

It Takes More than Moore to Answer Existence-Questions

Abstract

Several recent discussions of metaphysics disavow existence-questions, claiming that they are metaphysically uninteresting because trivially settled in the affirmative by Moorean facts. This is often given as a reason to focus metaphysical debate instead on questions of grounding. I argue that the strategy employed to undermine existence-questions fails against Quineanism, its usual target. The Quinean can protest that the given formulation of their position is a straw man: properly understood, as a project of explication, the Quinean project does not counsel us to choose between obvious ordinary-language claims and absurd revisionist claims, even if appeal to Moorean facts is permitted.

Recent work in metametaphysics has attempted to undermine what has been described as the ‘preferred methodology’ (Manley 2009, 3) for dealing with ontological questions – the Quinean approach. There is much to be said about what exactly this approach is (or should be),¹ but one strand of agreement is that for the Quinean, ‘ontological questions are quantificational questions.’ (Fine 2009, 158) That is, the primary interest of ontology is in what we quantify over, or equivalently (for the Quinean), what there is, or what exists. For a putative kind F , we can ask any of the following:

- Are there F s?
- Do F s exist?
- Is it the case that $\exists x(Fx)$?

However, Kit Fine (2001, 2009), and following him Jonathan Schaffer (2009) and Kathrin Koslicki (2012) amongst others envisage a serious problem with treating questions of this form as central to ontology. They claim that for almost any reasonable candidates, the questions resulting from their substitution into the schemas above seem to be trivially answerable in the affirmative. To take some typical examples of how to achieve these easy answers:

Numbers

- (1) There are prime numbers.
- (2) Therefore, there are numbers.

Properties

- (1) There are properties that you and I share.
- (2) Therefore, there are properties.

The argumentative strategy here has been described by Schaffer as Moorean – in each case the first statement is claimed to be a Moorean fact, ‘one of those things that we know better than we know the premises of any philosophical argument to the contrary’ (Lewis 1996, 549), whose truth establishes the conclusion by weakening the premise. Contrariwise, by considering the question whether there are numbers, or propositions, the Quinean is enquiring after something whose falsity would entail the falsity of a Moorean fact. But, says the endorser of this strategy, it’s a Moorean fact! We are so confident that it *is* a fact that no argument to the contrary should convince us.

These examples in themselves do not show that the Quinean approach is untenable. The central move for what I will call the *triviality argument* generalises on these examples to reason as follows: most questions of the form “Are there *F*s?” that the Quinean approach regards as interesting can be answered by appeal to Moorean facts. They then claim that if a question of the form “Are there *F*s?” can be answered by appeal to a Moorean fact, it is uninteresting, and therefore that most questions regarded as interesting by the Quinean are in fact uninteresting. On the assumption that an approach is flawed if it seriously misrepresents the questions it considers, the proponent of the triviality argument rejects Quineanism.

There are at least two simple ways that the Quinean might respond. First one might claim that there is at least one substitution of *F* for which no Moorean fact undermines the existence

question, but proponents of the triviality argument will be happy to issue the challenge and wait for counterexamples. If one is proposed, they may still be able to dissolve it by uncovering a Moorean fact, but this is not required of them. They need not even hold that one can never provide reasons to doubt a candidate, as they are content with a more limited thesis that ‘one should be permissive about those very entities Quineans typically consider most controversial’ (Schaffer 2009, 359). For instance, Fine admits that possible worlds may be an exception to the triviality argument, and Schaffer claims that putative entities will not be amenable to Moorean existence-proofs if they contain the notion of fundamentality in their definition, but neither regards these exceptions as undermining the strategy.

The second simple Quinean response is to insist that the Quinean approach gets ontology right but just concede that, as it turns out, there aren’t really any interesting ontological questions. Typically defenders of the triviality argument say that there are *obviously* interesting ontological questions and we need to find a way to acknowledge this, so they go on to articulate what has become known as “neo-Aristotelianism”, an approach that seats the project of ontology in questions about whether, and how, entities are grounded in other entities. However versions of the triviality argument have been endorsed by philosophers who would describe themselves as deflationists,² who see the dearth of interesting ontological questions as a welcome result.

