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Ontic terms and metaontology, or: on what there actually is

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Abstract Terms such as 'exist', 'actual', etc., (hereafter, "ontic terms") are recognized as having uses that are not ontologically committing, in addition to the usual commissive uses. (Consider, e.g., the Platonic and the neutral readings of 'There is an even prime'.) In this paper, I identify five different noncommissive uses for ontic terms, and (by a kind of via negativa) attempt to define the commissive use, focusing on 'actual' as my example. The problem, however, is that the resulting definiens for the commissive 'actual' is itself equivocal between a commissive and a noncommissive reading. I thus consider other proposals for defining the commissive use, including two proposals from David Lewis. However, each proposal is found to be equivocal in the same way—and eventually I argue that it is impossible to define an ontic term unequivocally. Even so, this is not meant to overshadow that we can understand an ontic term as univocally commissive, in certain conversational contexts. I close by illustrating the import of these observations for the Hirsch–Sider debate in metaontology.

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Aristotle calls metaphysics the science of "being qua being," in contrast to the sciences of particular kinds of beings. However, scholars have asked whether 'being qua being' is the best way to describe Aristotle's topic.[1] For he soon focuses on that

[1] See Shields (2012) for an overview of the issue within Aristotle scholarship.

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which is universal or fundamental, i.e. a.k.a., "substance." But an inquiry into "being qua being" may sound more like an inquiry into what it is "be" in the first place, whether we are talking about the being of substance, or of anything else.[2]

Yet the general question of what it means to "be" is important to contemporary concerns. E.g., when an ontologist asks "Do composite objects exist?," the problem partly owes to an unclarity in the meaning of 'exist'. After all, the worldly facts are right in front of us—we *see* putative tables and chairs, and we know how physics describes such things. But the ontological question persists. The sense, then, is that the question arises not from insufficient observational data or the like, but partly from an inadequate grasp of 'exist' or of what it is to "exist."[3]

An ontologist might thus embark on a semantic or conceptual analysis, to better understand this and related terms like 'there is', 'real', 'actual', 'nonfictional', etc. Call these "ontic terms." Yet the ontologist should recognize that ontic terms in natural language also have *noncommissive* uses, besides their usual commissive uses. That is, there are sentences containing ontic terms which do *not* entail that the object actually exists (cf. Azzouni 2004, 2007, 2010, 2012).[4] As a familiar example, a schoolchild can assert 'there is an even prime' without committing to Platonism about the number 2. So if a semantic/conceptual analysis of ontic terms is called for, the ontologist must target the commissive use of ontic terms, specifically. That is the use of 'exist' we need clarity on, within the question "Do composites exist?"

In admitting a noncommissive use for 'there is', we need not reject Quine's (1948) view that the range of the quantifier is criterial for what is actual. For Quine's view pertains only to quantification in a *regimented* language. In contrast, 'there is', 'exist', etc., are terms of *natural language,* and the point about noncommissive uses is limited to terms "in the wild."[5] A sentence like 'there is an even prime' should thus make it plausible that, in natural language, ontic terms can be used noncommissively (Section 1 will offer further examples as well.)

To be clear, the claim is not that ontic terms are *ambiguous.* Whether such terms exhibit ambiguity, as opposed to polysemy or some kind of hidden indexicality, is not something I shall decide. Instead, I shall say in a rather neutral way that natural language ontic terms are *equivocal*.[6] But n.b., 'equivocal' does not denote *vague* terms as such; otherwise, almost any referring term may count as "equivocal."

[2] If anyone asks, "being qua being" also seems somewhat misleading in Heidegger. He too focuses on a particular *kind* of being, "dasein," i.e., the being of a person under some fundamental description (or some such thing).

[3] The issue also owes to unclarity in 'composite'. But that is not the whole of it. If we rightly define 'composite' as *x* is composite iff *x* is F (for some descriptor 'F'), this does not yet answer whether *there is* anything satisfying the definition.

[4] Azzouni in fact holds that all ontic terms in natural language are noncommissive, at least as concerns their context-invariant meaning. I adopt contrary assumption here, but only for expository reasons. Later, fn. 18 explains how this assumption can be lifted without loss.

[5] Still, Quine (1952) also holds that the ordinary use of 'real' is commissive: "Sheep are real, unicorns not…Such is the ordinary usage of the word 'real'" (p. 212). But to say that 'real' is ordinarily commissive is not to say it always is. And again, even if we depart from Quine here, that does not mean rejecting Quine's regimented quantifier.

[6] Cf. Fodor (2006, p. 99, n. 20).

