

## Ways of Being

Joshua Spencer

### *Abstract*

Ontological pluralism is the view that there are ways of being. Ontological pluralism is enjoying a revival in contemporary metaphysics. We want to say that there are numbers, fictional characters, impossible things, and holes. But, we don't think these things all exist in the same sense as cars and human beings. If they exist or have being at all, then they have different ways of being. Fictional characters exist as objects of make-believe and holes exist as absences in objects. But, human beings and cars exist in a much more robust sense. What are ways of being? Why should we believe in them and what should we believe about them? This short essay provides an overview of the recent revival of ways of being and explores some of the surrounding issues.

### *Introduction*

There are three numbers between 6 and 10. Few would contest that. But, it immediately seems to follow that there are numbers. That is, that numbers exist. Even those of us who are willing to accept this conclusion are reluctant to admit that numbers exist in the same way that we exist. We tend to think that if numbers exist, if they have being, then the being that they have is different from the being that we have. But, that suggests that there are different *ways of being*.

Our intuitions are strong. In addition to numbers, philosophers have argued for the existence of other abstract objects like sets, properties, and propositions; they have argued for the existence of creatures of myth, fiction, imagination, and hallucination; the existence of merely possible and even impossible objects; and of almost nothings like holes, cracks and shadows.<sup>1</sup> In each of these cases, there are strong theoretical reasons to believe in these extraordinary entities. But, we are still reluctant to admit that any of them exist in the same way that ordinary objects exist or in the same way that organisms exist. It really seems that if any of these entities exist, if any of them have being, then their being is different from that of cars, crates and tables and also different from that of cats, cranes, and turtles. If our strong intuitions are right, then insofar as we have reason to believe in extraordinary entities, we also have reason to believe in ways of being.

The thesis that there are ways of being, also known as *Ontological Pluralism*, is undergoing a bit of a revival.<sup>2</sup> This revival consists mostly of explications of the view, defenses of the view from recent objections, and further developments of the view. In this essay, I will present a coherent theory of ways of being, then I will discuss the recent defenses of ways of being, and I will outline some of the recent positive developments of the view.

### *Ways of Being*

The view that there are ways of being, as formulated by those who are engaged in the current revival, is usually a view about existential quantification. In its most crude form, there are ways of being if and only if there are several existential quantifiers. But, it is a rather mundane fact that there are several existential quantifiers. In addition to ‘there is’, English includes quantifiers like ‘someone’, ‘something’, ‘somewhere’, and ‘sometime’. So, in order to avoid the mundane, the ways of being defender must revise the crude thesis in some way or other.

Kris McDaniel (2009, 2010a, 2010b) and Jason Turner (2010, forthcoming) have made such revisions by employing the view that some expressions in a language are special. Following Theodore Sider (2009, 2011), McDaniel and Turner say that these special expressions “carve nature at the joints” and thereby transparently convey the ultimate structure of reality; Since metaphysicians are trying to uncover the ultimate structure of reality, they should aim to express theories that employ only these special terms. In order to remain neutral about any particular theory of specialness, I’ll follow Ben Caplan (2011) in calling those expressions *elite expressions*.<sup>3</sup>

With the notion of an elite expression in our toolbox, we can now formulate a non-mundane version of the ways of being thesis:

*Ways of Being 1:* Necessarily, there are ways of being if and only if there is more than one elite existential quantifier.

Although this seems like a fairly decent characterization of the view, McDaniel (2010a) and Turner (2010, forthcoming) both believe that it’s flawed. In addition to ordinary singular existential quantifiers, there are also plural existential quantifiers. In English, for example, we have the singular quantifier ‘something’ and the

plural quantifier 'some things'. For all we know, those two quantifiers and no others may be elite. But, if *Ways of Being 1* were correct and just those two quantifiers were elite, then there would be ways of being.

According to McDaniel and Turner, however, there would not be ways of being in such a circumstance. After all, they claim, those two quantifiers have exactly the same domains, namely *things*. In light of the objection presented above, McDaniel and Turner suggest that we revise the ways of being thesis to exclude such counterexamples:

*Ways of Being 2*: Necessarily, there are ways of being if and only if there is more than one elite existential quantifier and the domains of those elite quantifiers are distinct from one another.

