

Two Ways of Saying No to Quine

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Abstract: W. V. O. Quine holds that the *raison d'être* of metaphysics is the drawing of two lists; the list of entities that are part of the world and of those that are not. To achieve this aim, he suggests regimenting true sentences belonging to 'our best theories' to determine their ontological commitments. Many accept Quine's project, differing with each other regarding what are the best theories, the sentences that belong to these and the entities that are part of the world. Other philosophers find this characterization of metaphysics deficient. Jonathan Schaffer considers the issue of what exists as trivial or uninteresting. The important issue is whether the things said to exist exists derivatively or fundamentally. He believes that there is a set of fundamental entities, and metaphysics ought to be concerned primarily with delineating this set of entities. Philosophical debates ought to be reconsidered along these lines. Theodore Sider on the other hand, thinks that the world contains a distinctive structure, and the aim of metaphysics is to discover the notions that enable us to describe facts concerning structure. Some of the possibilities and limits of these two approaches are highlighted.

Key words: *Quine, Schaffer, Sider, existence, ontology, fundamentality, structure*

Introduction

W. V. O. Quine's understanding of the primary aim of metaphysics, as well as of the means to achieve this aim, has been prevailing in Analytic philosophy for the past seventy years or so. Recently however, it has been challenged by a number of philosophers. This article will first outline the Quinean project regarding metaphysics. Then it will present two contrasting approaches regarding the primary aim of metaphysics; one by Jonathan Schaffer, and the other by Theodore Sider. The two approaches give rise to a number of issues and questions. The writing will present an account of the two philosophies, and highlight some of their possibilities and limits.

The Quinean Project

Quine holds that metaphysics ought primarily to address one fundamental question, the question 'What is there?' (or the Ontological question) All other questions

philosophers address in the various areas that fall under metaphysics; questions like whether a characteristic like 'red' is an abstract real property or whether it ought to be understood in nominalist terms, whether things endure or perdure, and similar questions; are all subservient to the fundamental question, 'What is there?' (Quine 1948, p. 33)

Metaphysics would then have the primary aim of drawing two lists. One is the list of those entities that exist and are part of the world. (By 'world' here, one should understand the sum of anything that exists. See Lewis 1986, p. 1) The other is the list of those entities that some might think are part of the world, but in fact are not. (Quine 1948, p. 21) They would not exist

'Existence' is considered by Quine as a univocal concept, having the same meaning regardless of whether the term is taken to refer to Gods, tables, numbers or human beings. (See Van Inwagen 1998, p. 237) It also admits of no degrees. Whatever exists, simply exists. This fact – that whatever exists, just exists - is much more metaphysically important than any differences that there might be between the different entities there are or might be.

To achieve the aim he sets for metaphysics, Quine suggests taking sentences from our 'best theories' about the world, and translating these into formal language using quantifiers, variables and predicates. The latter are introduced as 'abbreviations' for linguistic expressions we already use in everyday language. (Van Inwagen 1998, pp. 238, 243) The translation of sentences belonging to our best theories into formal sentences would reveal their real syntactic structure. (Quine 2013, pp. 159-161) It would also indicate what entities are part of the world if these sentences are true. (Quine 1948, p. 33) So if physics is amongst our best theories, and the sentence 'Everything is made up of atoms.' belongs to this field, one ought to translate the sentence into predicate logic to determine what entities would be part of the world given the sentence. The translation of the sentence would be:

$$\forall x, x(\text{is an atom}) \vee x(\text{is made up of atoms})$$

This would read: ('For any x, if x exists, x is an atom or x is made up of atoms.' Where x is a variable for an entity). The truth of the sentence would imply that the list of entities that are part of the world ought to include atoms, or anything else that is made up of atoms. If the sentence is true, there cannot be anything in existence which is either not an atom, or not made up of atoms. Any such being would be excluded from the list of entities that exist, and placed on the other list.

