort of list of *all* that there is, to leave nothing out – and to include nothing that does *not* exist, nothing that there isn't. (The list must, of course, comprise very general, abstract terms like "material object" and "set" – it will not, in its official form, contain "banana" or "football team,"

although the A-ontologist, when speaking concretely, may say things like, "Yes, unlike van Inwagen, I include bananas in my ontology.")

What is the relation – if any – between A-ontology and "the science of being as such"? Are they perhaps identical? Is the practitioner of the science of being as such engaged simply in an attempt, as one might say, to lay out the *extension* of "being," an attempt to say, in the most complete and general way possible, what there is? (One might also ask what the relation is between B-ontology and the science of being as such. I will leave this question to the B-ontologists.) I think not. Something called "the science of being as such" would obviously be concerned with the intension, as opposed to the extension, of "being." The science of being as such is concerned with the question of the *meaning* of "there is" and "being" (and related terms like "exists"). The practitioner of the science of being as such wants to know what concepts are expressed by these terms and their equivalents in other natural languages and related terms or devices in formal languages (such as quantifiers and bound variables). The question of the meaning of being is of fundamental philosophical importance, whatever the science or study that addresses it may be called. In my own work, I have called this study "meta-ontology." (To be precise: As I use the term, meta-ontology comprehends both questions about the meaning of being and questions about the proper method of A-ontology.) In the essays of Part I, I generally use "ontology" as a count-noun. When I do use "ontology" as a mass term, I use it in the sense of "A-ontology."

The first two of the four essays of Part I are meta-ontological. The third is an exercise in A-ontology. I shall discuss the fourth essay presently. The meta-ontology presented in Essays 1 and 2 is broadly Quinean. (This statement brings into stark relief the distinction between meta-ontology and ontology: I agree entirely with Quine about the nature of being and the method one should use in trying to determine what there is. I disagree with him almost entirely about what there is.) Essays 1 and 2 are essays on the philosophy of quantification. Essay 1 presents an account of "objectual" quantification (and presents, in a sense, an account of "ontological commitment"). Essay 2 is an attack on the intelligibility of substitutional quantification, its main rival. It is of the essence of my philosophy of quantification that objectual quantification *has* no rivals and might just as well be called simply "quantification." (Here is a related thesis which I accept, which is not touched on in the essays, and which I cannot defend here. Quine has said that higher-order

logic is ''set theory in sheep's clothing''; I agree, although I should prefer to say ''attribute theory in sheep's clothing.'' It is of the essence of my philosophy of quantification that first-order quantification has no rivals and might just as well be called simply ''quantification.'')

Now Essay 4. I begin with some remarks whose relevance to Essay 4 will not be immediately evident. One of the most important divisions between ''continental'' and ''analytic'' philosophy has to do with the nature of being.[3] (This division is discussed in Essay 1.) Quine's meta-ontology – and mine: he has formulated it; it is mine only in that I have read his work and have been convinced by it – is the highest development of what may be called the ''thin'' conception of being.[4] (The most important earlier stages in the line of development that led to Quine's meta-ontology are represented by the treatment by Kant and earlier critics of Descartes's ontological argument, and by Frege's *Begriffsschrift*.) The thin conception of being is this: the concept of being is closely allied with the concept of number: to say that there are Xs is to say that the number of Xs is 1 or more – and to say nothing more profound, nothing more interesting, nothing more. Continental philosophers of being have not seen matters this way. (The continental philosophy of being is, I believe, rooted in Thomism.) For these philosophers, being is a ''thick'' concept, and they see the thin conception of being – those of them who take note of it at all – as a travesty, an evisceration of the richness of being. (An allegiance to a thick conception of being is reflected in the titles *L'Etre et le Néant* and *Sein und Zeit*.) I can say little about this issue. Analytic philosophers, at least for the most part, will regard what I have to say as obvious, and continental philosophers will believe that anything I say on the topic is shot through with (perhaps wilful) misunderstanding. I can say only that, in my view, it is possible to distinguish between the being and the nature of a thing – any thing; anything – and that the thick conception of being is founded on the mistake of transferring what belongs properly to the nature of a chair – or of a human being or of a universal or of God – to the being of the chair. To endorse the thick

[3] I use these two traditional terms for want of anything better (I am aware that analytic philosophers are common enough on the European continent, and, whatever passports they may hold, do not generally regard the analysis of concepts as the only business of philosophy). *Some* terms are needed to do the work ''continental philosophy'' and ''analytic philosophy'' have done since the fifties, for the divide in philosophy they have been used to mark still exists, even if it is not the yawning gulf it once was.