The task, then, is to analyze the meaning of a commissive ontic term for the purposes of ontological inquiry. But here is where a problem arises. Prior to regimentation, the ontologist has only natural language to work in. In the first instance, the task is thus to wield the vulgate and somehow describe a more fine-grained meaning. Now in fact, we often can achieve this sort of thing. E.g., in the case of an ambiguous term like 'bank', we can define terms like 'bank_1' and 'bank_2' to express the different senses of the English. Yet with ontic terms, things are different. In particular, I shall argue that the different uses make it *impossible* to define an ontic term univocally on its commissive use.

This should not suggest that the commissive use is unintelligible or meaningless or the like. Often in context, an ontic term is patently understood as commissive (e.g., when the Pope asserts 'There is a God'). Still, if we cannot regiment a univocally commissive term, the consequences are notable. For one, we would be left without a formal criterion of ontological commitment. Relatedly, the language would be unable to univocally express Realism about x, for any x. And more broadly, there would be a failure to say in precise terms what it means to "be" as such. Insofar as that holds, an analysis of ontic terms offers little hope of clarifying the issue "Do composites exist?"

However, the discussion does not end on a thoroughly disparaging note. It is eventually shown that in a nonstandard yet pertinent sense, a criterion of ontological commitment remains possible, as well as statements of Realism. And "being qua being" will be tractable to some degree. For we will be able to define an ontic term that, in many contexts, is univocal enough for the purposes at hand. Often, achieving theoretical goals will not be hindered by some amount of imprecision. Even so, we will need to surrender the ambition of regimenting a strictly univocal commissive term. As a consequence, some ontic terms end up *unavoidably* problematic in some contexts. The final section illustrates this in relation to the Hirsch–Sider debate in metaontology.

1 Noncommissive uses

How might an ontic term be defined on its commissive use? To be sure, a regimented language can contain some primitive or undefined terms. So there is no categorical imperative to define any particular term. But as we noted above, for the ontologist's purposes it seems best to regiment if we can. Toward this end, this section proceeds by recording a variety of noncommissive uses in natural language, so to define the commissive use by a kind of via negativa. In the next section, the definition will then be critically evaluated.

Interestingly, sometimes an ontic term is used noncommissively simply because it has no ontological significance whatsoever. Take the following use of 'actually':

(1) Actually, artificial creamer is more unhealthy than coffee.

'Actually' in this case is just used as a kind of pragmatic device to indicate something unexpected—for (1) is equivalent to the same sentence minus 'actually'. The term is thus not used to signal the speaker's ontological commitments.[7]

[7] Ram Neta protests that if 'actually' is deleted, the sentence embeds differently in the antecedent of conditionals. But I suspect such an embedding forces a distinctly semantic role onto 'actually'.

The following use of 'really' also lacks a distinctly ontological meaning:

(2) The Fonz is really cool.

Here, 'really' functions as an adjectival intensifier akin to the word 'very'. It just indicates that the Fonz has the property to a relatively high degree; it does not signal the *bona fide* existence of anything.

A further ontologically neutral use occurs below:

(3) The Fonz rides a real bike, not a sportbike.[8]

The sentence deploys 'real' not to distinguish things of one ontological status from those of another. Instead, 'real' is used to separate motorcycles by a different category. (Such a use is what prompted Austin to call 'real' a "trouser word"[9]) Thus 'real' in (3) lacks a distinctively *ontological* meaning, since it determines an extension that does not include everything in the "Happy Days" model (such as the sportbikes). In contrast, if the Fonz asserts "To the great misfortune of the world, sportbikes exist," he is plausibly using the ontic term with an ontological meaning, where it ranges over everything in the model.

Henceforth, I use '+ON' to signal when a term has such a meaning. More perspicuously:

(+) An ontic term is +ON relative to a model *M* iff its extension is interpreted as the set D of all objects in *M*.

Thus, if the term is satisfied only by a proper subset of D, it is not +ON. It then has the meaning of a "trouser word" or something else that is not purely "ontological." One *might* say that a +ON ontic term is a term that can be defined by an unrestricted quantifier, in Lewis' (1986) sense.[10] However, I prefer to avoid this. For one, it prejudges that 'exist' is a quantifier in logical form. For another, an "unrestricted quantifier" is usually one that ranges over all possible worlds. In contrast, if a model's domain D = {Barack Obama}, then relative to that model, a +ON quantifier just has an actual person in its range.

In any case, if we are defining *commissive* ontic terms, (3) suggests they should be +ON at least. Yet this is not yet sufficient. For as Lewis taught us, ontic terms sometimes concern the "thick" ontological status of objects *in other possible worlds*.[11] Even the term 'actual' is used in this way by actual speakers, as Lewis himself grants (pp. 98–99). Take some actual person who is unsure whether the

[8] Although in the 1950s, the only sportbikes were the classic BMWs, which are as real as it gets.

