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EXISTENCE

Essays in Ontology

The problem of the nature of being was central to ancient and medieval philosophy, and continues to be relevant today. In this collection of thirteen recent essays, Peter van Inwagen applies the techniques of analytical philosophy to a wide variety of problems in ontology and meta-ontology. Topics discussed include the nature of being, the meaning of the existential quantifier, ontological commitment, recent attacks on metaphysics and ontology, the concept of ontological structure, fictional entities, mereological sums, and the ontology of mental states. Van Inwagen adopts a generally “Quinean” position in meta-ontology, yet reaches ontological conclusions very different from Quine’s. The volume includes two previously unpublished essays, one of which is an introductory essay where van Inwagen explains his conception of the relation between the language of “the ordinary business of life” and that of “the ontology room”. The volume will be an important collection for students and scholars of metaphysics.

PETER VAN INWAGEN is the John Cardinal O’Hara Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. His most recent publications include *Ontology, Identity, and Modality* (Cambridge, 2001) and *The Problem of Evil* (2006).

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Preface

This book contains some of the work I have done in ontology and meta-ontology since the publication of my earlier collection *Ontology, Identity, and Modality* in 2001. All but one of the twelve essays collected in this book have been previously published.

The unpublished essay, “Alston on Ontological Commitment” (Chapter 7), is a revised version of my contribution to a memorial symposium for W. P. Alston at the 2011 meeting of the Central Division of the American Philosophical Association.

In attempting to write an ordinary sort of introduction to this collection, I discovered that I was merely reproducing material that could be found in the introductory portions of the individual chapters. I have decided not to present the same material twice and instead to write for this volume a small introductory essay called “Inside and Outside the Ontology Room.” This essay is the latest of several attempts I have made to explain my conception of the relation between the language of “the ordinary business of life” and the language of “the ontology room.” My views on the nature of this relation have, I believe, been consistently misunderstood, and I have not yet despaired of their ever being understood. There is, moreover, some justification for allowing this essay to serve as an Introduction to the present volume, for the ontology room is not only the place in which these essays were written, but is also the place in which they must be read. That, at any rate, is the position I have attempted to defend in “Inside and Outside the Ontology Room.”

This book does not have a dedication of the usual kind (“For Mary”; “To my students”). I offer in its place the following dedicatory paragraph.

When I attend a conference on metaphysics, I am almost always at least twenty years older than the second-oldest person in attendance. (I am grateful to Kit Fine for the fact that this is occasionally not the case.) And this is because of the great flowering of analytical metaphysics that began in the early eighties and which happily shows no sign of abating.

This resurgence of metaphysics among analytical philosophers was largely due to the fact that many young philosophers (of both sexes, I am happy to say) began to do work in metaphysics in those years – despite the fact that most of their elders and mentors believed that metaphysics was a thing of the past, and that the few prominent philosophers who were writing on metaphysical topics (Roderick Chisholm, Richard Taylor, Alvin Plantinga, David Lewis – and of course Kit Fine) were wasting their time and talents on a subject that no longer had a place in philosophy. It is to this generation of metaphysicians – but perhaps now, in the second decade of the new century, it is more accurate to say, “these generations” – that this book is dedicated. I should like to name them, but there are too many: I could list thirty philosophers under the age of 50 who are doing metaphysical work of the very highest quality and not have anything like a complete list. I owe to these metaphysicians the blessed assurance that the chapter in the history of metaphysics to which my work is a footnote is not its closing chapter. And for this assurance I am grateful beyond measure.