[4] I owe the terms ''thin conception of being'' and ''thick conception of being'' to Professor Wilfried VerEecke.

conception of being is, in fact, to make (perhaps for other reasons; perhaps in a more sophisticated way) the very mistake of which Kant accused Descartes: the mistake of treating being as a "real predicate."

Even if it were possible for me to disagree profitably with the continental conception of being, the introduction to a collection of essays would not be the place for it. I mention the thick conception of being only to justify (in a way) placing Essay 4, "Why Is There Anything at All?", under the heading "Ontology." Heidegger has suggested that reflection on the question "Why is there something and not rather nothing?"[5] can, if the question is honestly addressed, expose the inadequacy of the thin conception of being. (These are not, of course, Heidegger's words, but I think that the attribution of the idea expressed by these words to him is fair.) Well – "Why Is There Anything at All?" is a reflection on the question that is its title, carried on by someone who subscribes to the thin conception of being. Heideggerians and other continental philosophers will, no doubt, regard it as simply a clever (if that) exercise in missing the point. In any case, the essay had to go somewhere. (To which the continental philosopher will no doubt reply, "Je n'en vois pas la nécessité.")

I will make one remark about the conclusion of the central argument of "Why Is There Anything at All?" Since I believe that there is a necessary being, I believe it is impossible for there to be nothing (those who believe, on Humean grounds, that it is possible for there to be nothing are directed to Essay 13). The conclusion of the central argument of the essay, that the probability of there being nothing is 0, follows from the impossibility of there being nothing. The central argument of "Why Is There Anything at All?" prescinds from my belief that it is impossible for there to be nothing. It is an argument for the conclusion that even if it is possible for there to be nothing, the probability of there being nothing is nonetheless 0. (The third of the four premises of this argument – "There is at most one possible world in which there are no beings" – is, of course, true if there are beings in every possible world. The arguments I give for the other three premises are independent of the question whether it is possible for there to be nothing.)

[5] Heidegger formulates this question ("the fundamental question of metaphysics" – but not in the sense "the most basic question that *belongs to* metaphysics"; rather, "the question that founds or underlies metaphysics") in various ways. The following formulation is the first sentence of *Einführung in die Metaphysik*: "Why are there beings [*Seienden*] rather than nothing?"

IDENTITY

The essays of Part II are episodes in an attempt, some two decades in length, to think to some philosophical effect about the metaphysics of material objects.[6]

The metaphysics of material objects has come to be recognized as one of the most difficult parts of philosophy. This is a remarkable development. When I was a graduate student (in the 1960s) it seemed to most philosophers that it was *everything but* material objects (the usual examples of which were those things that Austin characterized as "moderate-sized specimens of dry goods") that was puzzling: sense-data, thoughts, universals, God, elementary particles . . . Material objects, it was thought, were what we *did* have a good philosophical grip on. And, it was thought, a major aim of philosophy ought to be to "eliminate" everything but material objects – or, failing that, to provide an understanding of such other things as there might be that was as good as our understanding of material objects. But the puzzles that material objects raise are undeniable. There are puzzles that arise from particular cases or examples – the famous Ship of Theseus, or the more recent but almost equally famous case of the cat Tibbles and his part Tib. And there are puzzles that arise from appealing metaphysical principles, either because these principles are in conflict or because certain of them, appealing as they may be when considered in the abstract, seem to imply that important "common sense" beliefs about material objects are false.