There have been responses to the triviality argument. For instance Daly and Liggins (2014) argue that nothing has been done to establish the Moorean status of the examples in the triviality argument, and that therefore we have no reason to think that no countervailing considerations could be strong enough to undermine it, however strong warrant for the starting premise might be. I will not contribute further to criticism of that premise of the triviality argument – I will instead grant for the sake of argument that the statements in question are Moorean facts. Nor am I interested in critiquing the neo-Aristotelian approach

that is offered to replace Quineanism, both because this would do nothing to respond to the aforementioned deflationists and because there is already a large and complex literature on that issue. I will instead criticise the formulation of the Quinean approach that has been used to construct the triviality argument. By refusing to articulate the approach more clearly these philosophers are able to ignore better ways of explaining things from the target perspective, and when we clarify the Quinean approach a way is clearly available: in particular, the Quinean can deny that it follows from the availability of an answer to “Are there *F*s?” by appeal to Moorean facts that the question is uninteresting.

The presentation of the issue by proponents of the triviality argument suggests that the Quinean focus when asking ontological questions is on challenging, and possibly throwing out, putative kinds. Critiques of Quineanism are sometimes phrased as critiques of “eliminativism”,³ with an attendant focus on the (il)legitimacy of eliminating from our account entities that are identified as problematic. A simple picture of this endeavour would show us starting with a list of apparent existents $\{F, G, H, I, J, \dots\}$ and, suspicious of one of these, seeking arguments against its existence that are strong enough to jettison it from the list. We eventually end up with a list at the end of enquiry such as $\{F, H, J\}$. This is the endpoint Schaffer describes when explaining that the Quinean conception of ontology is flat: ‘[t]he target of metaphysical inquiry is an unstructured list of existents.’ (2009, 355)

This is wrong. For the Quinean the target of metaphysical enquiry is not just an ontology as a list of existents, but an ontology with an accompanying ideology. This notion, introduced in Quine (1951), refers to ‘one’s stock of simple and complex terms or predicates’ (1983, 501), and concerns what can be expressed in a theory. Alongside the question of what things we say there are is the question of what notions we need to talk about them.

I anticipate the following response:

“So what? Re-phrase and say that the target of *ontological* enquiry is an unstructured list of existents. It remains true that the Quinean countenances possibilities that are absurd, so their metaphysics collapses by virtue of its reliance on a bad conception of ontology.”

But the introduction of ideology in fact changes things substantially. For the Quinean will regard ontology and ideology as closely related: there will be no such thing as ontological enquiry divorced from ideological enquiry because we are constantly engaged in a complex trade-off between the two.⁴ Furthermore, this reveals the basic way in which Quineanism is misrepresented: the Quinean metaphysical project is one of explication, specifically explication of all of our serious linguistic behaviour if we want to be truly Quinean. A formulation of which Quine approved glosses this as ‘making more exact a vague or not quite exact concept used in everyday life’ (Carnap 1947, 8); we are generally not looking for entities to throw out of our account of the world, we are looking to build an account of the world as we understand it and seeing what is needed to do so. To reference the now-cliché Quinean quip, the relevant three Anglo-Saxon monosyllables are not “Are there *F*s?”, but “What is there?” (Quine 1948) If we imagined the enquirer as starting from an initial point and introducing language ranging over different kinds of object until able to achieve with their theory everything that we can in fact achieve now, the question of elimination would not come up, or at least would be secondary to the constructive project.

