Introduction: inside and outside the ontology room

> . . . a good notation has a subtlety and suggestiveness which at times
> make it seem almost like a live teacher.
> Bertrand Russell, introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

> But ordinary language is all right.
> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*

David Lewis spoke of "the philosophy room,"[1] and the term has gained some currency. But in philosophy's house there are many rooms, and one of them, more austere in design and more sparsely furnished than perhaps any of the others, is the ontology room.[2] (The ontology room is not the epistemology room or the philosophy-of-mind room, and it is separated by many rooms and many long corridors from the political-philosophy room.)

Let 'discussants' abbreviate 'participants in discussions in the ontology room'. Discussants converse in a language I will call Tarskian. The vocabulary of Tarskian consists of closed or open sentences and closed or open terms of English (or some natural language) and the sentential connectives, brackets, quantifiers, variables,[3] and identity sign of the vocabulary of first-order logic (so-called) with identity – perhaps supplemented by items from the vocabulary of various well-defined extensions of first-order logic with identity.[4]

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[1] "If our official theories disagree with what we cannot help thinking outside the philosophy room, then no real equilibrium has been reached." *Philosophical Papers*, volume 1 (Oxford University Press, 1983), p. x.

[2] Adjoining the ontology room is the meta-ontology room. That is where we are now. One remark that I have heard more than once in the meta-ontology room is that I have no right to call the ontology room by that name; I ought to call it the *Quinean* ontology room or some such. Well, we all have a right to our opinions, however ill-judged they may be.

[3] Variables occur in Tarskian mostly within the open sentences or open terms of some natural language ('y is a chair', 'die Mutter von z und x'); I list them as a separate vocabulary item because a variable can also occur within a quantifier phrase ('$\forall z$', '$\exists x$') or beside the identity sign.

[4] Plural variables ('the xs', 'the zs') and plural-quantifier phrases ('For some xs', 'For any zs'), for example. The important question of the place of modal operators in discussions in the ontology room raises issues I choose not to address in the present chapter.

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More exactly: discussants do not always (or, I concede, usually) converse in Tarskian, but they are always *prepared* to.[5] Discussants are prepared to translate any of their natural-language assertions into Tarskian, and, moreover, they will utter no sentence of a natural language unless they are prepared to accept its "obvious" translation into Tarskian (if it has one). For example, a discussant will not say, "She owns two very valuable paintings" unless he or she is prepared to say

> $\exists x\, \exists y$ (x is a painting & she owns x & x is very valuable & y is a painting & she owns y & y is very valuable & $x \neq y$ & $\forall z$ (z is a painting & she owns z & z is very valuable. $\rightarrow$. $z = x \lor z = y$)).[6]

Now it is hardly a profound discovery of modern formal logic that '$\exists x\, x$ is a painting' is logically deducible from that sentence of Tarskian. But this trivial logical fact is not without its nontrivial implications for the conduct of discussions in the ontology room. For discussants will not utter a sentence from which '$\exists x\, x$ is a painting' is demonstrably logically deducible unless they are prepared to say that something satisfies 'x is a painting'. (I *call* their language, or the language that they are always prepared to fall back on, Tarskian because the extension of a closed sentence of Tarskian – its truth-value – is a function, the function Tarski specified,[7] of its logical

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[5] David and Stephanie Lewis's classic dialogue "Holes" (Lewis, *Philosophical Papers*, volume 1, pp. 3–9) is a marvelously instructive fictional representation of a discussion in the ontology room, and it nicely illustrates the interplay of natural language and Tarskian in such discussions. The point at which the two *dramatis personae*, Argle and Bargle, become "discussants" – enter the ontology room – is very clearly marked: it occurs at the point at which Bargle cries, "Got you!"

