

The Picture of Reality as an Amorphous Lump*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ontology is the study of what there is. Here are some examples of disputes in modern analytic ontology:

(1) Abstract objects. The *nominalist* (as the label is used today) denies that there exist abstract objects. The *platonist* holds that there are abstract objects. One example is numbers. The nominalist denies that there are numbers; the platonist typically affirms it.

(2) Ordinary objects. Consider ordinary objects – tables, chairs, animals, rocks, what have you. Commonsensically we would hold that objects of all of these types exist. But some philosophers deny this. Peter van Inwagen holds that organisms are the only macroscopic objects there are.¹ Cian Dorr has argued that there are not any macroscopic objects at all.²

(3) Extraordinary objects. Consider the purported object which is the sum of my nose and the Eiffel Tower. Consider “incars” which, if they exist, are exactly like cars, except that they only exist when or insofar as they are inside garages.³ Do such objects exist? Common sense arguably says no. But on a variety of philosophical views they do.

Metaontology, which I will be concerned with, is about what ontology is. It is about the nature of questions like the ones mentioned. Specifically, I will be concerned with one particular dispute in metaontology, what I will call the dispute between robust ontologists and deflationists about ontology. On the *robust* conception of ontology, questions of ontology are real, genuine questions on a par with questions of science. On the *deflationary* conception of ontology, questions of ontology somehow fall short of this ideal. These characterizations are, to be sure,

* Many thanks to Eli Hirsch, Danny Korman, David Liebesman, Øystein Linnebo, Agustín Rayo and Ted Sider for helpful conversations and comments. The title is stolen from ch. 16 of Dummett (1981), where Dummett keeps using this locution.

¹ See van Inwagen (1990).

² See Dorr (forthcoming).

³ The incar example comes from Hirsch (1976), p. 361f.

rough and impressionistic. But that is in the nature of the topic. The robust and deflationary conceptions of ontology are tendencies rather than full-fledged theses.

Sometimes the following imagery is employed to describe these two different views on ontology. The robust ontologist holds that there are real metaphysical joints in nature. The deflationary ontologist, by contrast, subscribes to the “picture of reality as an amorphous lump” as Michael Dummett puts it.⁴ The deflationary conception is also sometimes described employing the “cookie cutter-metaphor”, according to which reality considered in itself is like some amorphous dough and our concepts are like cookie cutters, carving up reality into objects. It is worth stressing that these are mere pictures. A lot of philosophical work has to go into actually providing these pictures with definite content.

I will focus on the deflationary conception of ontology. Specifically, I will be concerned with what form an acceptable deflationism about ontology might take. The most well-known and important form of deflationism about ontology has historically been associated with William James and Rudolf Carnap, and among its most important current proponents are Hilary Putnam and Eli Hirsch.⁵ (There are important differences between the views of these thinkers but I will focus on the similarities.) Putnam calls his view the thesis of *conceptual relativity*. Hirsch calls his view the doctrine of *quantifier variance*. I will call this general type of deflationary view *ontological pluralism*. For most of the paper, I will critically discuss the ontological pluralist view. Then I will discuss whether there are other routes for the deflationist about ontology to take.

The ontological pluralist view on disputes such as the ones mentioned above is that the disputants can be seen simply as using ‘exists’, ‘object’, etc. – as we might say, *the ontological expressions* – differently. To this extent the disputants are simply speaking different languages. Whereas it might sound as if the disputes are really ‘deep’, there is nothing more deep going on than when you claim that the tomato is a vegetable and I claim it is a fruit. The dispute is in an important sense verbal. As in the tomato case there is a genuine issue nearby: namely that of what is the correct thing to say *in English*. Maybe correct English is to say, for instance, that there are numbers. But nothing philosophically significant hinges on this, since we could equally well have spoken a language where “there are no numbers” is the correct thing to say. (Note that one naturally can take the ontological pluralist’s line with respect to some of these disputes and not

⁴ Dummett (1973), e.g. p. 577.

⁵ See James (1907/46); Carnap (1950); Putnam (esp. 1987, 1987a, 1994, 2004); Hirsch (2002, 2002a, forthcoming, this volume). Incidentally I am somewhat doubtful about including James here: but often he is ascribed a view similar to these other theorists. See e.g. Pihlström (1996), pp. 64-88 and Thayer (1968), pp. 352-7.

with respect to others. This I will however typically slide over. The reason is that the problems I will go on to raise for ontological pluralism are completely general.)