Quine's characterization of how to achieve the aim he sets for metaphysics presumes that human beings may fill the two above mentioned lists after having decided which sentences belong to our best theories, which are true and how to translate them. Other than this they have no influence in relation to these lists' contents. An entity's existence and how it exists is not in any way related to how humans or any other conscious beings for that matter may think or conceive of its existence. Even the possibly relational character of things listed is either ignored or considered marginal. Quine's characterization of how to go about the metaphysical

project reflects the Analytic paradigm within which he is working. This is permeated by 'a realist impulse, ...[that] reaffirms the world's independence of the knowing subject' (Skorupski 1993, p. 129); a realist impulse that buttresses the assumption that the: 'world could ...be recognized in its objectivity.' (Skorupski 1993, p. 149). These aspects would all be problematized in Continental philosophy where a key issue remains the issue of: 'our access to the world' (Harman 2008, p. 201), and the claim that the world can be recognized in its objectivity is highly contentious.

Key areas of disagreement amongst philosophers working within a Quinean paradigm are what are our best theories, which sentences belong to these, which sentences belonging to our best theories are true, and how certain sentences are to be translated. Some philosophers would hold that only sentences belonging to the natural sciences belong to our best theories. Others would include sentences from everyday life. Theists and Platonists might include sentences that refer to abstract and/or non-material entities and beings. Even when there is agreement about which sentences belong to our best theories and which are true, different philosophers might provide different accounts regarding the entities that are part of the world, depending on how they translate these sentences. Suppose 'Churchill is taller than Napoleon.' belongs to our best theories and is true. The sentence will have one translation if 'taller than Napoleon' is interpreted as a predicate which Churchill instantiates. The world would contain Churchill and a property 'being taller than Napoleon'/the set of entities 'taller than Napoleon', depending on how understands 'being taller than Napoleon' (whether in nominalist or in realist terms). It will have a different translation if 'is taller than' is taken to indicate a relation between two entities. Both Napoleon and Churchill would then have to be part of the world. The list of the entities that exist would be different in the two cases.

Regardless of all these differences, philosophers who uphold Quine's claims regarding the purpose of metaphysics, will concur that the primary aim of this branch of philosophy is to fill the two above mentioned lists. Anything else is secondary and subservient to this question.¹ In what follows I consider two ways of rejecting this characterisation of metaphysics.

The First 'No' - Jonathan Schaffer

Most philosophers who do metaphysics in the Analytic Tradition stick to the Quinean characterisation regarding the aim of metaphysics, and the methodology to achieve this aim. The question 'What is there?' is still considered the basic question in the

1 Despite characterizing the purpose and methodology of metaphysics along these lines, Quine himself upheld: 'ontological relativism'. This holds that there is: 'no, single, objectively correct ontological theory' regarding what exists (Effingham 2013, p. 31). He himself then, seems skeptical about the possibility of metaphysics achieving the aim he sets for the discipline.

field (See Effingham 2013). Since the publication of Quine's paper 'On What There Is', the main debate has been rather whether metaphysics (as conceived by Quine) makes sense or not, with Neo-Carnapians generally denying that it does (See for instance, Hirsch 2005), and a host of other philosophers rebutting such a claim and furnishing their own list of existents. The Neo-Carnapian approach however, is not the 'no' to Quine that I consider.

Since the 1990s, a group of philosophers within the Analytic tradition has grown dissatisfied with the Quinean characterization of metaphysics for meta-metaphysical reasons. These believe that metaphysics as a philosophical activity makes sense, but think that Quine mischaracterized its aim. In particular, they think that the question which Quine considers to be fundamental to metaphysics – the question 'What is there?' – is not fundamental at all. One of these philosophers is Jonathan Schaffer.

Schaffer considers the enterprise Quine proposes – that of jotting down objects along two lists – as relatively unimportant. Even the manner in which Quine conceives of the metaphysical project, is excessively flat. What is important to Quine is merely whether something exists or not. He does not take into consideration, or does not take sufficiently into consideration, the different levels of being.

