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**Ontic Terms and Meta-Ontology, or:
On What There Actually Is**
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This paper examines some philosophical issues which concern words used to express ontological commitment (hereafter, “ontic terms”). Examples include ‘exist’, ‘there is,’ ‘real’, ‘nonfictional’, as they occur in sentences such as ‘ I exist’, ‘There are black swans,’ ‘Santa Claus is real,’ and so forth. Importantly, ontic terms in natural language have noncommisive uses as well (cf. Azzouni 2004; 2007; 2010; unpublished). That is, there are assertions containing such terms which are not ontologically committing. As a familiar example, a schoolchild may assert ‘there is an even prime’ in an ordinary mathematics class, without thereby committing to Platonism about the number two. But though the example is familiar, the significance of its noncommisive ontic term is not. The aim here is to illustrate some of that significance.

Note that in granting ‘exist’ or ‘there is’ a noncommisive use, we need not reject Quine’s (1948) view that the range of the existential quantifier is criterial for what is actual. For Quine’s view only pertains to quantification in a *regimented* language. In contrast, ‘exist’ and ‘there is’ are terms of *natural language*, and my concern here is restricted to the vernacular.¹

¹ Actually, Quine (1952) seems to hold the further view that the ordinary use of ‘real’ is commisive only: “Sheep are real, unicorns not...Such is the ordinary usage of the word ‘real’, a separation of the sheep from the unicorns” (p. 212). But again, to disagree on this point is not to reject Quine’s regimented quantifier.

Still, noncommisive ontic terms “in the wild” hold significance for regimentation. For they create an obstacle in defining a univocal ontic term for the regimented language. Of course, normally no special problem arises if a term of natural language has different uses—we can define each use separately, using subscripts as with ‘bank₁’ and ‘bank₂’. Yet with ontic terms, things are different. In particular, I shall argue that the different uses make it *impossible* to define an ontic term that is univocally commissive.

This is not meant to suggest that the commissive use is unintelligible or meaningless or the like. Many times ontic terms are patently understood as univocally commissive (e.g., when the Pope asserts ‘God exists’). Still, if we cannot introduce a univocally commissive term into the regimented language, the consequences are notable. For one, we would be left without a formal criterion of ontological commitment. Relatedly, the language would be too impoverished to express Realism about x , for any x . Yet the discussion does not end on such disparaging notes. For it is eventually shown that in a nonstandard yet pertinent sense, a criterion of ontological commitment remains possible as well as statements of Realism. The final section then reinforces the significance of these remarks, in an application to the Hirsch-Sider debate in metaontology.

I. Noncommisive Uses.

Again, the opening issue is how the commissive use might be defined for the purposes of regimentation. Of course, the regimented language can contain some primitive or undefined terms—yet in the case of ontic terms, it is best to define them if we can. For on the standard approach, the regimented language is supposed to be purged of all the ambiguity, imprecision, vagueness, etc., that is characteristic of natural language. So if an

ontic term has different readings in the vernacular, regimentation typically would require us to define the term univocally on its preferred reading.

Just to be clear, the claim is not that ontic terms are *ambiguous*. Whether the different uses reflect an ambiguity, as opposed to polysemy or some kind of hidden indexicality, is not something I shall pursue. Instead, I shall say in a rather neutral way that ontic terms are *equivocal*.² But n.b., ‘equivocal’ does not denote *vague* terms as such; otherwise, almost any term may count as “equivocal.”

In the present section, we shall list cases of noncommissive uses, in order to define the commissive use by a kind of *via negativa*. Subsequently, the resulting definition is critically evaluated.

Interestingly, an ontic term is sometimes noncommissive because it has no ontological significance whatsoever. Take the following use of ‘actually’:

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

In this, ‘Actually’ is merely used as a kind of pragmatic device to indicate something unexpected—for (1) is equivalent to the same sentence minus ‘actually’.³

The use of ‘really’ below 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.

² Cf. Fodor (2006); 99, n. 20.

³ Ram Neta protests that if ‘actually’ is deleted, the sentence will embed differently in the antecedent of conditionals. But I suspect that such an embedding forces a semantic role onto ‘actually’.

Yet a further ontologically neutral use occurs in the following:

(3) The Fonz rides a real bike, not a sportbike.⁴

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.”⁵) Thus ‘real’ in (3) lacks a distinctively *ontological* meaning, since it determines an extension that does not include the sportbikes that exist in the model. In contrast, if the Fonz asserts ‘Unfortunately, sportbikes exist’, he is presumably using the ontic term with an ontological meaning. (Henceforth, I shall use ‘+ON’ to signal when an ontic term possesses such a meaning.)