[6] Or perhaps to say that with the final universal quantification omitted – for the English sentence was ambiguous. (Natural-language sentences often contain ambiguities that translations into Tarskian have to resolve one way or the other. That is one reason for the qualification "if it has one" a few sentences back in the text.) If two or more sentences of Tarskian that are not logically equivalent are equally good candidates for the office "obvious translation of" a natural-language sentence that some discussant has uttered, the discussants must always be prepared to choose one of them and to declare that, for the remainder of their discussion, that natural-language sentence will be understood to express the proposition expressed by the agreed-upon Tarskian sentence. (Some sentences have *no* obvious translation into Tarskian – other than themselves, as "atomic" sentences, of course. Using a sentence that represents itself as involving the concept of "being" or "existence" but whose employment of that concept cannot be represented in terms of the existential quantifier – 'Being is, not being is not' and 'There are things of which it is true that there are no such things' seem to me to have that feature – is a solecism in the ontology room. Any discussant convicted of such a solecism will apologize for wasting the time of the other discussants and ask that the offending sentence be stricken from the record. The fact that this is one of the rules in force in the ontology room is one of the more important motivations for the meta-ontological remark I mentioned in note 2.)

[7] *Mutatis mutandis*: Tarski was of course concerned with formal languages in which semantic values are assigned to items like 'q' and '$Gxxy$' – sentence-schemata, I should call them – and not to items like 'Snow is white' and 'Tom loves x more than y loves x'. As constituents of a sentence of Tarskian, 'Tom loves x more than y loves x' and 'Tom loves y more than x loves y' are related precisely as '$Gxxy$' and '$Gyyx$' are related as constituents of a sentence (-schema) in the language of first-order logic.

structure and the extensions of the natural-language sentences that occur within it.) And they are not prepared to say *that* unless they are prepared to have a serious metaphysical discussion about the objects that satisfy this open sentence. For they take seriously the implications of the fact that every object, every real thing, everything there is, has, for every property, either that property or its complement. A person willing to have a serious metaphysical discussion about paintings is a person willing to answer any serious metaphysical question about the properties of paintings – of the objects that supposedly satisfy '*x* is a painting'. (Must a painting actually have been *painted* – or could a painting come about as the result of the random collisions of molecules? If a painting is vaporized, is the resulting cloud of atoms a thing that is no longer but *used to be* a painting? Suppose a painting by Duccio that represents the Last Supper has been modified by a later artist to include a figure representing Mary Magdalene; is it still the same painting? If not, has the original painting ceased to exist? – or does it still exist as a proper part of the new painting? Any discussant who is not willing to take questions like these seriously – who perhaps supposes that the concept "painting" is insufficiently "filled in" for such questions to have answers – will not use sentences that have '*x* is a painting' as a constituent and will protest if others do.)

The ontology room is many things, but one of the things it is – so I will contend – is a context of utterance.[8] Sentences that express a certain proposition when uttered, say, in a court of law or a meeting of the board of directors of an architectural firm or aboard the Clapham omnibus may

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[8]   This primary topic of this Introduction is "the ontology room as context of utterance," and little is said about the many other things the ontology room is. A philosopher who reads this chapter without having read much else in analytical ontology or meta-ontology might wonder why anyone would insist that ontological debates should be conducted (at least "potentially") in Tarskian. "Holes" (see note 5) is a very concise response to the question 'Why insist that ontological debates be conducted in Tarskian?', but, since 'Do holes exist?' is not one of the great, historically important ontological questions, the power of that essay may be lost on anyone who is suspicious of the idea that Tarskian should be the official language of the ontology room. I refer the reader to "Being, Existence, and Ontological Commitment" (Chapter 3 in this volume), particularly the fourth section, and "A Theory of Properties" (Chapter 8 in this volume), particularly the second section, for an extended defense of conducting ontological discussions in Tarskian. (The label 'Tarskian' and the phrase 'the ontology room' are not used in those two chapters, but the ideas those words stand for – expressed in different terms – have a prominent place in both.) The description of the ontology room in this Introduction leaves unanswered many questions that are (in effect) answered in those chapters. For example: "When you speak of 'the obvious translation' of a natural-language sentence into Tarskian, it's not at all clear what you mean. Consider the natural-language sentence 'If everything has a size, then everything has a shape'. Do not that sentence itself, the sentence 'Everything has a size → everything has a shape' and the sentence '$\forall x$ (x has a size) → $\forall x\, x$ has a shape' *all* count as 'obvious translations' of that sentence into Tarskian? The third of these seems to be what you would call '*the* obvious translation' of 'If everything has a size, then everything has a shape' into Tarskian. But on what ground do you 'privilege' that translation?"

express a different proposition when uttered in the ontology room. Or so *I* say. And it is propositions, not sentences, that are true or false – or at any rate, sentences are true or false only vicariously: in virtue of the truth-values of the propositions they express. If, therefore, a sentence expresses different propositions in different contexts of utterance, and if in some contexts of utterance it expresses true propositions and in others false propositions, there is no out-of-context answer to the question whether that sentence is true or false.