Although this revised thesis successfully avoids the objection presented above, I am not sure that it's superior to *Ways of Being 1*. McDaniel (2009) considers the possibility of a view according to which the domains of elite existential quantifiers overlap. In his example, there are four elite existential quantifiers: one pair of quantifiers for particulars and universals and another pair of quantifiers for the actual and the merely possible. The domains of the quantifiers in the first pair overlap with the domains of the quantifiers in the second pair. There are particulars that are actual and there are particulars that are merely possible.

Moreover, there are universals that are actual and there are universals that are merely possible. This view is perfectly consistent with *Ways of Being 2*, but I can imagine a similar view that isn't. Suppose that there are at least two elite existential quantifiers, one for particulars and one for spatial regions. Since spatial regions are particulars, the domains of these two quantifiers overlap. But, since some particulars are not spatial regions, their domains are distinct. Although there are particulars that are not also spatial regions, those particulars might have failed to exist. If there had been no particulars that were not spatial regions, then the domain of the particular existential quantifier would have been identical to the domain of spatial existential quantifier. Moreover, contrary to *Ways of Being 2*, it seems that there would still have been at least two ways of being. I am not sure whether the kind of view suggested above is plausible. But, if it is, then we have some reason to prefer *Ways of Being 1* over *Ways of Being 2*.

Jason Turner (2010) has pointed out that we need not focus on existential quantification to capture something like ways of being. Turner considers a view, inspired by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, according to which no metaphysical theory that contains only elite expressions also contains quantifiers. He suggests that

we might, nevertheless, still capture a view according to which things exist in different ways by focusing on names. One obvious idea is that there are, as we might call them, Neo-Tractarian ways of being if and only if there is more than one elite name. But, if each individual name in the theory is elite, then each individual named will have its own way of being. This may well be a ways of being view, but what we'd like to capture is the view that some things, properties say, all have one way of being and other things, individuals, all have a different way of being. Turner suggests that a metaphysical theory may employ both elite expressions and elite fonts or colors for those expressions. For example, a theory might include names of individuals written in one elite font and names of properties written in another elite font. On this view, individuals and properties would have different ways of being.<sup>4</sup>

It's clear, then, that there are a number of ways to cash out the view that there are ways of being. Some ways of cashing it out focus on elite existential quantifiers and others focus on elite referring expressions like names. There are still others, which we have not formulated, that focus on elite existential predication.<sup>5</sup> Each of these views belongs to a single family of views; a family of ways of being views. Most of the contemporary discussion focuses on quantification. But, other family members are worthy of consideration as well. Moreover, the connections between the members of this family have not yet been explored. It is worth wondering about what connects the members of the family and in what way they resemble one another.

### *Elite Expressions*

The discussion in the previous section relied heavily on the notion of an elite expression. But, we have not yet said much about what an elite expression is. So far we've said that elite expressions "carve nature at the joints" and thereby transparently convey the ultimate structure of reality. And we've said that since metaphysicians are trying to uncover the ultimate structure of reality, they should aim to express theories that employ only elite expressions. But, could more be said?

One thought, had by both McDaniel and Turner, is that elite expressions are those that express what David Lewis calls *perfectly natural properties* (1983, 1984, 1986). According to Lewis, perfectly natural properties are those properties the sharing of which ground objective qualitative similarity between objects,

and those properties the instantiations of which ultimately ground all facts. Consider the property *being an electron*. That property is (probably) perfectly natural. The objective qualitative similarity of electrons is partly grounded in the fact that they share the property *being an electron*. Moreover, *being an electron* is among those properties the instantiations of which ultimately ground all facts. On the other hand, the complex property *being an electron or a former member of The Beatles* is not perfectly natural. Those things that have that complex property do not thereby objectively qualitatively resemble one another. After all, an electron and Ringo both have *being an electron or a former member of The Beatles*, but they don't resemble one another just because they have that property. Moreover, *being an electron or a former member of The Beatles* is not amongst those properties that ground all facts. If there are perfectly natural properties, then it seems likely those properties form some of the joints in nature that elite expressions are supposed to carve. So, it seems natural to say that elite expressions are those that express perfectly natural properties.