Of course we should accept that this does not in fact go on when someone tries to do ontology: we necessarily start by identifying problematic kinds in the theory that we bring to the table. This might seem to reintroduce eliminativism. However, to see why focussing on elimination is still misleading, we can turn to the notions of *explaining* and *explaining away*. These are often treated as distinct, and in at least one sense they certainly are. Something could be described as having been explained when that explanation is only partial; for

instance my being hungry explains why I'm looking through the fridge even though it is by no means a complete explanation of my looking through the fridge (I am hungry a lot of the time, and only *most* of the time does it result in me rifling through the fridge). On the other hand, nothing could be regarded as explained away without being completely so. I do not count as having explained away the ghost at the fairground if I can account for all the spooky goings-on as actions taken by the nefarious property developer who wants to shut it down except for the sighting that took place while she was out of town.

However, if we countenance only complete explanations, it is less clear that the two notions are distinct and for the Quinean their difference is simply one of emphasis. On the project to eliminate mental entities, Quine writes:

The reduction of the mental to the physical...can be characterized in either of two ways: as *explaining* or as *explaining away*. There is no difference, but the first phrasing has a gentler ring. To have *repudiated* the life of the mind seems harsher than to have *explained* it in physical terms. (1995, 86, emphasis in original)

If explaining and explaining away are in all important respects equivalent, focussing on elimination is misleading because it privileges a less natural statement of the situation over a statement in terms congenial to the intuitions informing the triviality argument.

We can now clearly display how the proponent of the triviality argument misrepresents the Quinean approach in the key cases. Recall *Properties*: the strategy of the argument seems to be effective because it challenges the Quinean to deny, or even question, (2), aware that to do so seems to be to entertain the possibility of the rejection by *modus tollens* of a Moorean fact. Suppose that (1) is a Moorean fact. It nonetheless does not follow that the argument shows the Quinean approach to turn a trivial point into a substantial issue because the Moorean

status of the fact does not fix its analysis. Moore claimed to refute idealism and prove that there was an external world by appeal to the Moorean fact expressed by “I know that I have hands,” but while he thought that this established enough for his purposes, he remained ‘very sceptical as to what, in certain respects, the correct analysis of such propositions is.’ (Moore 1959, §4)

Given therefore that things remain open to analysis, there is nothing to prevent us from extending *Properties* to say:

- (3) Properties just are sets.
- (4) Therefore, there are no properties over and above sets.

This is an eliminative argument, assuming that we believe in sets, because we remove the commitment to any entity beyond a set of objects sharing a feature, but it does not deny the Moorean fact. By presenting the argument as explaining what numbers are, we preserve the truth of (2).

The inclusion of ideology in our enquiry demonstrates further how the question remains interesting. For an easy example demonstrating its relevance:

Couples

- (1) Some couples are closer than others.
- (2) Therefore, there are couples.
- (3) Couples just are two people satisfying the predicate ‘xx are together’.
- (4) Therefore, there are no couples that are not people quantified over plurally.

Whether this is an acceptable argument turns on questions of ideology – if we countenance both plural and singular quantification, we can account for couples in ideological terms, but if we do not regard plural quantification as basic a different strategy must be employed. The proponent of the triviality argument, on the other hand, cannot avoid the ontologically committing interpretation of “There are couples,” because of their heavyweight interpretation

of the Moorean fact; indeed Fine (2009, 160) endorses this move explicitly. Others might insist that the above involves no Moorean fact, but it is hard to know how this might be defended without undermining the Mooreanness of *Properties*, insofar as both simply appeal to ordinary language.

A task remains for us, though: how can we understand the apparent contrast between explaining and explaining away? On the Quinean picture, why would we prefer one characterisation over the other? The quote above suggested that this question is not worth asking, but that dismissal is only uncontroversial from within the Quinean framework. In the face of the external challenge posed by the triviality argument it is important that we say more to motivate the Quinean view of the relationship between the notions.

Quine is not so helpful in this respect: at least in the above passage he prefers to describe the physical as explaining the mental, while he describes classes as explaining away the natural numbers, but he dedicates little space to justifying the distinction. The considerations he offers relate to the presence of alternative analyses: we have a fairly stable physical story that purports to do the explanatory work of the mental,⁵ while numbers can be successfully equated with various different structures, and distaste for saying that 2 is the class of all pairs *and* the class containing exactly 0 and 1 leads him to prefer the eliminative characterisation. However we can propose a more general reason to choose between the formulations that demonstrates why the Quinean does not err in considering them more-or-less equivalent.