Perhaps it would be of service to the reader of Part II if I were to list the most important of the principles that are (individually or in clumps of two or three; no philosopher accepts them all) the source of the puzzles:[7]

- Any region of space that is wholly filled with solid matter is occupied by a material object that exactly fills it.
- Any material objects whatever have a mereological sum (which is also a material object).
- Every material object has all its parts essentially.
- If an object x is the mereological sum of certain objects, the ys, then the ys have essentially the property of having x as their sum.
- Material objects are extended in time in a way very strongly analogous to the

[6] The body of this attempt is contained in my book *Material Beings* (Ithaca, 1990). The essays in Part II of the present book concern matters not touched on or touched on only lightly in *Material Beings*.

[7] In order not to subject the reader to a cloud of notes in what follows, I will simply cite, collectively, the essays in the excellent collection *Material Constitution* (1996), ed. Michael Rea. The essays in the present book may also be consulted for references.

way they are extended in space; objects that are extended in time are composed of temporal parts, just as objects that are extended in space are composed of spatial parts.

If certain combinations of these metaphysical principles lead to violations of "common sense," why should that be thought to generate a "puzzle"? Why not accept the appealing principles and say, "So much the worse for common sense"? The answer to this rhetorical question is, of course, that there is a widespread allegiance among analytic philosophers to various epistemological principles that (as our literary colleagues say) "privilege" common sense. The simplest example would be:

- One must not endorse theses that are at variance with common sense (this seems to come down to the thesis that one must not reach the conclusion that material-object count-nouns in common everyday use – "table," "banana," "cat" – do not apply to anything, or ascribe to the things to which they do apply properties substantially different from the properties that are ascribed to them by people engaged in the ordinary business of life).

There are, moreover, widely accepted principles about thought and language that are not straightforwardly epistemological but which work to much the same effect as an epistemological privileging of common sense:

- It is not possible for most of what human beings believe to be false.
- If a philosopher maintains that material-object count-nouns in common everyday use do not apply to anything (or maintains that, e.g., "table" applies to things that have properties substantially different from the properties tables are ordinarily supposed to have), that philosopher must mean something different by these terms from what they mean in ordinary English.
- If someone says, for example, "There are some apples in the bowl on that table," what that person says cannot be true unless the predicates "is an apple," "is a bowl," and "is a table" have non-empty extensions.

Philosophers who have accepted various combinations of the metaphysical principles have been led, because of their allegiance to common sense (or something in that vicinity), to accept certain further principles, principles that belong not to metaphysics, epistemology, or the philosophy of language, but to logic (in a suitably broad sense of the word), principles in conflict with what might be called "the standard view of numerical identity":

- Identity must be relativized to kinds: it makes no sense to ask whether the (object that is the) ship x is identical with the (object that is the) ship y *sans phrase*, for x may be the same ship as y but not the same aggregate of planks.
- Identity must be relativized to times; x and y may be two objects at a certain moment and *later become*, or *once have been*, numerically identical. (For

example, if Tibbles is a cat and Tib is "all of Tibbles but his tail," then, if Tibbles loses his tail, Tibbles and Tib were two things before the loss of the tail and one and the same thing after the loss of the tail.)

- Identity is a relation that many things can bear to one thing. (And not as *ancestor of* is a relation that many things can bear to one thing. Identity is a relation that many things can bear to one thing not individually, so to speak, but collectively. For example, certain trees – numbering in the hundreds of thousands – are identical with the Forest of Arden; the legs and the seat of the stool, which are four in number, are identical with one thing, the stool.)

These philosophers have embraced revisions of the standard view of numerical identity because these revisions block the derivation of "anti-common-sense" conclusions from the metaphysical principles they find appealing. It is my conviction, displayed in the essays of Part II, that logic is better left alone. My maxim has been: retain the standard view of identity, and try to achieve theoretical coherency by a suitable choice of metaphysical principles (and by resolutely maintaining a healthy skepticism about "common sense").

It will be noted that in these essays I take a very strong "realist" line about *personal* identity (sc. across time). Only Essay 9 is directly concerned with personal identity, but in all the essays I more or less take it for granted that a theory of material objects can be satisfactory only if it is consistent with the thesis that human beings strictly and literally persist through time.