What ontological pluralists often say – below I will give, and discuss, some quotations – is that there are *different possible meanings for the ontological expressions*. Just as there can be different ‘vegetable’-like expressions with slightly different meanings so that in some English-like languages “the tomato is a vegetable” is true and in some it is false, there can be different ‘exists’-like expressions. In fact, this characterization also suggests one consideration in favor of ontological pluralism, one that seems to loom large in Hirsch’s contribution to the present volume: according to the ontological pluralist she only says about ontological expressions what is clearly right about other expressions, whereas the anti-pluralist unmotivatedly says that there is a difference between the two cases.

Another consideration motivating ontological pluralism is this. Ontological disputes like the ones briefly described above are notoriously *intractable*. It is easy to come to think that for principled reasons, there is no way of settling these disputes. Now, of course a dispute can be in this way intractable while not being empty or merely verbal in the way that the ontological pluralist says that many ontological disputes are. But the ontological pluralist can say that a good explanation of the intractability of ontological disputes is that the disputants are simply using ontological expressions with different meanings.

II. ONTOLOGICAL PLURALISM

Putnam supports his “thesis of conceptual relativity” – the form of ontological pluralism that he defends – by a whole battery of arguments.⁶ However, what normally takes center stage in Putnam’s defense of ontological pluralism is a number of well-known examples. I will consider the two discussed prominently in Putnam (1987) (and also in many other texts of Putnam’s). The examples have to do with ontological questions of a rather special kind. One might agree on the pluralist’s diagnosis of these examples, while holding that ontological questions of more traditional philosophical concern, like the ones listed above, are fully genuine. Still the examples both illustrate the issue well and promise to help motivate the pluralist’s stance. Correspondingly, problems with these examples indicate general problems with pluralism.

One of Putnam’s examples has to do with the different views of “Carnap” (not to be confused with the actual historical Carnap – Putnam uses the name just because the type of toy

⁶ Some of these arguments are: considerations about the “interpenetration” of convention and fact (see e.g. Putnam 1995, p. 58), the model-theoretic argument (see especially Putnam (1980) and (1981), ch.2), the semantic paradoxes (Putnam (1990), ch. 1), and quantum physics (Putnam (1990), ch. 1).

world considered is a type of world Carnap used to consider when discussing inductive logic) and “the Polish logician” on the existence of *mereological sums*. The other has to do with different construals of what *points* are. I will argue both that neither example actually succeeds in supporting Putnam’s ontological pluralism, and, more strongly, that Putnam’s ontological pluralism is false.

Here is what we might call Putnam’s mereology argument. Consider a world with three individuals, a, b and c. How many *objects* are there in this world? We can imagine one philosopher (“Carnap”) who says *three*; and another (“the Polish Logician”) who accepts the existence of mereological sums, and says *seven* (a, b, c, a+b, a+c, b+c, and a+b+c).⁷ Who is right? Putnam says that all we can say is that according to one conceptual scheme three objects exist and according to another, seven objects exist. There is no further question of which conceptual scheme gets matters right. There is, according to Putnam, no conceptual scheme-independent answer to the question of how many objects there are.⁸

Putnam’s other example motivating ontological pluralism departs from the observation that there are different ways of understanding talk of points in geometry. Let us call this the geometry argument.

Think of the points in the plane. Are these parts of the plane, as Leibniz thought? Or are they ‘mere limits’, as Kant said? . . . If you say, in this case, that these are ‘two ways of slicing the same dough’, then you must admit that what is a *part* of space, in one version of the facts, is an abstract entity (say, a set of convergent spheres—although there is not, of course, a unique way of construing points as limits) in the other version. But then you will have conceded that which entities are ‘abstract entities’ and which are ‘concrete objects’, at least, is version-relative.⁹

As already mentioned, it may be tempting to express the ontological pluralist view by employing what is known as the ‘cookie cutter-metaphor’. Expressed employing this metaphor, the view is that the world considered in itself is just like some amorphous dough, and the concepts employed are like cookie-cutters carving out cookies from the dough. The different conceptual schemes

⁷ Here is a brief and not entirely untendentious characterization of what mereology is. Mereology is the study of the part-whole relation. An object which is a *mereological sum* has other objects as parts, in the way described by mereology. An *individual* is an object that is not the sum of any other objects. For an overview of mereology, see e.g. Varzi (2003).

⁸ Putnam (1987), p. 18f.

