Introduction

As one would expect from its title, this Element offers you (some of) the elements of metaontology by way of an opinionated overview of (some of) the central arguments and positions. It is opinionated in three ways. I evaluate ideas and arguments as I present them, rather than present them with an air of neutrality. The selection of ideas and arguments to discuss here was not mandatory: though I have a limited word count, there are other metaontological topics that could have been discussed instead. Finally, my conception of metaontology is capacious, which is why it's clear to me that other topics could have been selected. This conception will be presented (rather than argued for) in the remainder of this section.

Metaontology is the branch of philosophy that focuses on questions that naturally arise in the context of doing ontology. Although the idea of metaontology itself might initially strike one as a bit too meta, the development of metaontology as a discipline is both unsurprising and welcome. Every human activity generates philosophical questions, including doing ontology. Should philosophers ignore those philosophical questions simply because they are questions about philosophy? Of course not!

For now, let us provisionally characterize ontological inquiry as inquiry into what there is and what exists. Whether this provisional characterization should ultimately be a definitional characterization is itself a metaontological question, and it is a question that is closely related to other metaontological questions, such as the question of which concept of ontology is most fruitful to adopt, and the even more meta question of whether we can decide this question of fruitfulness independently of deciding the first-order question of what there is and what exists. But perhaps discussing this is jumping headfirst into the weeds before we've looked at the rest of the garden. So, let's take a step back.

One way to demarcate various questions, topics, and themes in metaontology is by appealing to standard (but not sacred) ways of demarcating the main subfields of philosophy, and discussing how those subfields overlap with metaontology. That's what I'll do here.[1]

Epistemology focuses on questions about knowing, evidence, and reasons for belief. One branch of metaontology focuses on epistemological questions about ontology. Can ontological beliefs be justified? Do we have ontological knowledge? Philosophy is a dodgy business – so you might think that it's unlikely that we have any. But we do have some ontological knowledge, albeit negative or

[1] See also McDaniel (2020: chapter 6), which characterizes metaontology in a similar way and covers some metaontological questions (such as the question about the value of metaphysics) not discussed here.

conditional knowledge. For example, we know that if there are any numbers, there are all the numbers, rather than all of them except the number 17, and we know that whatever the correct answer is to the question of when some objects compose a whole, it's not that these objects are all in New Jersey. Maybe thinking through how we can know these things will shed light on what other things in ontology can be known.[2]

The philosophy of language focuses on questions about meaning, reference, objectivity, and truth. One branch of metaontology focuses on such questions about characteristically ontological vocabulary. What do we mean by "exists," "there is," or "some"?[3] Do ontological expressions really have the function they seem to have, namely, to aid in describing reality, or do they have a covert purpose?[4] Given roughly how we use these terms, were other meaning for them possible, or does our rough use of these terms suffice to secure the meanings that they have, perhaps because they are the only available meanings to be had? Or are there equally good things that could be meant by these expressions?

Ethics focuses on questions about value, right and wrong, justice and fairness, virtue and vice. A third branch of metaontology focuses on ethical questions about ontological theorizing. Here are some of them. To what extent should our ethical theorizing constrain our ontological theorizing? Can considerations of what is just or good be relevant to which ontological theories we should endorse? If a true ontological theory has implications that we take to be unfair or unjust, is there something we can do to make that theory no longer be true?[5] Can there be a conceptual ethics that would evaluate not what we should do but rather what concepts we should have?[6] Are key ontological concepts or terms evaluative concepts or terms, and if so, which ones?[7]

Metaphysics focuses on those questions about reality that are not settled by empirical investigations. A fourth branch of metaontology focuses on metaphysical questions about ontology itself. Does ontology itself have metaphysical

[2] This idea is pursued further in McDaniel (2020: 215–227).