This would be a boringly obvious point if philosophers did not persistently resist its implications for ontology. Its obviousness, boring or not, is easily illustrated. Consider, for example, the question, 'Is the sentence "The star Alnilam is near the star Mintaka" true or false?' This question has no out-of-context answer. In some contexts the sentence 'Alnilam is near Mintaka' expresses a true proposition, owing to the salience in those contexts of the fact that (from the point of view of speakers in those contexts) the angular separation of Alnilam and Mintaka is less than two degrees. In other contexts of utterance, it expresses a false proposition, owing to the salience in those contexts of the fact that the distance between the two stars is about a hundred times the local average distance between a star and its nearest stellar neighbor. In other contexts still, it expresses a true proposition, owing to the salience in those contexts of the fact that the distance between them is only about one three-hundredth the diameter of the galactic lens. (I could go on.)

The point may be boringly obvious, but it is, as I say, resisted. It is resisted when it is applied to the existential sentences of the kinds that figure in ontological disputes. I will presently give some examples of this "resistance." But my examples will require some stage-setting.

In *Material Beings*[9] I endorsed a meta-ontological position that implied that the sentence 'Chairs exist' expressed a different proposition in the context I am now calling "the ontology room" from the one it expressed in the context I called (and will call now) "the ordinary business of life."[10]

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[9] (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990). See particularly the preface and section 10.

[10] "The ordinary business of life" comprises a vast number of contexts of utterance, and not all of them are due to the indexical elements present in the sentences in which that business is conducted – not all of them are such simple, straightforward contexts as "Windsor Castle" and "March 11th, 1877" and "Queen Victoria." (For that matter, the ontology room is not really a single context of utterance. 'I do not accept your second premise' obviously expresses different propositions in different contexts of utterance *within* the ontology room.) Consider, for example, the case of the different propositions that might be expressed by 'The star Alnilam is near the star Mintaka' in various ordinary-business-of-life contexts. I am nevertheless going to assume that for our purposes "the ordinary business of life" (and "the ontology room" as well) can usefully be treated as *a* context of utterance.

Let us give these two contexts the nicknames "inside" and "outside." Now a philosopher sensitive to the way language is actually used may raise the following objection to this thesis about 'Chairs exist': it is hard to imagine someone "outside" actually using the sentence 'Chairs exist' to make an assertion. But the objection can be met, for, though it is indeed not entirely easy to imagine this, it can be done:

> "You and I may be brothers, but no two people could be less alike. *I* have devoted my life to working for peace and justice, and *your* only goal in life is to get rich selling furniture."

> "What can I say? I deal in reality and you deal in dreams. Chairs exist. Peace and justice don't and never will."

I say that the sentence 'Chairs exist', when spoken by my imaginary hard-headed cynic – when spoken "outside" – expresses a different proposition from the one it expresses "inside." And (I further say) if the hard-headed cynic happened also to be a metaphysician, and if he were at some other point in his life engaged in a debate "inside" about the metaphysics of artifacts, *he* would be making different assertions when he uttered 'Chairs exist' "outside" and when he uttered that sentence "inside" – assuming, of course, that he *would* say, "Chairs exist" when he was "inside." (If discussants agree about what proposition is expressed by 'Chairs exist' "inside," it does not follow that they will agree about the truth-value of that proposition. In fact, it's very likely that they'll disagree: they're *philosophers*.)