However, at this point, I think there is a serious worry for the defender of ways of being. The worry is that if there are ways of being, then there are several elite existential quantifiers. But, supposing that elite expressions are elite because they express perfectly natural properties, it follows that those elite existential quantifiers express perfectly natural properties. Perfectly natural properties, however, seem to be characterized by a particular role: sharing of them grounds objective qualitative similarity. But, even if we accept that existential quantifiers express properties, the sharing of those properties doesn't ground objective qualitative similarity. So, there are no ways of being.

Of course, the argument above relies on the claim that existential quantifiers don't express properties that ground objective qualitative similarity. But, why believe that? Well, suppose that existential quantifiers do express properties. Maybe they express properties of properties, properties had by other properties just in case those other properties are instanced (by entities in the domain of quantification). Assuming that 'something is tabby' and 'something is tall' express truths in English, the meaning of the ordinary English 'something' is a property had by the properties *being tabby* and *being tall*. But, those properties do not seem to be objectively qualitatively similar to one another, at least not so in virtue of the fact that both are instanced. So, it seems that the sharing of the property expressed by 'something' does not ground objective qualitative similarity. Moreover, if sharing the property expressed by 'something' grounds objective

qualitative similarity, then if the property *being tabby* had had no instances, it would have been objectively qualitatively different from the way it actually is. But that seems false. The property *being tabby* would not have been objectively qualitatively different from the way it actually is if it had not been instanced. It would merely have been relationally different. So, sharing the property expressed by 'something' does not ground objective qualitative similarity. Moreover, these arguments don't seem to turn on the fact that we've focused on the *English* word 'something'. So, we may conclude that existential quantifiers don't express properties the sharing of which grounds objective qualitative similarity.

It looks, then, like ways of being might be sunk (if elite expressions are those that express perfectly natural properties). Is there any hope for ways of being? I think so. The strength of the above objection depends on how we think the meaning of 'perfectly natural property' is fixed. If we think that the conditions introduced by David Lewis are each necessary conditions for a property to be perfectly natural, then it must be that perfectly natural properties ground objective qualitative similarity and the argument above seems sound. However, if we think that the conditions introduced by Lewis are merely sufficient conditions, then we should be open to the possibility that there are perfectly natural properties that do not ground objective qualitative similarity. In that case, the argument is unsound.

Of course, the above discussion assumed that elite expressions were those that expressed perfectly natural properties. But, that's not the only option available to the ways of being defender. Jonathan Schaffer (2004) has suggested that we should distinguish those properties the sharing of which grounds objective qualitative similarity from those the instantiations of which ground all the facts. The former properties are called *scientific properties* and the latter are called *fundamental properties*. The ways of being theorist ran into trouble, when he assumed that elite expressions express perfectly natural properties. But, that was because perfectly natural properties were supposed to be properties the sharing of which grounds objective qualitative similarity. So, maybe the ways of being defender would be better off saying that elite expressions express fundamental properties, those properties the instantiations of which ground all facts.<sup>6</sup>

Is it plausible to think that some existential quantifiers express fundamental properties? Some might think so. There is a fact about exactly how many objects there are in the universe; it is a fact, for example, that there are exactly  $n$  objects in the universe. We could state that fact by saying that there is an  $x_1 \dots x_n$  in the

universe, each of which is distinct from one another and anything in the universe must be one of them. But, in order to say *that* we had to employ an existential quantifier. So, it seems that the distribution of fundamental properties that ground that fact must include whatever property is expressed by the existential quantifier. Whether or not this argument is sound, it certainly makes it plausible to think that if existential quantifiers express properties, then some existential quantifier expresses a fundamental property.<sup>7, 8, 9</sup>

### *Defending Ways of Being*

The view that there are ways of being can't simply be dismissed as incoherent. So, if one is to reject the view, one must find a strong argument against it. Several arguments have been formulated and discussed in the literature. I will consider a couple of the strongest arguments against ways of being and the responses that defenders of ways of being have given to those arguments.