[9] Austin (1959) makes other distinctions in the use of 'real'; see also Bennett's (1966) response to Austin. But they support the same kind of point, viz., that 'real' can be used to mark off various categories besides ontological categories. Yet 'real' is not the only ontic term with a "trouser" use; consider 'He has no actual brain once he starts drinking,' 'To have the courage to exist is rare', and 'There is no guitarist but Hendrix.'

[10] All references to Lewis will be to this work.

[11] Note that the point above is independent of Lewis' Realism about possibilia; context can relativize ontic terms to a Pegasus-world even assuming fictionalism about possible worlds (Cf. Rosen 1990; Nolan 2002).

Fonz is a flesh and blood person in "Happy Days," or just a legend. You can rightly say in a corrective tone that:

(4) The Fonz is an actual person.

Regardless, this does not mean that the Fonz is *actual*. That is so, even though you are an actual person using the +ON term 'actual' in relation to the Fonz. Yet there is no mystery here, since (4) in context means something like "The Fonz is an actual person in the world of 'Happy Days'."[12] (Of course, it is mysterious how we apparently refer to "the Fonz" at all. But beyond that, there is no mystery why he satisfies the +ON ontic term in this context).

In addition, a +ON ontic term sometimes remains equivocal along the commissive dimension, even when an actual person applies it to an actual, historical figure:

(5) Napoleon exists.

On one reading, (5) implies that Napoleon exists *now*, where 'exists' denotes what is presently actual. And, assuming people do not survive death, the sentence is false on that reading. But (5) also has a true reading, where Napoleon is contrasted with a fictional person—where Napoleon is put in a different ontological category than the Fonz.

Does the latter reading feature a commissive ontic term? Napoleon is not *really* actual in one sense. Yet since he is categorized as nonfictional, this ontologically "thick" suggestion seems to evidence a commissive use.

But in fact, 'commissive' is a term of art, and we could stipulate things either way. My interest in the commissive use, however, is that it is the *ontologically committing* use. For definitional purposes, then, it seems better to favor the tenseless use of such terms. Otherwise, presentism would be analytic! And that should not be prejudged here, much less prejudged by definition.[13] (In contrast, the "tenseless" use does not favor eternalism. A presentist is able to affirm (5) on the second reading, since this just says that Napoleon is tenselessly non-fictional, which is true now at least.

So on the second reading of (5), we shall say 'exists' is "commissive," even though there is one sense in which Napoleon does not really exist. But beyond this, it will be best to reserve 'commissive' for ontic terms used in their *strongest* sense, to put it roughly. Or in different rough terms, let us say a term like 'exist' is used commissively if it makes no sense to follow the assertion "*x* exists [tenseless]" with the question "Yes, but does *x really* exist [tenseless]?" The question makes no sense

[12] I assume here that world-relative uses of ontic terms include fiction-relative uses (where the term ranges over the world of a story). Bill Lycan reminds me that this is controversial; see e.g., Proudfoot (2006). So if preferred, fiction-relative uses can be separated out as a distinct kind of noncommissive use.

[13] This issue about time has a parallel regarding modality: It will be said that the "commissive" use occurs in sentences entailing the *actuality* of the object (i.e., in our spatiotemporal order). This would make Actualism analytic, pace Meinong or David Lewis. But there may well be Possibilist ontic terms that are ontologically committing. Yet here, I restrict myself to "commissive" terms on what there actually is.

if it is obvious that the ontic term has its strongest [tenseless] sense (as in the Pope example).

The discussion thus far indicates the following conditions on a "commissive" ontic term:

(D1) An ontic term is used commissively in a sentence S iff: (i) the term is +ON, and (ii) the (negation-free version of) S entails that the object is actual [tenseless].[14]

The "negation-free version of" S just is S minus any lexeme expressing the negation truth-function. Thus, (D1) will deem that that the atheist's assertion of 'God does not exist' uses 'exist' commissively, since not only is the term is +ON, but also 'God does exist' (i.e., the negation-free counterpart) entails that God is actual [tenseless]. Caveat: It may turn out that clause (i) is superfluous once we have clause (ii). This shall be addressed momentarily, but for now, it is included at the risk of redundancy.

However, it turns out that (i) and (ii) are insufficient for a commissive use. A further noncommissive use is possible, though it is a far less familiar use. Indeed, it is quite a mysterious use, though the linguistic evidence seems formidable. Consider:

(6) The Fonz exists as a figment of the imagination.