⁹ Putnam (1987), p. 19.

correspond to different sets of cookie-cutters. However, in the context of presenting the mereology argument Putnam criticizes the metaphor:

Take [the metaphor] seriously, and you are at once forced to answer the question, ‘What are the various parts of the dough?’. If you answer, that (in the present case) the ‘atoms’ of the dough are [the individuals] and the other parts are the mereological sums containing more than one ‘atom’, then you have simply adopted [the Polish Logician’s version]. Insisting that this is the correct view of the metaphysical situation is just another way of insisting that mereological sums *really* exist.¹⁰

Insofar as there is a genuine argument here, it must be extracted from the text. For why, exactly, would one be forced to answer the question of what the parts of the dough are? Cannot the friend of the cookie cutter-metaphor say: when I say reality is like some dough, I mean precisely to deny that there is an objectively superior answer to the question of what the ultimate parts of reality are? But it seems the reasoning has to be this. If the dough picture is right, it can be recognized as being so from any perspective; hence also from the perspective of “Carnap”. But the dough picture says that it is possible to carve out seven objects from the dough. But that, in turn, is sufficient for there actually to be seven objects – for it is sufficient for a purported object to exist that a concept carving it out could exist. (Because otherwise we would be forced to say that objects are *created* by our carving them out.) Hence, the more ontologically decadent scheme – in this case, the Polish Logician’s scheme – is the accurate one. But then the dough picture misfires. For there is a proper way to carve the dough after all: the way of carving it that yields as many objects as there can possibly be.

Let me now turn to criticism. Some of the criticisms will be directed only at Putnam’s arguments for his brand of ontological pluralism. Other, more radical criticisms will be directed at ontological pluralism itself. My aim here is not wholly destructive. Later I will sketch the positive view suggested by these criticisms. I will begin by discussing Putnam’s geometry argument.

The trouble with this argument is that Putnam simply omits to consider the following alternative possibility, which seems far more natural for someone inclined toward a conciliatory view: the two different perspectives on points can be represented as different possible theories, T_1 and T_2 , such that ‘point’ means different things in the two different theories and is true of different things in the two theories. As characterized by one theory, ‘points’ are part of the plane,

¹⁰ Putnam (1987), p. 33.

and as characterized by the other theory, ‘points’ are mere limits. But there is no conflict: for ‘point’ refers to different things in the two theories. Points₁ are parts of the plane; points₂ are mere limits. (If ‘point’ refers to different things in the two theories, the same holds of related predicates.)

When using this case to argue for ontological pluralism, Putnam appears to assume that ‘point’ means the same in the two theories. Plausibly, what makes Putnam assume this is that both theories seem adequate for the purpose of representing what ‘point’ actually refers to. But this observation rather argues for the view that ‘point’ in ordinary language is *referentially indeterminate*, and can equally well be taken to be true of one type of entity as of the other. (A term is referentially indeterminate just in case, for all that has been determined with respect to its meaning, there are different possibilities concerning what it refers to that stand up equally well. The term is referentially indeterminate as between these candidate references. Compare how a vague expression like ‘heap’ is arguably referentially indeterminate as between different candidate references; or how Newton’s term ‘mass’ is referentially indeterminate as between relativistic mass and rest mass.¹¹)

After the passage where the geometry example is presented, Putnam goes on to say, “My view is that God himself, if he consented to the question, ‘Do points really exist or are they mere limits?’, would say ‘I don’t know’; not because his Omniscience is limited, but because there is a limit to how far questions make sense”.¹² Clearly, Putnam takes this to be a metaphysical point. But there is a simpler interpretation of what is going on. The reason why there is not anything for God to know is the same as in the case of God’s lack of knowledge of how many grains it takes to make a heap, or of whether Newton’s term ‘mass’ is true of relativistic mass or rest mass.

The criticism of this argument of Putnam’s is in the first instance only a criticism of the argument itself. The suggestion is that there is a natural way to understand the case which makes good on the sense that both views on points are somehow both acceptable but which does not involve embracing ontological pluralism. Part of the interest of the rebuttal lies in its potential generalizability: maybe analogous moves can be made with respect to all cases Putnam might appeal to in support of his ontological pluralist view. But even so, nothing in this reply directly

¹¹ The ‘mass’ example is from Field (1973). The point is that Newtonian physics spoke only of one quantity, ‘mass’, and given what we know today there is no quantity that satisfies all the assertions Newtonian physics made about mass, but there are two quantities that both come close – what we call relativistic mass and rest mass. What, then, does ‘mass’ as it occurs in Newtonian physics refer to? It does not seem plausible either that the term should lack reference altogether or that it should determinately refer to one or other of these quantities. Rather, it would appear Newtonian ‘mass’ is referentially indeterminate as between relativistic mass and rest mass.