The first argument is the Disjunctive Quantifier Argument, which is discussed by both McDaniel (2009) and Turner (2010). Note that we can always use any number of existential quantifiers to define a single existential quantifier that has a more inclusive domain than the originals. For example, with 'something' and 'someone' we can define a more inclusive existential quantifier 'some entity' as follows.

D1: 'some entity is F' =df 'either someone is F or something is F'

But, since any defined existential quantifier is more inclusive than the originals, the originals can't be elite. So, there can't be more than one elite existential quantifier and, hence, there can't be any ways of being. We can formulate this argument as follows:

- (1) For any two or more existential quantifiers  $e_1 \dots e_n$ , there is a single quantifier  $e_{1\dots n}$  that is more inclusive than any of  $e_1 \dots e_n$ .
- (2) For any two or more existential quantifiers  $e_1 \dots e_n$ , if there is a single quantifier  $e_{1\dots n}$  that is more inclusive than any of  $e_1 \dots e_n$ , then none of  $e_1 \dots e_n$  is elite.
- (3) So, no two or more existential quantifiers are elite.
- (4) If no two or more existential quantifiers are elite, then there are no ways of being.
- (5) So, there are no ways of being.

The argument is valid and line (1) seems fairly strong. Moreover, line (4) is true given the account of ways of being introduced above. So, the only hope for the defender of ways of being is to reject line (2).

To show that line (2) is mistaken, we just have to look at other elite expressions. Consider predicates. Anytime we have two or more predicates, we can use them to define a more inclusive predicate. Consider 'is an electron' and 'is a gluon'. We can define the more inclusive predicate 'is a gluotron' as follows:

D2: 'x is a gluotron' =df 'either x is an electron or x is a gluon'

But, we don't think that 'is an electron' and 'is a gluon' can't be elite just because we can define a more inclusive predicate using them. In fact, a perfect parody of the argument against ways of being would show that there's just one elite predicate. But, clearly there's not just one elite predicate. There is no correlation between the inclusiveness of a predicate and whether or not it's elite. Similarly, we should not assume that there is a correlation between the inclusiveness of a quantifier and whether or not it's elite. Hence, we should not assume that line (2) is true.<sup>10</sup>

Another serious argument against ways of being is due to Peter van Inwagen (1998). Van Inwagen notes that there is a tight connection between existential quantification and counting or numbering. When we say there are three things, that the number of things is three, we are saying that *there are* an x, y, and z all distinct from one another and nothing else. So, given that tight connection, if there are different ways of being, perhaps a way of being for properties and a way of being for individuals, then there are different ways of numbering, one way of numbering individuals and one way of numbering properties. But, if there are different ways of numbering, then there are different kinds of numbers that correspond to those different ways of numbering. But, it seems absurd to say that there are different kinds of numbers. After all, we aren't using a different kind of number when we say that there are six people in the room than when we say there are six properties of gold. So, van Inwagen concludes, there are no ways of being.

McDaniel (2009) seems to suggest that when we number things, we use the most inclusive quantifier. Since there is only one most inclusive quantifier, there are not different ways of numbering. Hence, McDaniel seems to reject the inference from there are many ways of being to there are many ways of numbering. However, if this is McDaniel's response it doesn't seem very strong. After all, we'd like to be able to say how many things there are in the universe. But, as metaphysicians, we are supposed to be striving to express a



theory that contains only elite expressions. If the most inclusive quantifier is not an elite expression, then, as metaphysicians, we won't be able to use it and hence won't be able to say how many things there are in the universe.