Schaffer holds that there is a fundamental realm of entities which somehow accounts for the existence of other entities. These other entities would be derivative, and would exist in virtue of fundamental ones. Fundamental entities on the other hand, do not exist in virtue of anything else. There are various reasons why one might be induced to believe in such a fundamental level of entities. Ross Cameron claims that postulating a level of fundamental entities which accounts for all others is theoretically and metaphysically valuable, as well as intuitive. If we do not postulate a realm of fundamental entities, there would be: 'no explanation of everything that needs explaining ... no collection of objects that explains the existence of every [other] entity' (Cameron 2008, p. 12).

The main aim of metaphysics ought not therefore to be the ontological quest to establish what exists. The primary aim of metaphysics is to characterize this fundamental realm of entities; to discover which entities are fundamental and which are derivative and exist in a non-fundamental manner. (Schaffer 2013, p. 351). The emphasis would be on identifying the former, with; non-fundamental entities being merely be an 'ontological free lunch' (Schaffer 2013, p. 361) Schaffer holds that there is a long tradition in philosophy, including Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Spinoza, which conceives of the purpose of metaphysics along these lines (Schaffer 2013, pp. 350-354, 375-376). Within this tradition questions like 'What is there?' are inconsequential and unimportant. Questions like 'What entities are fundamental?' on the other hand, are interesting and informative. It is the latter question that philosophers ought to address.

Consider the sentence 'There is a table.' and assume that it is true. If one accepts common-sense ontology this sentence would belong to our best theories. The table would go on the list of things that exist by Quinean. If one is a Nihilist on the other

hand, and thinks that the world does not contain table but only ontological simples arranged table-wise, the sentence would not be taken to belong to our best theories. The sentence's truth would not indicate that there are tables, but only ontological simples arranged table wise. It would be these ontological simples that end up on the list of entities that exist. Schaffer holds that either approach fails to address the metaphysically interesting issue regarding the table. This issue is not whether the table exists (it obviously does). The metaphysically important issue is whether it exists fundamentally or derivatively. The key issue is whether it exists in virtue of something else (say some ontologically simpler entities), or whether it exists fundamentally (does not exist in virtue of anything else). This is what is metaphysically interesting.

Schaffer holds that most debates in metaphysics, for instance the debate between materialism and dualism, the debate about the existence of impossible worlds, that about fictional beings, or the debate regarding whether numbers exist, are interesting only if they are considered along these lines; if they are couched in fundamental-derivative terms. The debates should concern whether minds, possible/impossible worlds or numbers exist derivatively or fundamentally, not whether these exist or not. (Schaffer 2013, pp. 361-365). It is obvious that there are minds, numbers, fictional entities, and impossible worlds. The truth of sentences like 'Sherlock Holmes feigned his death.', for instance, implies the existence of Sherlock Holmes. Similarly, since 1 is a prime number while 20 is not, and 1 has characteristics which 20 does not have, the numbers 1 and 20 have to exist. (Schaffer 2013, p. 357) These ought all to go on the list of entities that exist given Quine's characterization of metaphysics. This however, is not an interesting conclusion. What would be metaphysically interesting is the question whether minds, numbers, fictional beings, and impossible worlds exist fundamentally or derivatively (Schaffer 2013, p. 257).

Schaffer's reaction to Quine's project is sensible. The Quinean project and the 'flat' manner in which it considers the entities that fill up the existents list, is quite narrow. The sentence 'There is a table.' Seems to imply that the world contains tables. The sentence 'Everything is made up of atoms.' on the other hand, is ontologically committed to the world containing atoms. If both sentences belong to 'our best theories', atoms and tables would both go on the list of entities that are part of the world. From a Quinean perspective the issue stops there. One however, may be rightly unhappy with this result. Surely, atoms cannot stand on the same ontological par as chairs. Adopting a Quinean perspective however, one would either have to admit that, in terms that are ontologically relevant, they are on the same par, since they both are included on the same 'existents' list. Or else, in Nihilist fashion, one might be tempted to deny the existence of tables. Both results however, might understandably be unsatisfactory. One might reasonably think that atoms are ontologically more basic than tables, without however wishing to deny the existence of the latter. Schaffer's characterization of metaphysics, would enable us to assert the existence of both, and yet assign to atoms a privileged role if one thinks that their existence is metaphysically more important.