¹² Putnam (1987), p. 19.

argues against the truth of ontological pluralism. In this respect, my discussion of Putnam's mereology argument, to which I will now turn, will be of more significance.¹³

Focus on the criticism that Putnam himself, in the context of presenting the mereology argument, levels at the cookie-cutter metaphor. An analogous argument is equally telling against Putnam's ontological pluralism. Here it goes: If ontological pluralism is true, its truth can be appreciated from any perspective. Hence also from that of, say, Putnam's Carnap. So already from Carnap's perspective the permissibility of saying that there are seven objects can be appreciated. But already if it is permissible to say that there are seven objects, it is true to say that there are seven objects.

The crucial step is the last. This step may seem simply to beg the question against Putnam's ontological pluralism. But here is why this step can be taken. First, *ad hominem*: this is the same move that Putnam makes in arguing against the cookie-cutter metaphor. (Already from the perspective of Putnam's Carnap it can be seen that it is permissible to say that there are seven objects in the world under consideration.) Second, we can certainly, on the pluralist's view, think of Putnam's Carnap and the Polish Logician as using two different languages, with different meanings assigned to the ontological expressions, including the existential quantifier. Consider then the Polish Logician's language, where, purportedly, the sentence that intuitively expresses that there are seven objects is true. Carnap can, we said, recognize that this language is as fine as Carnap's own language. What, then, should Carnap say about the truth-value of a sentence of the Polish Logician's language the form ' $F(t)$ ', where ' t ' is a singular term of that language purporting to refer to an object Carnap officially does not recognize? Carnap should be able to recognize, on the assumption of the recognizable truth of ontological pluralism, that this sentence is true. But a sentence of this form is true only if ' t ' refers. In general, an atomic sentence, of any language, is true only if the predicate is true of the object referred to by the singular term.¹⁴ But this presupposes that the singular term has a referent. The reasoning straightforwardly generalizes. For any two languages L and L' , it holds that if the singular term ' t ' of L' is such that there are true atomic sentences of the form ' $F(t)$ ' in L' , then ' F ' is true of the object referred to by

¹³ There are independent reasons to doubt whether the dispute over the nature of points is really properly understood as verbal. My argument is just that even if we agree with Putnam that in some sense the dispute is a non-dispute, his pluralist conclusion does not follow.

¹⁴ Some would argue this is an overgeneralization. They might say that despite the fact that 'Vulcan' has no referent, sentences like "Vulcan=Vulcan" and "Vulcan is a planet" – roughly, sentences ascribing essential properties of the would-be referent – are true. In the main text I disregard this possibility. If you are inclined to think that the thesis assumed in the main text is an overgeneralization, just focus on atomic sentences not belonging to this special class.

'*t*', and unless L is simply expressively impoverished, this is something which can be expressed in L.

Let me say a few words about what 'expressively impoverished' means here. The notion will be of some importance in the discussion to follow. A language is expressively impoverished just in case there are facts which the language does not possess the means to express. Consider – to borrow an example from Dorr (forthcoming), from which I have also taken the label 'expressively impoverished' – a variant of English spoken by a community where the members have decided among themselves to speak a language where, say for religious reasons, it is absolutely impossible to speak of anything that is at least a certain distance from Earth. There are some difficulties concerning how exactly to make the example work. For example, in this variant of English, the semantics of expressions of the form 'what x is thinking about' must be somewhat different from the semantics of the corresponding expressions of actual English: for what if x happens to be thinking of something too far from Earth? But there is no need to get into the details. The reason for bringing up the possibility of there being languages that are expressively impoverished in this sense is that what the ontological pluralist holds precisely is not simply that there are languages like this. What the ontological pluralist wishes to hold is that there are languages with significantly different sets of ontological expressions such that these languages are all maximally adequate for stating all the facts about the world.¹⁵

Turn now to how Hirsch argues for his version of ontological pluralism, in for example his contribution to this volume. Hirsch's argument proceeds in two steps. In the first step, it is argued that for each coherent ontological position (within a certain class – Hirsch is never explicit on exactly how big the class is, but the scope of the proposal need not concern us), there is some possible language within which the position comes out true. In other words, there is some language where the ontological expressions have the right meanings for the position to come out true as stated in that language. In the second step, it is argued that for example appeal to the principle of charity militates in favor of taking us to speak a possible language where the common sense view on what there is and is not comes out true.