Turner (2010) has an alternative response. He says that there *are* different ways of numbering, but, accepting *that* doesn't imply that there are different numbers. Turner's suggestion requires us to distinguish between numbering relations and the numbers themselves. When we say that there are six people in the room, we say that there is a relation between the people in the room and the number six. That relation is an *individual* numbering relation. When we say there are six properties of gold, we say that there is a numbering relation between the properties of gold and six. That relation is a *property* numbering relation. So, there are two numbering relation. But, there is only one number six.<sup>11</sup>

#### *In Favor of Ways of Being*

Of course, defending ways of being from objections is one thing, arguing for ways of being is quite another. Kris McDaniel (2009, 2010a, 2010b) has taken up the challenge, though, and presented some very strong arguments in favor of ways of being. McDaniel (2010) distinguishes between three different strategies that people have used to argue for ways of being: *Theological*, *Phenomenological*, and *ontological*. In this short section I will outline some of these arguments.

The *theological strategy* proceeds from some thesis about the nature of God to the conclusion that there must be ways of being. For example, on some views, God is absolutely different from any created thing. So, since God has being and created things have being too, it seems to follow that the being God has is different from the being created things have (McDaniel 2010a).

The *phenomenological strategy* proceeds from some thesis about our experience to the conclusion that there are ways of being. For example, certain things are given to us in our experience. Among those things that are given to us are logical concepts like *negation*, and *existential quantification*. But, claims the defender of the phenomenological strategy, different ways of being are given to us in our experience as well. From our experience, we are given one kind of being for living creatures, one kind for tools, and another for abstract objects (McDaniel 2010)

However, the most attractive argument strategy is the *ontological strategy*. This strategy proceeds from the fact that there are fundamentally different kinds of objects that behave fundamentally differently to the conclusion that there are ways of being. We can see how this strategy works by thinking about material objects, regions of space-time and properties.

Being is a relatively topic neutral. Many different kinds of entities have being. Material objects have being and so do regions of space-time. But, when a material object has being, it has *being-at* a region of space-time. In other words, a material object's being is relativized to space-time. But, a space-time region's being is not relativized to a region of space-time. Similarly, consider properties. On one popular view, properties are located where they are instanced and they depend on the things that instantiate them. On this view, properties have *being-in* objects.

As McDaniel (2010a) points out being is *systematically variably polyadic*. It is *variably polyadic* in the sense that sometimes it is relativized and sometimes it is not. And its variability is *systematic* in the sense that whenever we are talking about the being of material objects, we are talking about *being-at*; whenever we are talking about the being of properties, we are talking about *being-in*; and whenever we are talking about the being of regions, we are just talking about *being*. This all suggests that material objects have one way of being; properties have another way of being, and space-time regions have a third way of being.

### *Advancing Ways of Being*

The recent work on ways of being has only just begun. In addition to considering the arguments for and against ways of being, we should consider how a ways of being view might be developed. How, for example, do the various ways of being interact with one another? How are ways of being related to other concepts? Let's briefly consider some almost nothings: holes.

Kris McDaniel (2010b) has noted that we have a strong intuition that holes have being, but a much lesser being than we have. But, what kind of being do holes have and in what sense is it lesser? One idea is that holes have *being-in*. After all, in order for there to be a hole, it must be a hole in something. But, if holes have *being-in*, then they seem to have the same kind of being as properties. However, we think that the being holes have is not just a lesser kind of being, but a much lesser kind of being than that of ordinary objects. If

properties have a lesser kind of being, it is not that much lesser. So, it seems that the being of holes is not the same as the being of properties.

We might introduce a new notion of being for holes. McDaniel calls the being that holes have *being-by-courtesy*. The things that have *being-by-courtesy* are things that fall under no elite existential quantifier whatsoever. However, it is still true, in some sense, to say that they are. Anything that has *Being-by-courtesy* has a lesser kind of being than those things that fall under elite quantifiers. So, we can capture the intuition that holes have being, but their being is lesser than that of material objects and that of properties. One strange fact about things that have *being-by-courtesy* is that in a sense they have being, but they have no way of being. They have being because it is true to say that they are. But, they have no way of being because they don't fall under an elite quantifier. It's becoming clear that as we explore deeper into the realm of being, we'll encounter more strange and wonderful views.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Almost nothings' is a term introduced by Kris McDaniel (2010b). It seems pretty apt.