It is however doubtful whether all major arguments and debates in metaphysics can be re-fashioned along the terms Schaffer envisages. Take the debate about the existence of God. Schaffer suggests reformulating this as a debate on whether God exists fundamentally or derivatively. Atheists would hold the latter view, while theists would subscribe to the former.² It is arguable however, whether the debate can be successfully couched along these lines. If the atheist concedes that God exist in some shape or form, she would be basically conceding defeat. This is especially so if the argument involves the traditional characterizations of God as a necessary being, who is omnipotent, omniscient and ultimately responsible for everything that exists. Given Schaffer's suggestions, the theist would hold that such being exists fundamentally, whereas the atheist would hold that it exists derivatively. If God however, is defined in the traditional manner as: a being who; 'contains within Himself the whole perfection of being' (Aquinas 2006, 1a, 4.2), 'a substance that is infinite, eternal, independent, omnipotent, and omniscient' (Descartes 1997, p. 152), or 'that by which no greater can be conceived' (Anselm 2001, p. 7), it is hard to think that it might exist in a derivative manner. If such a being exists, it cannot but exist in a metaphysically fundamental way. By definition, it cannot exist derivatively. If the atheist concedes that God exists in some way then, she loses the whole plot. The existence or non-existence of such entity would be what is philosophically crucial.

Perhaps, a common shortcoming of both Quine's and Schaffer's characterization of the purpose of metaphysics is their reductive character. They both focus on just one aspect of being, or consider only one aspect to be all-important. Quine focuses exclusively on existence. Schaffer seems to be solely concerned with whether an existent belongs to one level of reality rather than another. A metaphysics which accords equal or similar weight to both issues is possible. The mistake may lie in treating one question as fundamental, as largely unimportant. The issues of whether an existent exists and, if it exists, whether it exists fundamentally or derivatively, might be equally important questions.³

2 Though being an atheist, Schaffer holds that the answer to the question as to whether God exists: 'is a trivial yes.....God is a fictional character.' (Schaffer 2013, p. 359). Fictional characters would exist, but would not exist fundamentally.

3 Aristotle's metaphysics is a case in point. Aristotle sets the 'study of being qua being' (Metaphysics 4) as the aim of metaphysics, rather than addressing some question or other. This involves (contrary to what Schaffer seems to suggest) questions about what entities are part of the world. For instance, one of his main endeavours is to banish to the non-existence bin Plato's Forms. (Aristotle 1990) Yet, Aristotle recognizes that not all things that exist, exist on the same par. Some exist in potency and some in act, and the latter are ontologically superior to the former. (Even amongst things that exist in act, God for instance sits at the top of the ontological hierarchy.) The two issues are fundamental to the study of being qua being.

The Second No – Ted Sider

In his *Writing the Book of the World* Ted Sider also characterizes metaphysics in terms of fundamentality rather than of the drawing of lists of entities. In contrast to Schaffer however, Sider characterizes fundamentality not in terms of the grounding of entities but in terms ‘structure’. Structure is not an entity, set of entities or stuff. It is a posit underlying phenomena. The world would have a distinctive structure underlying everything there is, and which does not obtain in virtue of anything else.

Structure cannot be defined in terms of or reduced to anything else like causality, some set of laws, or necessity. The notion of structure is simple and explanatory (Sider 2013, pp. 15-18). Its postulation would be justified by its suitability to improve our models of and theories about the world (Sider 2013, p. 10).

In light of the world possessing such a structure, two different types of fact would obtain. The first would be Fundamental facts, which are facts that concern some part of or aspect of the world’s structure. Then there would be derivative facts. These are facts that are not fundamental and do not concern some part or aspect of the world’s structure. (Sider 2013, p. 5) They would obtain in virtue of fundamental facts. Fundamental facts can be described provided we have words expressing the right notions.