I take it that (6) is [tenselessly] true *in the actual world*. This may encourage Meinongians to say that (6) refers to an actual nonexistent, but let us ignore that. (6) at least does not imply that the Fonz is actual in the same way that you and I are. Quite the contrary, the sentence implies that the Fonz is *just pretend*. For that reason, 'exists' in (6) is noncommissive, even though (6) is actually, tenselessly true and the ontic term is +ON.[15]

Some may desire further explanation of the noncommissive sense in which the Fonz "exists", and I offer further explanation elsewhere.[16] But suffice it to say that 'exists' is used in a distinctive noncommissive way in (6). That linguistic point

[14] Since the "commissive" use is ontologically committing, (D1) suggests ontological commitment in the vernacular is explained by the semantics of an assertion. However, this is contentious; it has been denied by Azzouni (2004, 2007) as well as Martinich and Stroll (2007). Unfortunately, I cannot fully address this controversy here. However, I have some doubt about Martinich and Stroll's alternative account, where ontological commitment in the vernacular is due to the *pragmatic* or speech-act content of an assertion. This would not seem to be a complete story, since ontological commitment can occur in *thought* as well, where the notion of a speech-act has no application (Cf. Heal 1994; Green 2005 on Moore's paradox).

[15] Some may doubt that 'exists' in (6) is +ON. I would agree that 'exists as a figment of the imagination', taken as a whole, is a kind of "trouser phrase", yet one can still stipulate that 'exist' itself, within the phrase, is +ON. After all, per the earlier definition, this is just to stipulate that in the relevant model, 'exists' has the entire domain as its extension. And we saw that this alone does not make an ontic term ontologically committing. (It is weird to insinuate that "the Fonz" exists in a model for the *actual* world, but that is the Meinongian issue we are ignoring. .) So 'exist' here is noncommisive: Though the Fonz is said to exist, he exists as just a figment of the imagination (whatever that means). That is so, despite 'exist' being +ON and concerned with [tenseless] actuality.

[16] Parent MSa.

appears solid, even if the metaphysics behind the point is puzzling. Granted, (6) may be a case of speaking "loosely," but that is a red herring. The fact remains that the use is permitted within ordinary English; it therefore must be distinguished from the commissive use of 'exists'.

So in light of (6), the definition of 'commissive' needs a third clause:

(D2) An ontic term is used commissively in a sentence S iff: (i) the term is +ON, (ii) the (negation-free version of) S entails that the object is actual [tenseless], and (iii) the truth of S does not imply that the object is imaginary.

(Again, there may be some redundancy in this, but let that pass).

Before moving on, one might ask about the sentence mentioned at the outset:

(7) There is an even prime.

Is the ontic term commissive? Except in oddball cases, it is +ON—and certainly can be used commissively. But if (7) is asserted in an ordinary mathematics class, it will not imply Platonism about the number 2, even if the speaker happens to be a Platonist.[17] So in that case at least, the term is noncommissive (Granted, if Platonism ends up being necessarily true, then every sentence implies that 2 exists. But plausibly, whether an ontic term is "commissive" is then determined by some kind of relevance logic.)

When used noncommissively, 'There is' in (7) might not exemplify a *novel* kind of noncommissive use. If numbers turn out to be useful fictions, for instance, it might be like the ontic term in (6) (cf. Field 1980; Yablo 2001). Or, if numbers turn out to be mere possibilia, then 'There is' is relativized to a nonactual world, akin to 'actual' in (4) (I leave it as an exercise to consider other views of numbers.)

2 The commissive use

As the reader may have noticed, there is a real concern about (D2). The problem is that 'actual' occurs in clause (ii), and this itself is an ontic term. Not only does this make (D2) circular in a way, it also renders (D2) equivocal, given the different uses of 'actual'.

The point is *not* that 'actual' in clause (ii) is equivocal in context. In particular, in the context of this discussion, we understand well enough that it is meant to be used in its strongest [tenseless] sense. Yet here is where issues about regimentation enter. Again, the standard goal of regimentation is to construct a language free from all the unclarities, imprecisions, etc., that occur in natural language. That is so, especially

[17] Some hold that (7) is ontologically committing even in mundane uses. Schaffer's (2009) Aristotelianism may suggest that, for example. Unfortunately, I cannot discuss this detail. But if one sees (7) as inevitably committing, I would ask whether (1)-(6) are as well. (Mind you, the issue is not whether the relevant objects exist. It is whether the English invariably *commits* the speaker to their existence). It seems we should allow that, e.g., (2) can be used in a non-committal way. Yet then, why say differently in the case of (7)? Without further argument, insisting on a distinction seems under-motivated.

when the language creates philosophical puzzlement ("Do composite objects *exist*?") Standardly, this requires us to provide a univocal interpretation for the term. Yet that is where (D2) is lacking.