[3] There seem to be eight answers to the question of which of these expressions are synonymous. (The eighth is that they are all meaningless expressions.) Roughly, van Inwagen (1998) takes them to be all synonymous, while a standard way of being a Meinongian is to lump "there is" and "some" together and distinguish them from "exists," but on Priest's (2005: 13–14) version of Meinongianism, "there is" and "exists" are lumped together and distinguished from "some."

[4] A standard conception of ontology is one in which ontological claims are descriptive claims that aim to describe reality, but Flocke (2021) defends an *expressivist* account of ontological claims according to which they express noncognitive mental states such as the acceptance of norms. In a similar vein, McDaniel (2017b: 180–181) develops (but does not defend) a noncognitivist account of metaphysical fundamentality.

[5] This idea is discussed in Jenkins (2020).

[6] See the papers in Burgess, Cappelen, and Plunkett (2021) for different putative answers to this question.

[7] See again Flocke (2021) and McDaniel (2017b).

presuppositions?[8] If so, what are they, and if they are no longer presupposed, is a kind of inquiry similar to ontological inquiry still possible – and if so, what would this kind of inquiry be? What is the nature of being or existence? Does it make sense to even ask if being or existence has a nature?

Just as there is no clean separation between ontology and metaontology, there is no clean separation between the history of ontology and the history of metaontology. Questions about the metaontological views of our deceased predecessors, as well as questions about their arguments for them, belong to the history of metaontology, but insofar as we pursue answers to these questions because we think of a particular historical figure or tradition that their views were correct or their arguments sound, they belong to metaontology as well. The first section discusses a few figures from the history of metaontology.

Metaontology is a wide-ranging and vibrant field of philosophy. No book this size could do it justice. Accordingly, I won't try to represent the full glory of metaontology here. The remainder of this introduction is a preview of the remainder of the Element.

I provisionally characterized ontological inquiry as inquiry into what there is and what exists. This provisional understanding immediately raises the questions of whether what there is and what exists coincide, and if so, whether they coincide as a matter of necessity, and if so, why they coincide as a matter of necessity. In short, are there nonexistent objects, and if not, why are there no such things?

The question of whether there are nonexistent objects is the focus of Section 1. This section discusses some of the main historical positions on the status of allegedly nonexistent objects called "beings of reason," and discusses historical figures such as Suarez, Brentano, Twardowski, and Meinong. It also discusses some of the main arguments against nonexistent objects in the contemporary literature, with a special focus on arguments from philosophers such as Thomasson, van Inwagen, Lewis, and Zalta. Two sorts of arguments will be discussed, which are roughly (1) arguments that there are no such things at all as the putative nonexistents and (2) arguments that there are such things as (some of) the putative nonexistents, but these putative nonexistents do in fact exist.

Section 2 will focus on whether ontological questions are trivial to answer and whether ontological debates are merely verbal debates. Can there can be different concepts of existence or different meanings of "exists" or other ontological expressions? Do we even need to theorize about objects in terms of existence? If ontological questions are nontrivial, what if anything explains why they are nontrivial? Are they nontrivial only if a substantive ontological or

[8] See McDaniel (2020: 235–242) for a discussion of this question.

metaphysical view is true? And even if there aren't different senses of "exist," might there be different modes of being or ways to exist?

These questions are important questions, and central to much current metaontological discussion. The richness of the field means difficult decisions about what to cover – but I hope the ensuing discussion whets your appetite for more metaontology.

1 Are There Nonexistent Objects?

1.1 The Problem of Nonexistents

Are there things that do not exist? At first, this question seems easy to answer: of course not. How could something be without existing? Aren't the ideas of being something and being an existing thing the same? On the other hand, it seems that we can produce examples of things that don't exist. Santa Claus doesn't exist, thankfully, but sadly neither does Spider-Man. But Santa Claus and Spider-Man are not identical, and though they have some features in common, they also differ: although both typically wear costumes with a lot of red, Santa Claus does a deeper dive into the private information of people than social media companies, while Spider-Man knows that with great power, there must also come great responsibility. So, there are at least two things – Santa Claus and Spider-Man – that do not exist. These two examples seemingly form the tip of a large nonexistent iceberg containing innumerable creatures of myth and fable. For example, no Greek God exists, and neither do any of the Roman Gods, but aren't the Roman Gods the same Gods just with different names? No Norse Gods exist either, but the Norse Gods are not the same nonexistent Gods as the Greek Gods.