<sup>2</sup> McDaniel (2009, 2010a, 2010b), Turner (2010) and Caplan (2011) all briefly survey some of the historical figures who seem to believe in ways of being.

<sup>3</sup> In some places, McDaniel (2009) uses a comparative notion rather than an absolute notion of eliteness. I think, though, that McDaniel's preferred formulation of the ways of being thesis involves the absolute notion.

<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, one could avoid introducing elite fonts by using elite plural referring expressions. If a metaphysical theory uses one plural referring expression to pick out properties, perhaps *those<sub>p</sub>*, and another to pick out individuals, perhaps *those<sub>i</sub>*, then we might say that individuals and properties have different ways of being.

<sup>5</sup> Kris McDaniel's (2010a) discussion comes close to considering a view that involves elite existential predicates. At some point in his discussion, McDaniel considers existential properties of individuals. But, properties of individuals are most naturally expressed with a predicate rather than a quantifier.

<sup>6</sup> Caplan (2011) surveys a number of accounts of elite expressions. At one point, Caplan considers the view that the elite expressions might be those that express Schaffer's fundamental properties.

<sup>7</sup> This argument relied on the claim that we can't say that there are exactly *n* objects in the universe without employing an existential quantifier. But perhaps we could do so if we had a name for every object in the universe and a universal quantifier. I don't think, though, that we could do so without using either an existential quantifier or a name. So, we have some reason to believe that either an existential quantifier or some names are among the elite expressions if we understand an elite expressions as those that express whatever grounds every truth. Of course, if there are either elite existential quantifiers or elite names, then there is hope for ways of being.

<sup>8</sup> We might be joint pluralists and say that there are several different kinds of joints in the world. Perhaps fundamental properties constitute one kind of joint and scientific properties another kind of joint. There might even be certain moral properties that constitute a third kind of joint. If joint pluralism is true, then we should probably say that elite expressions are those that express any kind of joint whatsoever. I can imagine a view, for example, according to which one elite existential quantifier, perhaps 'something', expresses property that is amongst joints of one kind whereas different existential quantifier, 'someone', expresses a property that is amongst joints of another kind. This seems to me to be a ways of being view.

<sup>9</sup> On both of the views considered in this section, an elite expression is taken to be one that expresses a *property* of some special sort. But, it might be natural for the ways of being defender to abandon this idea. After all, the ways of being view entails that quantifiers are elite expressions and it isn't obvious that quantifiers express properties at all. Instead of saying that a quantifier is elite if it expresses a special property, we might say that a quantifier is elite if all the things in its domain are ontologically on a par. This

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view seems to be in line with the view defended by Sider (2009, 2011). Thanks to Ross Cameron for suggesting this alternative to me.

<sup>10</sup> The above response is essentially the response that McDaniel (2009) gives. Turner (2010) suggests that how we respond to the Disjunctive Quantifier Argument depends on whether we say that an expression is an existential quantifier in virtue of its inferential role or we say that an expression is an existential quantifier in virtue of its semantic role. Turner says that if we choose an inferential role criterion, then we should agree with McDaniel. However, if we choose a semantic role criterion, then we should (according to Turner) reject (1). According to Turner, if we choose a semantic criterion, then the criterion itself will be expressed using an existential quantifier and there is no guarantee that the domain of our defined “existential quantifiers” won’t outstrip the domain of the existential quantifier used to express the semantic criterion. But, if their domains do outstrip that of the quantifier used to express the semantic criterion, then they won’t really be existential quantifiers (if the criterion is right). However, I think that Turner is mistaken about this. Whatever semantic criterion we choose, it better count *all* of the expressions that the ways of being theorist thinks are elite existential quantifiers as existential quantifiers. But, if the semantic criterion does that, then it will count the defined expression as an existential quantifier expression too. It seems to me that the best route of response is McDaniel’s.

<sup>11</sup> Turner (2010, forthcoming) considers and responds to several more arguments against ways of being. Many of these arguments and Turner’s responses to them are rather technical. Unfortunately, I don’t have the space in the short paper to present each of these objections and the plausible responses that Turner gives.