I am one of the philosophers who, when he is "inside" says, "Chairs do not exist." And yet, in my view, the proposition that would be expressed by 'Chairs exist' if it were uttered "outside" in circumstances like those I imagined in the preceding paragraph is *true*. Let us call the proposition expressed by 'Chairs exist' "inside" and "outside," respectively, the "inside proposition" and the "outside proposition." Few philosophers if any agree with my contention that the inside proposition and the outside proposition are distinct propositions: most philosophers who have any opinion on the matter at all would say that someone who said, "Chairs exist" in the course of a discussion of the ontology of artifacts would be saying the same thing as my imaginary cynic was when he said, "Chairs exist." (If there is anyone who agrees with me on this point in the philosophy of language, that philosopher may well disagree with me about metaphysics, for the great majority of present-day metaphysicians will insist that the inside proposition is true. But among the many philosophers who affirm the identity of the inside and the outside proposition, there are a few who agree with me about the metaphysics of artifacts: these philosophers adopt

what is fashionably called an "error theory" of the sentences we use when we are speaking about artifacts "outside": they will say that – with some obvious exceptions like "I wanted to sit down, but there was no chair" – the propositions those sentences express are false. Here I can point to an actual example: Trenton Merricks.)[11] But – *I* say – not only are the inside and the outside propositions distinct, but it is only in the ontology and meta-ontology rooms that anyone has ever so much as *considered* the inside proposition. In my view, only metaphysicians (or at any rate only people who have been exposed to discussions of the metaphysics of artifacts) have ever considered – ever entertained, ever grasped, ever held before their minds – the inside proposition. The following table may be useful for keeping the positions of the philosophers mentioned or alluded to in this paragraph straight.

Most metaphysicians	Merricks	Van Inwagen
The inside and the outside propositions are identical	The inside and the outside propositions are identical	The inside and the outside propositions are distinct
and therefore	*and*	*and*
The inside proposition is true	The inside proposition is false	The inside proposition is false
because	*and therefore*	*and*
The outside proposition is true.	The outside proposition is false.	The outside proposition is true.

(Merricks would say that the inside proposition and the outside proposition are "both" the proposition that I call the inside proposition. That is, he would say that both "inside" and "outside" 'Chairs exist' expresses the proposition that, in my view, that sentence expresses only "inside." I *think* that most of "most metaphysicians" would agree with him, but I will let the individual members of that class speak for themselves.)

Here is one argument among many I have given for the conclusion that the inside proposition and the outside proposition are distinct. The inside proposition entails the proposition

Chaireg   Some chair-shaped regions of space are exactly occupied by a material object,

[11] See Trenton Merricks, *Objects and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

and the outside proposition does not entail *Chaireg*. The inside proposition entails *Chaireg* because the inside proposition is true only if something satisfies '*x* is a chair', and nothing could satisfy '*x* is a chair' unless it were a material object that exactly occupied a chair-shaped region of space. The outside proposition, however, can be true even if nothing satisfies '*x* is a chair'. I could put this point by saying that "outside" speakers are not only not speaking Tarskian, but are not committed to the "obvious" translations of their sentences into Tarskian. (The thesis that '∃*x* *x* is a chair' is an "obvious" translation of 'Chairs exist' into Tarskian is, if not established, then at least strongly supported, by the following fact: if, in a course in elementary formal logic, students were given the following exercise

> Symbolize 'Chairs exist'; use the scheme of abbreviation
>
> C*α*: *α* is a chair,

the instructor would accept no answer from them but some alphabetic variant of '∃*x* C*x*'.) Tarskian is, by design, a semantically extensionally combinatorial language (hereinafter, a combinatorial language): the semantical values of sentences are their extensions ('truth' or 'falsity' or various set-theoretical objects), and the semantical value/extension of a sentence is a function of its logical structure and the semantical values/extensions of the natural-language sentences and terms that occur within it. A necessary condition for a language's being combinatorial is that its sentences have an unambiguous "logical structure."[12] The logical structure of sentences of Tarskian is not only unambiguous but manifest: each of them wears its logical structure on its sleeve. (For example, the logical structure of '∃*x* *x* is a chair' is what that sentence has in common with all the members of an infinite class of sentences that includes itself, '∃*z* *z* est une chaise', '∃*x* *x* is an elephant', and '∃*y* *y* is a solution to the hypergeometric differential equation'. You could call it '∃*α* *φα*'. You could call it 'the logical structure