As mentioned above, the Quinean is engaged in a project of explication: based on core cases of language-use that we take to be correct, we attempt to clarify what we're talking about in a way that goes beyond our mere speech-behaviour. Explication will sometimes achieve results that are surprising from the standpoint of the defender of a putative kind, and sometimes will not. In the former situation explaining away is the natural characterisation of a successful

theory, while in the latter it is best seen as merely explaining. For instance, suppose we are enquiring about universals and we find that the phenomena they were initially employed to explain are dealt with adequately by the existence of sets. Defenders of universals would typically say that they believe in universals because without them we cannot make sense of talk about shared features, so if the phenomena in question (shared features) are adequately explained by sets it would be strange to retain the term “universal” and say that, as it turns out, universals just are sets. Compare this to an enquiry about properties, which is superficially very similar. In this situation, however, if we were to find that sets were sufficient to explain the phenomena for which properties seemed necessary (again, talk of shared features), it would be more natural to regard our account as explaining what properties *are* because nothing substantial and controversial is associated with the term. It would be a not unreasonable understanding of the concept *property* to hold it to refer to whatever explains the co-attribution of predicates.

The proponent of the triviality argument will perhaps protest that we have not really shown how the Quinean can have an interesting ontological project. It is not my responsibility to do so fully here, as demonstrating this would be difficult and require that I make further commitments. My aim has been to show, without relying on any particularly controversial approach, that one can accept the Moorean facts of the triviality argument without conceding that the Quinean approach must then fail by treating as questionable that which is certain. However, it has been shown, albeit briefly, how the Quinean can have an interesting ontological enquiry. Assuming a Moorean fact that says or entails “There are *F*s,” the remainder of the Quinean ontological project becomes relevant to questions about the kind *F* when we ask whether there are statements in our prospective theory, Moorean or otherwise, of the form “There are *G*s” such that we could plausibly say “ $F=G$.” To gesture at how the project will continue we can look to ideology, both in the basic sense above of our accepted

logical notions and in a wider sense. For instance, once we have accepted “There are properties” there remains the question what predicates we accept as applying to those entities: for instance, should we hold that the predicate “*x* resides in Platonic heaven” applies to them? The eliminative extension to *Properties* would then turn the question about that predicate on to sets themselves, an example of the interaction of the ontological and ideological projects. I have not provided details of how one would resolve these further questions, but again that is not my task here, especially as it could undermine my claim’s neutrality between multiple approaches to ontology, making the defence less general.

I conclude that the triviality argument does not show the Quinean approach to be fatally flawed, even if we grant the assumption that certain key existence-statements are Moorean facts. The Quinean can, in cases that do not clash with any core usage, regard an account as merely explaining the entities involved by identifying them with other entities or with ideological constructions.

Notes

1 Peter van Inwagen (1998, 2009) attempts to articulate the Quinean approach, and some instructive explanation can be found in Eklund (2006a, 2006b) and Jenkins (2010), but the sources enjoy only partial agreement, and the latter two both acknowledge an unresolved tension with Quine's work.

2 I have in mind here examples like Eli Hirsch (2005) and Amie Thomasson (2007, 2014), although each of their accounts involves substantially more than the triviality argument.

3 For instance, we see claims that the 'Quinean method is eliminativist by design' (Schaffer 2009, 372).

4 While Quine (1951) does distinguish the two endeavours, saying that two theories with the same ontology may differ in ideology, it is clear even there that they are importantly related.

5 I of course have no stake here in the attempt to explain/repudiate the mental; my point is entirely independent of that dispute. Notably though, while Quine was optimistic in earlier work (e.g., his 1960) about the prospects for this reduction, in the cited work he acknowledges that it is unsuccessful and acquiesces in anomalous monism.

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