Since the issue really concerns regimentation, it will be more efficient to define the commissive use not for just any ontic term, but rather for a specialized term of the regimented language, say, the term '**actual**.' The aim then is to use whatever resources we have in the home language and somehow reach a univocal definition of '**actual**'.[18]

Let us therefore revise (D2) so that the *definiendum* is '**actual**', and begin exploring options for avoiding equivocation in clause (ii). We could of course specify that in clause (ii) 'actual' is used commissively:

(D3) *x* satisfies '**actual**' iff: (i) the term is +ON, (ii) the (negation-free version of) its containing sentence entails that the object is *actual* [tenseless], where '*actual*' is commissive, and (iii) it does not entail that the object is imaginary.

But naturally, since we are trying to define the "commissive" use of 'actual', it is not very helpful to use 'commissive' in the definition. (Again, 'commissive' is a mere term of art.)

The task is thus to find some univocal expression that is equivalent to '**actual**', to remedy clause (ii) and avoid circularity in the process. But note that if the expression we seek is *equivalent* to '**actual**', then the revised clause (ii) would clearly render clauses (i) and (iii) logically redundant. Still, (i) and (iii) are worth noting since they are informative of certain features of this use. But for brevity, they are hereafter omitted.

Of course, no progress is achieved by defining '**actual**' using other natural language ontic terms, as in the following:

(D4) *x* satisfies '**actual**' iff *x* exists.

(D4) would be equivocal in the same way that the others are. The point also applies to similar attempts using 'there is' and even 'nonfictional':

(D5) *x* satisfies '**actual**' iff there is a $y = x$.

(D6) *x* satisfies '**actual**' iff *x* is nonfictional.

Again, the terms on right hand side have a noncommissive reading, e.g., where they are relativized to a non**actual** world. Thus, if 'nonfictional' in (D6) is relativized to a world of Greek Myth, then the following is true:

(8) Pegasus is nonfictional.

And so without further elaboration, (D5) and (D6) also seem inadequate to define '**actual**'.

[18] This reveals why our starting assumption against Azzouni's neutralism is ultimately unnecessary (see n. 4). It is agreed that ontic terms in natural language are (at the very least) not always commissive. So regardless of neutralism, we must start with natural language and its noncommissive ontic terms, and somehow bushwhack our way to something commissive.

There is a different class of definitions for '**actual**' which would include:

(D7) *x* satisfies '**actual**' iff *x* is physical.

(D8) *x* satisfies '**actual**' iff *x* is in spacetime.

(D9) *x* satisfies '**actual**' iff *x* is mind independent.[19]

These are distinctive in that the satisfiers for '**actual**' are defined by their *metaphysical* rather than *ontological* status. That is, the satisfiers are identified by their *nature*, not by whether they really and truly exist. Yet because of that, (D7)–(D9) will be inadequate to define '**actual**'. For in other possible worlds, certain non**actual** objects have these natures; in a Pegasus-world, Pegasus is a physical, spatiotemporal, mind independent creature. Yet it remains the case that he is not **actual** (Yes, he is "actual at that world," but that is merely one way of being non**actual**). So without any further supplement, none of (D7)–(D9) appear adequate.[20]

Naturally, one might want to clarify that these definitions concern **actual** physical objects, **actual** objects in spacetime, etc. But this would be to engage in circularity. In such cases, circularity does not result in completely uninformative definitions; (D7) for instance would teach you that **actual** objects are physical. Yet '**actual**' would be doing the real defining work, since it alone suffices to determine the extension of '**actual**'—whereas 'physical', 'in spacetime', and 'mind independent' apparently do not.

3 A proposal from Lewis

Contemporary ontologists may be unaccustomed to the noncommissive 'actual'; yet even Lewis grants that it can be used as a "blanket" term for everything that exists (which for him, includes mere possibilia). But of course, that is not how he uses the term:

> I myself do not use 'actual' as a blanket term…I use it to mean 'this-worldly': It is an indexical, relative term, and as used by us it distinguishes our world and our worldmates from all the other worlds and their inhabitants. (p. 99)

What is also notable, however, is that Lewis attempts to define 'actual' using a different sort of strategy, viz., *ostension*. In the case of '**actual**', the result would be something like:

(D10) *x* satisfies '**actual**' iff *x* is in *this* world.

And assuming we all understand what *this* world is, (D10) would seem to fix the extension of '**actual**' in an unproblematic way.