On Hirsch's view, a sentence like "incars exist" comes out untrue in our language, but there is some other language where the corresponding sentence comes out true. It is easy to modify my point about Putnam's mereology argument to refute this claim. Let 'Herbie' purport to name a car, and let 'Herbie*' purport to name the corresponding incar. By Hirsch's lights, the

¹⁵ Note that I say "maximally adequate" and not "perfectly adequate". The ontological pluralist might certainly hold that all languages are to some extent expressively impoverished. The core of the view is that among the different sets of ontological expressions a language might have, there is no set which makes for determinately more expressive richness.

following holds. The term ‘Herbie*’ of our language does not refer (there is no referent for the term in the domain of the quantifiers of our language, even when the domain of quantification is absolutely unrestricted), but there is a language, call it L*, much like English such that the term ‘Herbie*’ of that language is in the extension of the predicate ‘refers*’ of that language, where ‘refers*’ is a counterpart of our predicate ‘refers’, and ‘Herbie* exists*’ is a true sentence of that language, where ‘exists*’ is a counterpart to our ‘exists’.

By the same argument as one given against Putnam earlier, this is not a stable position. Focus on L*. According to the view under consideration, there are true atomic sentences of L* of the form ‘F(Herbie*)’; for example, “Herbie* is white”. But is it not the case that for any atomic sentence of the form ‘F(t)’ of any language, that sentence is true only if the object referred to by ‘t’ is in the extension of the predicate ‘F’? This presupposes that ‘t’ has a referent. Hence we should in the present case conclude that ‘Herbie*’ has a referent. So there exists something for ‘Herbie*’ to refer to.

Let me here also present a related argument against the pluralist view, departing from the same kind of idea as the argument just given. Consider the true sentence of L* “Herbie* is white” (1*) and the counterpart sentence “Herbie* is white” of our language augmented with the name ‘Herbie*’ purporting to refer to an incar (1). By the ontological pluralist’s lights, (1) is untrue, but (1*) is true. But this, I submit, is impossible, given as the name ‘Herbie*’ of L* and the name ‘Herbie*’ of our language purport to refer to the same object.¹⁶ By the pluralist’s lights, (1) and (1*) differ in truth-value. Hence they differ in meaning. If they differ in meaning, either they differ in composition or one or more constituents differ in meaning. The best candidate for a difference is clearly in the singular term, ‘Herbie*’. But can it really plausibly be maintained that ‘Herbie*’ differs so in meaning between the two languages as for this to account for a difference in truth-value between (1) and (1*)? These considerations suggest that the sentences (1) and (1*) cannot differ in truth-value after all, and hence that ontological pluralism must be false.¹⁷

¹⁶ Care must be taken here. On the pluralist view, do terms of the alien language purport to refer at all (as opposed to refer*)? The reason I am cavalier about talking about ‘Herbie*’ as purporting to refer is that even if it should not be strictly true that it does, the ontological pluralist must agree that there is some sort of very tight relation between the names ‘Herbie*’ of the two languages, and the most straightforward description of what the names have in common is that they purport to refer to the same object. Taking this description strictly and literally would be question-begging, but it need not be so taken for the argument.

¹⁷ I keep using atomic sentences of simple predicate-term form as my example. In principle, I could use other examples. But in the present argument the focus on simple atomic sentences has a point. The ontological pluralist wants to say that the ontological expressions have different meanings in the different languages she considers. But now we see how the supposed differences in meaning between the ontological expressions ramify: the ontological pluralist appears committed to saying that we cannot have a term in our language that purports to refer to the entities that are said to ‘exist’ in a language where the counterpart of the sentence “incars exist” comes out true.

I have presented two arguments that purport to show that ontological pluralism must be false. The first, which we might call *the 'Tarskian' argument*, departs from the assumption that for any atomic sentence of the form 'F(t)' of any language, this sentence can be true only if there is something that 't' refers to, and this something is in the extension of 'F'; this assumption we might call the Tarskian assumption.¹⁸ The second, which we might call *the sameness argument*, departs from the fact that there is no way the ontological pluralist can make good on her claim that two sentence which stand in the relation to each other that 'F(Herbie*)' of our language and 'F(Herbie*)' of L* stand can differ in truth-value.

If *all* that could be said on behalf of the assumptions these arguments rely on is that they come out true *in English*, the arguments would not be successful against ontological pluralism. The ontological pluralist could say that all the arguments show is that we speak a possible language where all the different purported entities mentioned are truly said to exist. This does not vitiate the ontological pluralist's point that there are different possible languages, with different sets of ontological expressions, none of them "privileged". However, what I claim on behalf of the arguments that have been presented is that the assumptions they rely on are satisfied in all languages but ones that are expressively impoverished, in the sense earlier explained. What I claim on behalf of the Tarskian argument is that a language whose ontological expressions work in such a way that the Tarskian assumption (or the statement of that language which is its counterpart) fails to come out true is simply expressively impoverished: it fails to be able to state everything relevant to semantics. Maybe this claim can be resisted (although this would require some radical rethinking about the nature of semantic facts¹⁹). However that may be, the sameness argument is in this respect safer. For this argument trades on nothing about what the language we are considering is itself able to express about truth and reference and existence. Rather, all that the sameness argument relies on is that we are employing a language where for every term of another language that purports to refer to a specific object of a particular kind, there could be, in the language employed, a term purporting to refer to that same object. Certainly there are possible languages that fail to satisfy this condition. But such languages are obviously expressively impoverished: they are incapable of naming the purported objects in question.