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[12] If natural languages are combinatorial, it is in some much more subtle and complex way than Tarskian, for two occurrences of what most people would unreflectively call the same sentence of (e.g.) English sometimes "represent" sentences (sentence-types) that have radically different logical structures. If English is a combinatorial language, therefore, we must suppose that distinct sentences of English are on various occasions "represented" by visually and aurally identical strings of English words. If, for example, I say to you, "Landing planes can be dangerous" when you propose to go for a stroll on an airport runway, and Suzy says to you, "Landing planes can be dangerous" when you propose to land a 747 without proper training, then (if English is a combinatorial language), it must be that Suzy and I have uttered two different sentences. And, in any case, Tarskian is combinatorial (only) *in relation to* the (somehow given) extensions of the natural-language sentences and terms that are constituents of its sentences. In relation to what is a natural language combinatorial? If that question has an answer, it is a subtle one.

displayed by all and only those closed sentences that are existential quan-
tifications on a natural-language sentence in which one variable is free'.
Whatever you call it, it's manifest.) If the sentences of any natural language
have anything that can usefully be called a logical structure, they do not
wear it on their sleeves. In the ontology room, in order to avoid having to
conduct our conversations entirely in Tarskian, we conventionally impose
a logical structure on certain of our natural-language sentences: if a sen-
tence has an "obvious" Tarskian translation, it has the logical structure of
that translation – a consequence of the more general "inside" convention
that a natural-language sentence expresses (in that context of utterance,
in the context "inside") the proposition expressed by its obvious Tarskian
translation. But that same sentence, when used "outside" – when used in a
context in which those conventions are not in force – does not, in general,
have that logical structure or express that proposition.

The thesis that natural-language sentences, when used "outside," do not
necessarily have the logical structures of their "obvious" Tarskian transla-
tions, can be established by reflection on any of a wide variety of examples.
(Established to *my* satisfaction. Other philosophers will flatly deny that
reflection on these examples establishes anything of the kind. The reflec-
tions I offer will at least show why I have been led to accept this thesis.) I
will examine one such example, the case of statements "about shadows."

Consider the following "outside" conversation.

> "How do we know that they have antiaircraft missiles?"
>
> "From inspection of satellite images of the area. Some of the shadows we
> can see in those images can only be interpreted as the shadows of Russian
> SA-21 Growler missile launchers."

If the proposition expressed by the final sentence of this conversation is
the proposition expressed by its obvious Tarskian translation, then what
the second speaker has said can be true only if something satisfies 'x is a
shadow'. But (a) what the second speaker asserted might very well be true,
and (b) *nothing* satisfies 'x is a shadow'. (You and I, reader and author,
now have one foot in the ontology room because we are considering an
ontological thesis as an example: discussions in the meta-ontology room,
naturally enough, sometimes involve examination of ontological theses.)
There *are* no shadows. There are photons and there are regions of space
whose physical content would prevent photons from passing through them
("opaque regions") and there are regions on the surfaces of things on which
no photons (or fewer photons than might have been expected) are falling

at some given moment because some photons that had been "on course" to fall on those surface regions were absorbed by the content of an opaque region before they could reach those surface regions. There are such things as these, yes – at least given that there are regions of space and regions on the surfaces of things. And if there really are surface regions, some of them are sometimes "shadowed" or "in shadow." *Being in shadow* is an attribute of some surface regions; it is a universal, an abstract object, the common feature of all shadowed surface regions.[13]

In my view, it would be simply *absurd* to say that anything satisfied '*x* is a shadow' or to say ("inside"), "Shadows exist" or "There are shadows."[14] It is, I say, simply impossible to assign a coherent set of properties to "satisfiers" of '*x* is a shadow'. (At least if it is impossible for a nonshadow to be a former shadow; at least if shadows can move across surfaces.) But suppose that some poetic soul – Gerard Manley Hopkins, let us say – had one morning entered the following *pensée* in his journal: "If the world were emptied of light, it would be emptied of shadow as well – and I should mourn the loss of shadows almost as much as I should mourn the loss of light. But light exists! Shadows exist! All praise be to thee, O Lord, who hast created both light and shadow!" In that case, Hopkins's sentence 'Shadows exist' would have expressed a true proposition – in serene indifference to the falsity of the (or the nonexistence of a) proposition expressed by '$\exists x \, x$ is a shadow'.