[19] Notably, Azzouni (2004) appears committed to something like (D9). Though see his (2012, p. 234) where this is qualified in a pertinent way.

[20] (D9) is also troubled in (apparently) prejudging that qualia are not **actual**.

Again, I do not doubt that we can univocally understand 'in *this* world' as commissive. Yet it is crucial that (D10) leaves unspecified which world the demonstrative is fixed on. That means the sentence can express different propositions in English, some of which concern the **actual** world, and some of which do not. Thus, one can imagine a context centered on a world of Greek Myth, where (D10) coins a term of art for denizens of *that* world. But again, none of this shows that (D10) really is in danger of being misunderstood. Yet it does mean that (D10) fails to describe in strictly unequivocal terms what satisfies '**actual**'.[21]

This may seem unimportant, given that misunderstanding is not the inevitable result. Still, in some cases the ostensive definition *is* in danger of being misunderstood, even by speakers who understand it rather well. In fact, one such context occurs in the debate over Lewis' Modal Realism. Recall Lycan's (1979) objection that Lewis' Realism implies the absurdity that "all possibilities are actual." True, this would follow from Lewis' view if his use of 'actual' were equivalent to his use of 'exist'. Yet here is where Lewis clarifies that he does not use 'actual' as a "blanket term" to range over all possibilia (even though he thinks these possibilities exist). Whether this is a sufficient clarification may not be obvious (see Linsky and Zalta 1991; King 1993; Lycan 1994, Parent MSb). But for present purposes, we only need observe that the confusion arises with Lewis' 'actual', despite the ostensive definition: Although the ostensive definition communicates that the term denotes objects in *this* world, an unfortunate unclarity remains regarding what "*this* world" is.

4 Another proposal from Lewis

The visit with Lewis-scholarship reveals that the equivocal status of 'actual' is not an idle concern. One might have thought that *strictly speaking* the term is equivocal, but within a context it is not. Yet there are contexts where it can remain equivocal, and philosophically important contexts at that. Accordingly, although I have been selling the issue as one for regimentation, it bears on other philosophical matters as well.

However, Lewis offers us another way to characterize a commissive ontic term. In his Preface, he writes:

> [S]ome things exist here at our world, other things exist at other worlds…You might say that strictly speaking, only this-worldly things *really exist*; and I am ready enough to agree; but on my view this 'strict' speaking is *restricted* speaking, on a par with saying that all the beer is in the fridge and ignoring most of all the beer there is…If I am right, other-worldly things exist…though often it is very sensible to ignore them and quantify restrictedly over our worldmates. (p. 3)

[21] Instead of '*this*', Lewis sometimes uses the pronoun 'our' to the same effect, as in '*our* world.' Yet since 'our' is contextually shifty in the manner of a demonstrative, the definition will be equivocal either way.

The idea would be to define a commissive ontic term as a *restricted quantifier*—one that does not range over all possibilia but just over this-worldly things. But as the phrase 'this-worldly' makes clear, restricting the quantifier rests on the same ostensive strategy used in (D10), hence, the difficulty with (D10) occurs here as well.

However, a further strategy is suggested by Lewis' *iteration* of ontic terms. Instead of just using 'exist', Lewis goes commissive by composing two ontic terms together in the phrase 'really exist'. And this iterative phrase may seem univocally commissive.

But in fact, 'really exist' and similar compound ontic terms can be rendered ontologically non-committal, just as much as any single term. Suppose for instance someone is adamant that Pegasus is merely imagined by Bellerophon within the Greek myth. In an insistent tone, we might respond that in fact:

(9) Pegasus really exists.

(10) Pegasus is not imaginary but an actual creature.

(11) Pegasus is an actual, nonfictional being that really and truly exists.

Again, in the right context (9) means that Pegasus really exists *in a world of Greek Myth*. An especially striking case of this is when we are discussing the "play within a play" in Act V.i of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Suppose someone were to insist that there is no lion in the nested play. You might then respond:

(12) PI'm *not making this up; there really and truly is* a lion, Snug.

Again, in the right context, your statement is true, even though it implies the existence of an imaginary object, an object that is imaginary even in Oberon and Titania's world![22]

5 A generalized argument

It thus seems Lewis has not defined a commissive (atomic or compound) ontic term in an unequivocal way. But he may not be to blame for the circumstances. We have been canvassing options for defining the commissive use in an extensionally adequate, unequivocal, and noncircular manner. Yet there is a more general argument to the effect that such a definition is impossible. As a preliminary, it can be established that:

(13) To univocally define a commissive ontic term, one must employ a univocally commissive ontic term.