III. A MORE FUNDAMENTAL WORRY

¹⁸ Alfred Tarski was the first theorist clearly to lay out how the truth of a sentence depends on the reference of its constituents. See Tarski (1935/83).

¹⁹ Notice just how radical the rethinking would have to be. Many would be attracted to the view that truth and reference should be dethroned from their status as central notions in semantics. I am not assigning to the notions of truth and reference any central or explanatory role. All I am relying on is that the Tarskian assumption is in fact true, not that it is central or explanatory.

Thus far I have talked about ontological pluralism as if it were clear what the view comes to. But in fact it is not even clear whether there is a way to make adequate sense of the doctrine. Consider Putnam's formulations of the doctrine: "[T]he logical primitives themselves, and in particular the notions of object and existence, have a multitude of different uses rather than one absolute 'meaning'"²⁰, "[T]here isn't one privileged sense of the word 'object'"²¹, and, from Putnam's most recent book, "what logicians call 'the existential quantifier', the symbol ' $(\exists x)$ ', and its ordinary language counterparts, the expressions 'there are', 'there exist' and 'there exists a', 'some', etc., *do not have a single absolutely precise use but a whole family of uses*"²² and, later, "conceptual relativity...holds that the question as to which of these ways of using 'exist' (and 'individual', 'object', etc.) is *right* is one that the meanings of the words in the natural language...simply leaves open".²³ Hirsch expresses his thesis as the denial of the claim that there is a "metaphysically privileged sense of the quantifier".²⁴

What might the claim that (say) 'object' and 'exist' do not have just one sense come to? There is a way of understanding it under which it is trivially true: these *strings of symbols*, or these *noises*, could be associated with different meanings. But this trivial claim cannot be what the ontological pluralist has in mind. No one would dream of denying it. If, by contrast, the claim is that 'object', 'exist', etc. do not just have one sense *while still meaning what they actually do*, the claim sounds patently false. Or, rather, it sounds patently false unless what is meant is that these expressions are somehow referentially indeterminate; and at least as far as Putnam is concerned this really does seem to be the view. The idea would be that the ontological expressions are like vague expressions – or like what most theorists take vague expressions to be like – in that they have different semantic values under different acceptable assignments. This interpretation fits Putnam's formulations well. But there are two reasons for skepticism. First, ontological pluralism is clearly meant as a *metaphysical* thesis: a thesis about the nature of reality. But how can the truth of a metaphysical claim turn on (something as shallow as) the referential indeterminacy of some words we actually employ? Second, in order for the extension of any predicate to include some thing *a* under any acceptable assignment, *a* must exist. So, under the supposition that these ontological notions have different semantic values under different

²⁰ Putnam (1987a), p. 71.

²¹ Putnam (1994), p. 30.

²² Putnam (2004), p. 37.

²³ Putnam (2004), p. 43.

²⁴ Hirsch (2002a), p. 61.

acceptable assignments, it turns out that the most generous assignment is the correct one. This contradicts the supposition. Reductio.²⁵

It is better, perhaps, to fasten on the word “privileged” in Hirsch’s formulation and in one of Putnam’s formulations. On any reasonable view, there is a multitude of existence-like concepts – a number of different possible meanings for an ‘exists’-like expression to have. Putnam’s point can be taken to be that none is ontologically privileged: that none is determinately the best one for representing what the ontological facts actually are. This seems right as far as it goes: but it is still unclear what it might mean to say that one existence-like notion is ontologically superior to, or inferior to, or for that matter equally good as, another.

However, what the pluralist can be taken to mean that two theories employing two different existence-like notions can be in some important sense *equivalent* to each other: despite differences in formulation the theories somehow say *the same things* about the world. Compare how Hirsch, when outlining his version of ontological pluralism, says that there are “many possible perspectives on ‘the existence of objects’, which all are adequate for describing the same facts, the same ‘way the world is’”.²⁶ This can be seen as one way of cashing out the talk of ‘privileged’ concepts of existence. The concept of existence of one language L is superior to that of another language L’ just in case L’ is more expressively impoverished than L, and is so in virtue of the differences between the ontological expressions of the two languages. Ontological pluralism is then the view that there are languages with significantly different sets of ontological expressions, tied for maximal expressive richness.