And why do I insist that "outside" utterances of 'Chairs exist' and 'Shadows exist' express truths – given that I say that "inside" utterances of these same sentences express falsehoods? Well, I suppose I am enough of a Wittgensteinian to think that it is not possible for very much of what we say "in the midst of life" to be false. And I suppose that I mostly agree with Eli Hirsch about the "truth-conditions" of English sentences "about chairs" – or, as I should prefer to say, about which of the sentences "about

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[13] Might shadows simply *be* shadowed surface regions, then – or "maximal" ones, ones that are not parts of a larger shadowed surface region? Might "being a shadow" be an *office* that surface regions occasionally occupy? (I leave out of account here the fact that 'shadow' has both a two-dimensional and a three-dimensional use – as 'The moon entered the earth's shadow'. What I say about the two-dimensional use could easily be adapted to the three-dimensional use.) Well, that's a possible "move" – although it would imply (remember that I am speaking "inside" and that someone who made that move would also be speaking "inside") that shadows never move across the surfaces of things and that some nonshadows are former shadows.

[14] If Cicero will forgive me: nothing so absurd can be said that some *highly intelligent, serious, and able* philosopher had not said it. Roy Sorensen, a highly intelligent, serious, and *extremely* able philosopher has said just these things in his brilliant book *Seeing Dark Things: The Philosophy of Shadows* (Oxford University Press, 2007). Sorensen calls the thesis that shadows do not exist 'eliminativism' and confronts it with a series of counterarguments and difficulties. The reader can perhaps infer that I am unmoved by his case against eliminativism.

chairs" spoken in the ordinary business of life express true propositions and which of them express false propositions. And this remark conveniently brings me to the topic of Eli Hirsch, who is one of the examples I promised of a philosopher who resists the implications for ontology of the boringly obvious thesis that the same sentence can express different propositions in the different contexts of utterance. (I don't mean that he "resists" the boringly obvious thesis; of course he accepts it; I mean that he resists what I say are its implications for ontology.) It is this resistance that leads him to classify me as a purveyor of a "revisionary ontology." A revisionary ontology, Hirsch tells us, is one that entails the following proposition:

> Many common sense judgments about the existence or identity of highly visible physical objects are a priori necessarily false.[15]

But how can my ontology be, in this sense, revisionary when one of its central theses is that most of the judgments people make about highly visible physical objects are *true*? When my wife said to me yesterday, "The chair you said you'd carry upstairs is still in the living room," what she asserted was (*I* say) true. True *without qualification*. True *when taken straightforwardly and literally*. True *tout court*. True *simpliciter*. True *full stop*. True *period*. Not "true in the loose and popular sense but false in the strict and philosophical sense," but *just true*. When my hard-headed cynic said, "Chairs exist," what he said was true – true *without qualification* (etc.). Now Trenton Merricks is a revisionary ontologist in exactly Hirsch's sense (a label I am sure he will not only accept but glory in), but I am no more a revisionary ontologist in the sense of Hirsch's definition than Hirsch is.[16] So how can he say that I am one? Insofar as there is an answer to this question in "Against Revisionary Ontology," it is relegated to a footnote (note 16, p. 106):

> Closely related to this distinction [the distinction between "true in the loose and popular sense" and "true in the strict and philosophical sense"], and

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[15] Eli Hirsch, "Against Revisionary Ontology," *Quantifier Variance and Realism: Essays in Metaontology* (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 96–103. The definition of 'revisionary ontology' occurs on p. 101.

[16] My "official theory" does not, therefore, disagree with what I cannot help thinking outside the ontology room (see note 1). The beliefs that I have inside and outside the ontology room about the kinds of things that exist are, in fact, exactly the same. In particular: wherever I am, I accept both the outside proposition and the denial of the inside proposition. (Of course, if I *speak* a sentence that expresses the denial of the inside proposition, that linguistic act ensures that I am "inside." But I take it that at the moment at which I was attending to my wife's all-too-true statement about the chair that was still in the living room, I then believed that $\sim \exists x \, x$ is a chair in whatever sense it is that I then believed that the atomic number of iron was 26 and that Montreal was north of New York.