[22] One may protest that a speaker has no reason to iterate ontics, other than to go commissive. So we *should* see iteration as commissive. Yet redundancy is always possible in English, even if a speaker has no reason to do it.

The argument is this: Suppose for conditional proof that some sentence univocally and correctly defines a commissive ontic term. Then, the *definiendum* must be univocally equivalent to the *definiens*. Therefore, if the *definiendum* is univocally commissive, so too is the *definiens*. QED.

Next, we can observe that *every* ontic term seems equivocal. For context can always take the ontological "bite" out of an ontic term, as is evident with 'There is an even prime', or by relativizing the term to a non**actual** world. After all, in these ontologically neutral contexts, it is not as if we are *forbidden* from using some of these terms. However: If all ontic terms are equivocal on the commissive–noncommissive dimension, then given (13), it would follow that *a univocal definition of a commissive ontic term is impossible.*[23]

Some have worried that the reasoning generalizes too readily, so that other equivocal terms will turn out to be indefinable as well. I am not aware of any convincing case of this however. As noted earlier, usually there is no problem in defining an equivocal term in a univocal way, e.g. 'bank_1' may be defined unequivocally as denoting the land bordering a river (Terms in this may be *vague*, but as noted earlier, 'equivocal' here does not denote vague terms as such).

Granted, something akin to (13) is true of all terms and not just ontic terms: Anytime a term is defined univocally, it is because the *definiens* is a univocal equivalent. But the problem is that, unlike 'bank_1', *there is no univocal equivalent* for '**actual**' in the vernacular. Any of the candidates will themselves be ontic terms, but as such they can be used in both the commissive and noncommissive ways.

6 Understanding and primitive ontic terms

The impossibility of an adequate definition has noteworthy consequences. For one, this looks bad for a formal criterion of ontological commitment. The usual idea is to read off ontological commitments from formulae containing a commissive ontic term.[24] Yet if the ontic term can be read as noncommissive, such a criterion will be frustrated.[25] The flip side is that, in the absence of such a term, no sentence of the language could univocally express *Realism* about an entity, property, relation, or what have you (And since Anti-Realism is the denial of Realism, the point also applies to Anti-Realism).

[23] This may remind one of Thomasson's (2009) view about 'thing' on its "alleged neutral" or "properly ontological" use. Thomasson holds that there are no application conditions for this use of the quantificational idiom, and so sentences using 'thing' in this way end up with an indeterminate truth-value. However, I am not pressing for any semantic indeterminacy. The commissive use of 'actual' may have a perfectly determinate meaning; my point is just that we cannot *articulate* what its meaning is in a univocal definition.

[24] Again, the commissive term here need not be a quantifier; it can be a predicate, per Azzouni (2004).

[25] Even so, one might attempt to identify the ontological commitments of a theory by specifying its standard or "intended" model. Yet, I think this endeavor is also problematic; see Parent (2009), ch. 1.

To repeat, none of this shows that the different readings of ontic terms are conflated in context.[26] We *can* distinguish the two readings of 'There is an even prime'. Yet if there is no defining what it is we understand, then our understanding cannot be a matter of knowing a univocal definition. Ontic terms may thus exemplify Wittgenstein's (1953) view "there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*" (§201). But the point is shown not using skeptical possibilities for meanings (cf. Kripke's 'plus' vs. 'quus'). In the case of ontic terms, the alternatives are *relevant* alternatives, for the noncommissive uses regularly occur in natural language.

Be that as it may, the Wittgensteinian idea also leads to a more positive point. Namely, in one sense the regimented language *can* contain a univocal ontic term. For if the term is univocally understood as commissive in context, then there will be no real cause for concern—even though the term will be equivocal, strictly speaking. On this view, then, '**actual**' could be introduced into the regimented language as follows:

(D11) *x* satisfies '**actual**' iff it is *really* actual.

Again, though the *definiens* can be used noncommissively, we all realize it is meant to be used in its strongest [tenseless] sense. So we might just let (D11) stand, and rely on various cues (e.g., the iteration of ontic terms, the use of italics) to prompt the appropriate reading.[27]

Naturally, if '**actual**' is allowed into the language, then Realism and Anti-Realism are once again expressible. And a criterion of ontological commitment also becomes possible. (D3), moreover, can stand a partial analysis of "being qua being"—even though the logical core of "being" is not stated univocally. Further, part of our constructed language, the part which signals ontological commitment, is a part that must be left somewhat unregimented.

I take such limitations to be nontrivial. Our non-definitional grasp of a commissive term is good enough for many purposes, yet it is insufficient for some. E.g., as concerns the Lewis–Lycan debate, I doubt that (D11) would settle the issue there. That is so, even though we all have some substantive understanding of what Lewis means by 'actual'.