So if we are defining commissive ontic terms, it is necessary to say that they are +ON at least. But this is not yet sufficient. For as David Lewis (1986) taught us, there are ontic terms used to assign ontological status *in a nonactual world*.⁶ Oddly, even the term ‘actual’ is sometimes satisfied by nonactual objects, as Lewis himself grants (pp. 98-99). E.g., suppose a person is unsure whether the Fonz is a flesh and blood person in “Happy Days” or just a legend. One may reply in a corrective tone that, in fact:

⁴ Although in the 1950s, the only sportbikes were the classic BMWs, which are as real as it gets.

⁵ Austin makes several other distinctions in the use of ‘real’; see also Bennett’s (1966) response to Austin. But they illustrate the same kind of point, viz., that ‘real’ can be used to mark off various categories that are not ontological categories. But notice that ‘real’ is not the only ontic term that has a “trouser” use; consider ‘He has no actual brain once he starts drinking,’ ‘To have the courage to exist is rare indeed’, ‘There are no guitarists other than Hendrix.’

⁶ All references to Lewis will be to this work. Note that the point above is independent of his Realism about possibilities; context can relativize ontic terms to a Pegasus-world even if one is a fictionalist about possible worlds. (Cf. Rosen (1990), Nolan (2002).)

(4) The Fonz is an actual person.

Even though (4) is true in context, it does not entail that the Fonz is *really* actual. That is so, even though ‘actual’ is +ON. Yet there is no mystery here, since (4) in context would express something like “The Fonz is an actual person *in the world of ‘Happy Days’*.”⁷

But note that the term remains equivocal when we switch to Napoleon:

(5) Napoleon is an actual person.

On one reading, (5) implies that Napoleon exists *now*, where ‘actual’ 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.

However, does this second reading use ‘actual’ commissively? It remains that Napoleon is not *really* actual in one sense. Yet he is categorized as nonfictional, and this ontologically “thick” implication suggests something commissive. Though in fact, ‘commissive’ is a term of art, and we could stipulate things either way. The interest in the commissive use, however, is that it is the *ontologically committing* use; it commits the speaker to the existence of the object.⁸ For definitional purposes, then, it seems better to

⁷ For brevity, I assume that world-relative uses of ontic terms subsume fiction-relative uses (where the term ranges over the world of a story). But 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.

⁸ Recall that a “commissive” ontic term was initially identified by its (unnegated) occurrence in a (consistent) sentence entailing that its object is actual. , it follows that ontological commitment is determined by the semantics of an assertion. However, Azzouni (2007) and Martinich & Stroll (2007) hold that ontological commitment in the vernacular is in the *pragmatic* or speech-act content of an assertion. I cannot fully address this idea here. But it would not seem to be the complete story, since ontological commitment can occur in *thought* as well, where the notion of a speech-act has no application. (Cf. Green 2005).

favor the tenseless use of such terms—otherwise, Presentism would be analytic! Yet that should not be prejudged here, much less prejudged by definition. In contrast, the “tenseless” use does not favor Eternalism. A Presentist is able to affirm (5) on the second reading, since this just expresses that Napoleon is non-fictional, which is true now.⁹

So on the second reading of (5), ‘actual’ is used “commissively,” even though there is a sense in which Napoleon does not *really* exist. Beyond that, however, it will be most instructive 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 if it is obvious that ‘exist’ has its strongest (tenseless) sense, as in the Pope example.

The discussion thus far indicates the following definition of the “commissive” use:

(D1) An ontic term is commissive iff (i) the term is +ON, (ii) its containing sentence entails that the object is tenselessly actual (after any negations are deleted).

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.

The shortcoming of (D1), however, is that (i) and (ii) still seem insufficient for a commissive use. A further noncommissive use is possible in English—though this is a far less familiar use. Indeed, it is quite a mysterious use, though the linguistic evidence seems formidable. Consider:

⁹ This issue about time has a parallel regarding modality: We said the “commissive” use occurs in sentences entailing the *actuality* of the object (i.e., in our spatiotemporal order). But this seems to prejudge that Actualism is analytic, pace Meinong or David Lewis. Yet this can more readily be avoided, for we can stipulate that our “commissive use” concerns ontological commitments only for what *actually* exists.