In our language we use a myriad of words and sub-sentential expressions expressing notions through which we can build true sentences about some aspect of the world. The notions these sentences may involve can be more or less suited to ‘carving up’ the aspects of the world we describe. Sider gives the following example to illustrate how a true sentence may carve up the world better than another true sentences because of the notions it contains. Take a flat surface split vertically into a green half and a blue half. One can describe this surface using the terms ‘green’ and ‘blue’, and present the true sentence ‘The surface is painted half green and half blue’. Someone else may however decide to characterize the surface in a different way, horizontally rather than vertically. She would consider the top part of surface to be coloured ‘grue’, and the bottom part to be coloured ‘bleen’. True sentences using these notions (i.e. gleen and blue) may be concocted. ‘The sun is shining on the grue part but not on the bleen part of the surface.’ might be true. Yet the notions ‘blue’ and green’ are better suited to carve up the surface than the notions ‘gleen’ and ‘blue’.

This is not enough however for Sider. Not merely some notions are better suited than others to describe the world, but that some notions would enable us to describe aspects of the world’s structure as they are. This would be the second presumption Sider makes. There are notions that not merely describe aspects of the world better than other notions, but which: ‘carve at the joints’. Sentences that contain only notions that carve at the joints, and which are true, would: ‘...match... reality’s structure ...[in] an objectively correct way’ (Sider 2013, p. vii) True sentences that contain only such notions would therefore describe fundamental facts. Other true

sentences would describe derivative facts. Take the true sentence ‘There is a car in my garage.’ If ‘car’ is not an aspect of structure, the notion ‘car’ will not carve at the joints. The sentence would not describe a fundamental fact, but a derivative one; a fact that obtains in virtue of some other fundamental fact/s (Sider 2013, p. 108). Suppose on the other hand that ‘electrons’, ‘protons’, and a particular relation call it ‘C’ holding between subatomic particles at a subatomic level all carve at the joints. The true sentence ‘The electrons C the protons’ would describe a fundamental fact. (Sider 2013, pp. 75-76). The key enterprise in metaphysics is to find the primitive notions that allow one to describe fundamental facts that concern structure; the ones that allow us to write the Book of the World (Sider 2013, p. 1).

The second presupposition Sider makes is needed for his metaphysics to be anchored firmly to the Realist tradition. If one had to accept that metaphysics is about finding the right notions, retain presupposition i) which holds that the world has a definite structure, but reject ii); thus, holding that there are no notions that carve at the joints; one’s metaphysics would be verging dangerously close to idealism. It would lean close to the Kantian-sounding project of choosing between different notions or sets of notions for reasons other than that the chosen notions/set of notions enable/s us to accede to the world’s fundamental structure.

Sider’s way of doing metaphysics then, is fundamentally different both from Quine’s and from Schaffer’s. For the latter two philosophers, metaphysics is concerned primarily with entities. (Establishing those entities that exist and those that do not for Quine; determining those entities that exist derivatively, and those that exist fundamentally for Schaffer.) For Sider on the other hand, the main business of metaphysics shifts to ideology; to notions rather than entities. The key focus becomes finding the notions that cut at the joints.

These notions would form an exhaustive set which would allow an: ‘insight into structure’. (Sider 2013, p. 1) They would allow one to write the Book of the World; ‘a privileged description of the world ...[involving simply] fundamental notions’ (Sider 2013, VII). In this regard then, Sider makes a third presupposition; the presupposition that these fundamental notions form an exclusive and exhaustive set that permits one to concoct one picture of how the world fundamentally is.

Sider’s metaphysics therefore, involves these three commitments:

- i) That the world contains a fundamental structure.
- ii) That there are notions that ‘carve at the joints’ and enable us to describe facts pertaining to and aspects of structure.
- iii) That these fundamental notions form an exclusive and exhaustive set that permits one to concoct one picture of how the world is at a fundamental level; the level of structure.

In most respects Sider remains true to Analytic philosophy’s realist spirit and the supposition that the world can: ‘be recognized in its objectivity’(Skorupski 1993, p. 149). There can only one way in which notions may carve at the joints; only one way in which the book of the world may be written. In another respect though, he is akin

to Continental philosophy. This is because he problematizes the issue of 'our access to the world' (Harman 2008, p. 201); a key issue in this philosophical tradition. Not all true pictures of the world afford access the world's underlying structure. Sider however does not consider the issue of our access to the world in terms the relation between mind and the world or, vaguely, of the relation of language to the world, as a lot of Continental philosophers do. He does not raise the issue of whether we can have access to the world given that our access is mediated through language or the Mind. (In realist spirit, Sider assumes that such access is possible.) The core of his metaphysical project involves tracking those which notions provide such access to the world's fundamental structure. It involves considering various notions, keeping aboard those that allow such access (i.e, those that carve at the joints), and discarding those that do not.