Nonetheless, an ontic term which is *understood* univocally works just as well, in many cases. And given the expressive power this adds to the language, it would be perverse to despair of the situation rather than include a somewhat unregimented element.

Still, we saw the limitation this implies for modal metaphysics. Moreover, it seems that any Realist/Anti-Realist debate will be limited in the same way. Whether ontologists are discussing mathematics, morality, modality, meaning, or mind, ontic

[26] Azzouni (2007) also stresses that terms can be used absent definitions (e.g., color terms).

[27] Of course for Wittgenstein, understanding '**actual**' would not be a matter of knowing the interpretation at (D11) either. Instead, (D11) might define a commissive ontic term for the regimented language, in as much as this is possible. Yet since (D11) is equivocal, I cannot ultimately protest if it is omitted and '**actual**' is instead left as primitive, assuming it is univocally understood.

terms have the potential to become hazy and out of control. And in those cases, it cannot be reined in by some unequivocal definition.

7 An application: metaontology

This last thought might be seen as vindicating Hirsch's (2005, 2007, 2008, 2009) superficialist view in metaontology—where ontological disputes, e.g., in mereology, are seen as merely verbal. Certainly without a univocal definition, a mereological nihilist and her opponent can talk past each other. Yet nothing here shows it *has* to be that way. Hirsch, however, claims that principles of charity favor such pessimism, since these would have us interpret both sides as speaking the truth in their respective "languages." And once they are so interpreted, the disagreement over composite objects is simply based on a misunderstanding. For such reasons, Hirsch thinks no *ontological* matter is in dispute; rather "[t]he only real question at issue is which language is (closest to) plain English" (2005, 70).

In line with his (2002) "quantifier variance," Hirsch assumes that his "real question" concerns the use of 'exist' and other ontic terms in plain English. In Section I, however, we saw that ontic terms in ordinary English are used in *multiple* ways, many of which have no ontological significance. Hirsch must therefore mean that the question is: Which use of 'exist' is (closest to) the *commissive* use? Yet if so, then Hirsch's position is negatively affected. He is correct to say that in plain English, assertions of the form "*x* exists" often occur where '*x*' is replaced by a term for a composite. But that is *irrelevant* if 'exists' is used in a noncommissive way (Indeed, except in certain religious discussions, speakers seem rarely concerned to say what *really* exists).

The upshot, it seems, is that even Hirsch must take up Sider's (2009, 2011, forthcoming) "ontologese gambit," where ontological disputes feature an ontic term that is strictly interpreted as commissive (cf. Sider's term '**existence**'). Further, it seems entirely possible to share an understanding of such a term. (Recall again the Pope example.) And when that is so, an ontological debate need not have the disputants talking past each other. Rather, they will be debating the substantive issue of whether composites satisfy a strictly commissive term, i.e., whether composites *really exist.* Accordingly, the dispute would hardly concern the ordinary usage of ontic terms (if only because "*the* ordinary usage" rests on a mistake).

Sider's opposing view is not unproblematic, however. He takes himself to define the commissive term '**existence**' (2009, §§10–11), yet this is the kind of thing that now seems troubled. Sider's program may remain workable; after all, an explicit definition is not needed to understand '**existence**' as univocally commissive. Although, this depends a bit on what 'workable' means. It is workable as an *anti-superficialist* view, for it illustrates how ontologists can co-ordinate on understanding an ontic term commissively. But it seems less workable if the term '**existence**' is meant to help *resolve* the nihilism dispute. (I am unsure whether Sider intended as much, but the point is worth making regardless.) After all, it seems the nihilism dispute persists not because it is up for grabs whether 'exist' is used commissively. Rather, the debate continues because it is simply unclear whether composites satisfy

the commissive use—i.e., it unclear whether composites **exist**. Initially we might assert the **existence** of tables and chairs, but physics calls that into question given that such ordinary objects are mostly empty space. This sort of doubt can then be reiterated, so that the existence of protons gives way to the existence of their subatomic parts, etc., until we reach mereological simples. And the irony is that an ontology of simples is also contentious. Even here we can sensibly ask "do simples *really* exist?"

If the meaning of '**existence**' could be clarified further, perhaps that would dispel the debate. Whether composites **exist** could be resolved in the manner of whether tomatoes are a "fruit," namely, by consulting a suitable definition. But in the case of '**exist**' no such definition is forthcoming, and that may be the real reason why ontological debates persist. Nothing in this vindicates Hirsch's superficialism—but nor is it flattering to Sider's term '**existence**'. If anything, the results here make plausible a certain kind of *quietism*. Though far be it from me to say such a thing.

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