This is better. But one problem here concerns what the nature of the equivalence between the theories is supposed to be. It would obviously be misguided to say that the theories, or statements therein, are *synonymous*. Synonymy is a matter of sameness of meaning, and even if some interesting equivalence relation obtains between the theories, or the statements therein, they do not actually mean the very same thing. And it would obviously not go far enough for the ontological pluralist’s purposes to say that the theories are *necessarily equivalent*. This equivalence relation is too weak. The statements “ $2+2=4$ ” and “nothing is both red and green all over” are both necessarily true and hence they are necessarily equivalent – they have the same truth-values no matter what the world turns out to be like – but they do not describe the same facts, except on a radically coarse-grained conception of facts. What is needed is an equivalence relation intermediate in strength between these two. But it is quite unclear what equivalence relation this might be. Some of the counterexamples that can be used against identifying it as

²⁵ Compare Sider (2001), p. 128.

²⁶ Hirsch (forthcoming), p. 13.

necessary equivalence can also be used against identifying it as apriori necessary equivalence. Another immediate suggestion is empirical equivalence (in the strong sense where it entails equivalence of theoretical virtues). But this is too weak: a realist of the kind Putnam attacks will feel comfortable in holding that theories can be empirically equivalent yet one is true and the other false. In (1978), Putnam proposed that two theories are “cognitively equivalent” if they explain the phenomena equally well and are mutually relatively interpretable.²⁷ But adding a relative interpretability clause does not get around the problem: the realist can comfortably say of two theories which are equivalent in this sense that one is true and the other false.

IV. THE DEFLATIONARY CONCEPTION OF ONTOLOGY

I have at some length criticized ontological pluralism. Now let me turn to the consequences of the failure of ontological pluralism for deflationism about ontology.

In virtue of the influence of the views of theorists like Carnap, Putnam and Hirsch, many would find it natural simply to equate deflationism about ontology with ontological pluralism. But remember what is the more fundamental thought of the deflationist: that *somehow* ontological disputes are non-disputes; and that *somehow* there is no privileged carving-up of the world into objects. There may be other ways to go for the deflationist besides taking the pluralist route. I will now turn to what else the deflationist might say about the nature of ontological questions.

For instance, the deflationist about ontology can embrace a maximally decadent ontology, *maximalism*, as I will call it. What maximalism says is that for any type of object such that there can be objects of that type given that the empirical facts are exactly what they are, there are such objects. The qualification about the empirical facts being exactly what they are is there to rule out that maximalism should be committed to the existence of phlogiston or Vulcan. The ontological decadence of maximalism consists in its willingness to countenance all sorts of metaphysically weird sorts of objects – like incars, or like unintuitive abstract objects – as existing.

This possibility that the deflationist about ontology should embrace maximalism is suggested by how the present criticisms of Putnam and Hirsch all point in one and the same direction: someone who accepts the assumptions from which Putnam and Hirsch start should end up accepting a decadent ontology. For example, the would-be ontological pluralist wants to say that sentence (1*) is true, and I have argued that she is thereby committed to taking also (1) to be

²⁷ Where a theory T_1 is relatively interpretable into another, T_2 , iff the terms of T_1 can be translated into the terms of T_2 so that all theorems of T_1 are theorems of T_2 . Two theories are mutually relatively interpretable iff they are relatively interpretable into each other.

true. Since the reasoning in no way trades on the specific case of incars, the following general point holds. For any type of object ϕ such that the would-be ontological pluralist holds that there are possible languages with a notion of existence such that Fs exist in the sense of this alternative notion of existence, the ontological pluralist will have to hold that some of these languages contain true atomic sentences of the form 'F(*t*)' where '*t*' purports to refer to a ϕ . By the same reasoning as earlier, the corresponding atomic sentence of English will also have to be true. (Maybe English does not contain the means for formulating a corresponding sentence, but in that case English is simply expressively impoverished.)