Amongst the notions that carve at the joints, Sider refers to are the predicates of fundamental physics; logical quantifiers, junctors and the notion of identity, the predicate \in for set-membership, as well as to the notion of structure itself (Sider 2013, p. 6). This is the set of notions which, according to him, can allow us to draw a picture of how the world exists at the fundamental level. The picture of fundamental reality that he draws is both naturalistic and nihilist (thinking that there are only ontological simples); with fundamental reality consisting of space-time points and sets.

It is doubtful however, whether the set of notions Sider indicates as holding the key to unlock the world's fundamental structure is consistent with the third commitment his characterization of metaphysics involves; to wit that these notions form an exclusive and exhaustive set that allows one to draw a picture of how the world is at a fundamental level. As Timothy O'Connor and Nickolas Montgomery point out, the set of fundamental notions Sider elicits, cannot be exhaustive or exclusive. The set of fundamental notions Sider proposes includes all logical junctors. Yet, some of these junctors are redundant. What fundamental facts may be expressed through disjunctors, may be expressed via a conjunctors, and vice versa. Whatever truth may be expressed by, say, a conjunctor (or a conjunctor and a negator), may be expressed by a disjunctor (or a disjunctor and a negator). Suppose P and C are notions that carve at the joints. Suppose the proposition 'P & C' (in words: 'P and C.') expresses a fundamental fact. The same fact would be expressible by the proposition $\neg(\neg P \vee \neg C)$ (I words: 'It is not the case that, not P or not C.'). The two propositions are logically equivalent. So one of the two junctors becomes redundant when compiling the set of notions that cut at the joints. Or else, two sets, one including a disjunctor and the other an conjunctor are possible. Different, equivalent pictures, of the same fundamental reality may be concocted. But, as O'Connor and Montgomery suggest (O'Connor, Montgomery 2013), this would imply that there are 'Books of the World' rather than a 'Book of the World.' as presupposition (iii) seems to assume.

Sider would reply that the set of fundamental notions should be exclusive and exhaustive, but not hampered by redundancy constraints. If two notions both carve at the joints, they ought both to be included in our set of fundamental notions,

even if all facts that may be expressed through one notions may be exhaustively expressed through the other. As O'Connor and Montgomery note though: 'it is natural to impose a non-redundancy constraint on ideological elements' (O'Connor, Montgomery 2013). Occamist considerations would buttress this. The rejection of redundancy constraint by Sider seems *ad hoc*, so as to make the luxurious set of fundamental notions he concocts consistent with presupposition iii).

Conclusion

W. V. O. Quine holds that the primary aim of metaphysics is addressing the ontological question 'What is there?' It primarily involves jotting down those entities that are part of the world. This understanding of the main aim of metaphysics has prevailed in Analytic philosophy. In this writing accounts by two philosophers who reject this aim of metaphysics have been presented. One is by Jonathan Schaffer, who holds that the primary aim of metaphysics is to distinguish what exists fundamentally from what exists derivatively, suggesting that main debates in philosophy ought to be couched and be considered in these terms. While sympathetic with Schaffer's concerns and plea, I argued that, with regards to certain important debates, existential questions (i.e. whether a particular entity or a type of entity exists) cannot be marginalized in the way he suggests. I then considered the other approach by Theodore Sider, who suggests that the world has a fundamental structure, and the aim of metaphysics is to discover those notions that cut at the joints, and to compile an exclusive and exhaustive set of such notions. This would permit one to draw a picture of how the world fundamentally exists; to write the Book of the World. I claimed that the set of notions he furnishes can be considered as exclusive and exhaustive only if one rejects certain redundancy constraints which, however, it makes sense to retain.

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