The case that I've stated for nonexistent objects seems reasonably straightforward: We can distinguish nonexistent objects from one another, which means that we can count nonexistent objects; we can count nonexistent objects only if there are nonexistent objects; therefore, there are nonexistent objects. In short, nonexistent objects are available to be quantified over. Among contemporary philosophers, the view that there are nonexistent objects is called "Meinongianism," named after Alexius Meinong, about whom more will be said later in this section.

There is a second, related argument that stems from answering affirmatively a fundamental question that will be raised again and again through the history of philosophy: does "thinking of" denote a two-place relation between a thinker and what that thinker is thinking of? If "thinking of" does denote such a two-place relation, then whatever is thought of must be something, even if it does not exist. I can think of Spider-Man – maybe I do this too often – and so Spider-Man is something I stand in a relation to. But Spider-Man is something I stand in

a relation to only if Spider-Man is something. So, Spider-Man is something. (As we'll see in Section 1.2.3, the argument is often attributed to Meinong, but it is only one element in his case for nonexistent objects.)

Let's take a step back. "Whether there are things that don't exist" is akin to other metaphysical questions such as the following:

Q1: Are there things that are not concrete?
Q2: Are there things that are not particulars?
Q3: Are there things that are not present?
Q4: Are there things that are not actual?

Does assimilating the big question to these questions presuppose that the big question is conceptually open in the way that – perhaps to varying degrees – these questions here are conceptually open? Platonists and nominalists debate Q1, and it seems that few nominalists think that a negative answer to Q1 is mandated by our concepts.[9] Similar remarks apply to Q2. With respect to Q3 and Q4, we do find some philosophers arguing that negative answers are conceptually mandated: certain presentists or actualists think that it is conceptually necessary that everything is present or actual.[10] With respect to Q3, one putative reason for claiming that a negative answer is conceptually mandated is that the verb "are" appearing in Q3 is present-tensed but there is no "untensed" conjugation of this verb that could be used to state a meaningful version of Q3 that could be nontrivially affirmatively answered. With respect to Q4, one putative reason for claiming that a negative answer is conceptually mandated is that "actual" is redundant: To say that a proposition is actually true is just to say that a proposition is true, and to say that there is an actual entity that is a certain way is just to say that there is an entity that is that way.

Similarly, perhaps nonexistent objects are conceptually impossible. Suppose that existence reduces to quantification: To say that dogs exist, for example, is just to say that there are dogs, and to say that I exist is just to say that something is identical with me. If existence reduces to quantification in this way, then the claim that there are nonexistent objects just is the claim that there are things such that there are no such things. And that claim is logically incoherent! It seems then that nonexistent objects are conceptually possible only if existence is not reducible to quantification.

In contemporary metaphysics, the dominant view is still that existence reduces to quantification. But in the history of philosophy, this view is decidedly in the minority. For example, in Novotný's (2013) masterful study of late

[9] Although for a view in the neighborhood of this claim, see Hofweber (2016).
[10] For a discussion of the claim that presentism is trivially true, see Ludlow (2004); for a discussion of whether possibilism is conceptually incoherent, see Lycan (1988).

scholastic views about beings of reason, Novotný (2013: 29) notes that for the scholastics, existence and being are not the same: "exists" is a first-order predicate not reducible to the quantifier, and it denotes a nontrivial property that some but not all items enjoy. The question of whether there are things that don't exist is by their lights conceptually open, and given this, it is unsurprising to find a range of opinions on this question expressed.

Perhaps a quick dip into some of the history of the problem of nonexistents will be helpful.