To embrace maximalism may seem to be to abandon deflationism. After all, maximalism constitutes a definite answer to the question of what objects there are. But I think maximalism can satisfy the deflationist's motivations. It is clear that deflationism, as a stance concerning metaphysical disputes, cannot be *identified* with maximalism: also a robust ontologist can adhere to maximalism. But this does not mean that the deflationist cannot embrace the view. Here, moreover, is why maximalism seems an attractive way for the ontological deflationist to go. Consider the following passage from Carl Ginet:

But is it incoherent to suppose a type of *material* thing whose constitutive matter could completely change from one time to another in a nonpiecemeal fashion? Could I not introduce such a type of material thing by definition? I might stipulate that a *monewment* is a material object performing the same sort of function as a monument (commemorating something) and such that monewment *x* at t_2 is the same monewment as monewment *y* at t_1 , if the matter constituting *y* at t_1 were subsequently destroyed all at once and thereafter new matter of pretty much the same sort and shape were put in the same place in order to restore the commemorating in the same fashion of whatever it was that monewment *y* at t_1 commemorated.²⁸

In a well-known critical discussion, Peter van Inwagen interprets Ginet as assuming that we are bringing objects into existence by our stipulations.²⁹ But it is more natural to take Ginet to assume that so long as the stipulation is logically coherent and the empirical facts cooperate (roughly: there are monuments), there are in fact monewments. (As I will put it, so long as *minimal conditions* are satisfied, there are monewments.) Generalizing the reasoning, we end up with a maximally decadent ontology, maximalism. The underlying reasoning can moreover be taken to

²⁸ Ginet (1985), p. 220.

²⁹ Van Inwagen (1990), p. 7.

rest on a deflationary assumption about ontology. Perhaps the best way to explain how this can be so is by employing some of the metaphors mentioned early on. The deflationist about ontology thinks of reality as an amorphous lump; the robust ontologist takes the world to have ontological ‘joints’. If reality has joints then there can fail to be monements even if the minimal conditions are satisfied. For the stipulation may fail to carve the world at its joints. But if, by contrast, reality is an amorphous lump, there is no way the stipulation can fail to carve the world at its joints: hence satisfaction of the minimal conditions is enough for the stipulation to be satisfied by something.³⁰ (Maximalism too faces serious problems. Let me briefly mention two. First, there is a problem about proper formulation: the above formulation in terms of consistency with the empirical facts being what they are at best fudges things. Second, there is a potential problem we might call that of incompatible objects: one might argue that there are two kinds of purported objects, the Fs and the Gs, such that the Fs satisfy maximalism’s conditions for existence and so do the Gs, but it is logically impossible for Fs and Gs to coexist. But discussion of those problems, and what we should take to be their upshot, falls outside the scope of this paper.)

V. CONCLUSION

The criticisms of ontological pluralism have not been criticisms of deflationism about ontology in itself – except on the assumption that deflationism about ontology is inextricably tied to ontological pluralism. I have cast doubt on this assumption. Specifically, I have suggested that the deflationist might embrace what I have called maximalism. There are other possibilities as well. Let me end by briefly describing them. One is to embrace total *nihilism*: the view that there are no objects at all.³¹ Another is to deny that questions about what there is have any literal content at all. Some theorists, prominently Stephen Yablo, have argued that normally when we utter ontologically committing sentences – sentences which require for their literal truth that certain objects exist, like “there is an even prime number” or “there are two tables in this room” – we really mean them only in a fictional spirit. We do not actually commit ourselves to the existence of these things. Rather, our utterances are only presented as true *on the assumption that the relevant objects exist*. This fictionalism in itself yields no deflationist conclusion about ontology. It leaves open that we can in principle leave the pretense behind and ask whether numbers or tables really exist. But Yablo at one point suggests (although does not even endorse this radical suggestion himself) that talk about what there is, like talk about ‘zillions’, entirely lacks a literal

³⁰ There are also more theoretical ways that maximalism can be supported on deflationist grounds. See my (manuscript).

³¹ Nihilism in this sense must not be confused with the less radical doctrine of mereological nihilism, the view that there are no *composite* objects.

meaning. There is no way to drop the pretense. This view, call it *absolute fictionalism*, would seem to be a kind of deflationism about ontology.³² Third, even if all positive deflationist views that say something distinctive about the nature of ontological questions are found wanting, there is a fairly comfortable fallback position for the would-be deflationist to fall back on. The would-be deflationist can say that even if ontological questions are genuine, there is no way to settle ontological questions, so the project of ontology is still futile. Call this agnosticism about ontology. The agnostic about ontology is perhaps not strictly a deflationist, since the agnostic acknowledges that ontological questions are genuine. But agnosticism may still be good enough for the purposes of the would-be deflationist: the criticism of the enterprise of ontology still stands. (Naturally, good skeptical questions can be raised also about the reasonableness of agnosticism. But consideration of those questions lies outside the scope of this paper.)

I do not mean to push for either nihilism, absolute fictionalism, or agnosticism. In my view, maximalism is the most interesting, and promising, route for the deflationist to take. My purpose in bringing up these other views is only to emphasize how many other routes there are for the deflationist about ontology besides ontological pluralism.

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³² Yablo (1998), p. 259.

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