An apology is required in connection with Essay 8 ("Temporal Parts and Identity across Time"): it contains some of the same material (about 1,200 words" worth) as Essay 11 ("Plantinga on Trans-world Identity"). The buyer of this book may with some justice protest paying for two tokens of the same type. But the duplicate passages are essential to the essays in which they occur, and there seemed to be no serious alternative to printing the same words twice.

MODALITY

There have been two main influences on my philosophy of modality: the work of Alvin Plantinga and Saul Kripke, on the one hand, and David Lewis on the other. The essays in Part III have mainly to do with "modal ontology" – with questions about the nature of objects like possible worlds and possible individuals, with the nature of the property (if it is a property) *actuality*, with the nature of the relations *exists in* and *is true*

in, and with essence and accident and "identity across possible worlds."[8] (The exception is Essay 13, "Modal Epistemology," whose topic is adequately conveyed by its title. If the question, What is an essay on epistemology doing in a collection of metaphysical essays? is raised, I have an answer: It is an essay in the epistemology of metaphysics.) It is well known that there are two main schools of modal ontology. One is the product of the endlessly rewarding thought of David Lewis, and its membership comprises him and very few other people. According to this school, the universe (the mereological sum of all spatiotemporal things[9]) is "the actual world" and other possible worlds are "things of the same sort," separated from the actual world by the fact that they bear no spatiotemporal relations to it. We "exist in" the actual world in that we are parts of it, and we call it "actual" because it is the one we are parts of; people who are parts of other worlds correctly call the worlds they are parts of "actual" in virtue of just that fact: that they are parts of them. The other school (the school of Plantinga and Kripke and Stalnaker and Robert Adams and myself and – very nearly – everyone but Lewis) holds that the actual world is not the universe, but rather a necessarily existent proposition-like abstract object that is "actual" in virtue of the fact that it (or a proposition closely associated with it) happens to be true; it (or this proposition) is true because of the properties of concrete reality – of the whole system of things with causal powers and accidental intrinsic properties –; it makes certain claims about concrete reality, and these claims get the properties of the one concrete reality right. Other possible worlds, the non-actual ones, are similar proposition-like abstract objects, and are non-actual in virtue of getting the properties of the one concrete reality wrong. (Actuality for Plantinga *et al.* is thus a relational property, like that property, desirable in maps, called *accuracy* – the property that is conferred on a map just in virtue of its getting the territory right.)

Part III is largely a defense of the Plantinga–Kripke modal ontology and a sustained argument against Lewis's modal ontology. Only one

[8] David Lewis has convinced me that the phrase "trans-world identity," which figures prominently in both the title and the text of Essay 11, is a solecism.

[9] If there could be causal things that were not spatiotemporal – such as God, according to many theologians and philosophers –, one would have to say "the mereological sum of all causal things." Lewis believes, however, that anything with causal powers must be in space and time. It is a nice question whether this thesis about causality is properly a part of Lewis's modal ontology, or is simply a thesis he happens to hold (for reasons that are largely independent of his views on modality) that yields an important modal-ontological consequence when it is conjoined with the theses that properly belong to his modal ontology.

essay calls for comment. ''Indexicality and Actuality'' was written when I did not really ''get'' Lewis's modal ontology. (It was published in 1980; it was written for the most part in 1978.) When I was writing that essay, I charitably made Lewis a present of a Plantinga–Kripke-style modal ontology – I charitably supposed that he could not really have meant literally the scattered remarks suggesting that his metaphysic of possible worlds was quite different from the metaphysic of Plantinga and Kripke, that he was what he later came to call a ''genuine modal realist.'' I will say in my defense that it was not really clear to anyone at the time – except, no doubt, to Lewis – that those scattered remarks were meant to be taken strictly, seriously, and literally. The essay, therefore, does not accomplish what it sets out to accomplish: a refutation of Lewis's ''indexical theory of actuality.'' Nevertheless, it contains – so it seems to me on re-reading it – much interesting material, and it does, I think, stand as an argument for the following conclusion: no one who accepts an ''abstractionist'' modal ontology can accept any account of actuality that could possibly be described as ''indexical.''