1.2 Some Dead People on Nonexistent Objects

I will not pretend that this section is comprehensive. Instead, I will discuss how the problem of nonexistents was addressed by a select few historical figures at certain points in their philosophical journeys. Still, a scattershot survey of this sort can be useful even if all that it does prevents contemporary philosophers from thinking that the problem of nonexistence has its origins in the early part of the twentieth century.

One reason why the problem of nonexistents was so thorny in the history of philosophy is that for many philosophers, the idea of being is itself not particularly straightforward. Aristotle said that "being is said in many ways," and although what exactly he meant by this is contested, it seems that the way in which a substance is "said to be" is not the same as the ways in which members of other ontological categories are "said to be."[11] Does Aristotle's claim imply that "being" is semantically ambiguous? Or does it imply that there are modes of being? Are both of these implied?[12] (Ontological pluralism will be discussed more in Section 2.7.)

Regardless, according to Aristotle, even nonexistent objects can, in some way, be said to be – and in fact, there must be a way in which they can be said to be, since we can say true things about them. (Just as one might wonder whether "thought of" is a two-place relation between a thinker and a thing, one might wonder whether "about" is a two-place relation between a truth and a thing.) Even nonbeing itself can in some way be said to be![13]

What is it to exist? We might provisionally reserve the word "exist" for things that can truthfully be said to be in the way that we can truthfully be said to be. On this usage, we exist, plants exist, but nonbeing does not exist. However, according to a strict Aristotelian, given this usage, properties, relations, events,

[11] See Aristotle's Metaphysics IV.2, 1003a33–b19.
[12] See McDaniel (2017: Introduction and chapter 1) for a tentative presentation of an ontologically pluralist reading of Aristotle, and Czerkawski (2022) for a critical response to one argument for attributing ontological pluralism to Aristotle.
[13] See Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 1003b10.

and so on do not exist either. A broader proposal is that something exists if and only if it belongs to one of the Aristotelian categories.[14] On this proposal, you exist, and so do your properties, but none of nonbeing, blindness in an eye, or centaurs exist. Given this proposal, we could safely attribute the claim that there are nonexistent objects to those historical figures who follow Aristotle's doctrine of the categories so understood. One such figure is Suarez, to whom we now turn.

1.2.1 Suarez

Although beings of reason, which our provisional understanding of "existence" classifies as nonexistents, had been previously theorized about, it is in the hands of Suarez that they first receive a thorough examination. Suarez devoted an entire investigation (specifically, #54!) of his lengthy tome to the status and nature of beings of reason. In what follows, I will cover some of this investigation's highlights.

Suarez (Section 1, paragraph 6) begins by clarifying the concept of a being of reason. According to Suarez, what is rightfully defined as a being of reason is that which has being only objectively in the intellect, or that which is thought by reason as a being, even though "it has no entity in itself."[15] Suarez notes that Aquinas says that a being of reason is produced at the moment when an intellect tries to apprehend what is not and then fashions it in some manner as being.

So, what is it to think of something "by reason as a being"? One plausible answer is that it is to judge something about it. When I judge that the blindness in my eye is getting worse, I treat the blindness in my eye as the *object* of the judgment – it is what the judgment is about. When I do this, at least as far as the power of judgment is concerned, the blindness in my eye is treated as an object just as much as any other object. Just as I can judge that the blindness in my eye is getting worse, I can judge that my headache is getting worse. Just as I can judge that the hole in the road is getting wider, I can judge that my belly is getting wider. From the perspective of the faculty of judgment, all of these objects are available to judge.

That beings of reason are produced via judgments about them is suggested by Suarez's (Section 2, paragraphs 15–17) remarks that a being of reason "properly comes to be through that act of the intellect by which something that in reality has no entity is conceived in the manner of a being." We are told that this act of the intellect is a comparative or reflexive act, that is, an act that presupposes

[14] Or is God – traditionally, if God can be said to belong to a category, it is a category consisting of only God.

[15] See Novotný (2013: 48–50) for careful discussion of the idea of being objectively in an intellect.