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

I take it that (6) is true in the actual world (and is neutral about time). This may encourage the Meinongian idea that (6) concerns an actual existing object, but let us that pass. (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 noncommisive, even though (6) is tenselessly true in the actual world, and the ontic term is +ON.¹⁰

Some may desire further explanation of the “existence” of the Fonz in this noncommisive sense, and I offer further explanation elsewhere.¹¹ But here it suffices to say that ‘exists’ is used in a novel noncommisive way in (6). That linguistic point appears solid, even though the metaphysics behind the point may be puzzling.

So in light of (6), the definition of ‘commisive’ apparently needs a third clause:

(D2) An ontic term is commisive iff (i) it is +ON, (ii) its containing sentence entails that the object is tenselessly actual (after any negations are deleted), and (iii) the sentence does not entail that the object is imaginary.

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

Before moving on, one may wonder about the noncommisive use mentioned at the outset, the use of ‘There is’ in:

(7) There is an even prime.

¹⁰ Some may doubt whether ‘exists’ in (6) is +ON. I am inclined to say so, because it attributes *some* positive ontological status to the Fonz, viz., it marks him as something that we have *actually* imagined. This is in contrast to possibilities we have never imagined (in the sense of “mentally pictured”).

¹¹ Parent (ms. b)

When (7) is asserted in an ordinary mathematics class, it will not imply Platonism about the number two. (That is so, even if the speaker happens to be a Platonist.) Yet (7) does not necessarily exemplify a further type of noncommissive use. If numbers turn out to be useful fictions, for instance, then the use of ‘There is’ in (7) is of the same type as the ontic term in (6). Or, if numbers turn out to be mere possibilia, then ‘There is’ is relativized to a nonactual world, akin to ‘actual’ in (4). (However, the noncommissive use in (7) ends up complicating things if Platonism is true; see Parent (in progress).)

II. Defining the Commissive Use.

As the reader may have noticed, there is a question about the adequacy of (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 certain way, it also renders (D2) *equivocal*, given the different uses of ‘actual’.

The point is not that ‘actual’ in clause (ii) is inevitably equivocal *in context*. In particular, in the context of this discussion, we understand well enough that it is meant to be commissive. 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, and indeterminacies that occur in natural language. Standardly, this means providing a univocal interpretation for any natural language term with multiple readings. Yet in the case of ‘actual’, that is precisely where (D2) is lacking.

Since the issue really concerns regimentation, it is more efficient if we define the commissive use not for just any ontic term, but rather only 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 get to a univocal definition of ‘**actual**’¹²

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) its containing sentence entails that the object is tenselessly actual, where ‘actual’ is commissive, (after any negations are deleted), and (iii) the sentence does not imply 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. (That’s a different kind of circularity.)

The task is thus to find some univocal expression that is equivalent to ‘**actual**’ in order to replace ‘actual’ in 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. It is enough to define our technical term ‘**actual**’ by some expression that is equivalent to ‘actual’ on its commissive use. (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:

¹² This reveals why our starting assumption against Azzouni’s neutralism is ultimately unnecessary (see n. 1). 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 non-commissive ontic terms, and somehow reach a univocally commissive term.

(D4) x satisfies ‘**actual**’ iff x exists.

(D4) would be equivocal in the same way that (D3) is. The same point carries over to other cases such as ‘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 noncommisive reading, e.g., where they are relativized to a non**actual** world. E.g., if ‘nonfictional’ in (D5) 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**’.

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 it is in spacetime.

(D9) x satisfies ‘**actual**’ iff x is mind independent.¹³

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 further supplement, none of (D7)–(D9) seem adequate.¹⁴

¹³ Notably, Azzouni (2004; ms.) appears committed to something like (D9).

¹⁴ (D9) is also troubled since it apparently prejudices qualia to be non**actual**.

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 these 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’ do not.

III. A Proposal from Lewis.

Contemporary metaphysicians may be unaccustomed to seeing ‘actual’ in its noncommisive use; yet as noted earlier, even Lewis grants that ‘actual’ 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 ‘actual’:

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 notable here, 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.

Again, I do not doubt that we can understand expressions like ‘in *this* world’ as univocally commisive. 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. Again, one

can imagine a context centered on a world of Greek Myth, where (D10) introduces a term of art for denizens of *that* world. To repeat, none of this shows that (D10) really is in danger of being misunderstood. But it does mean that (D10) fails to describe in strictly unequivocal terms what ‘**actual**’ means.¹⁵

Moreover, in some contexts 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’ Realism about possible worlds. 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 Parent (ms. a)). 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, it can remain a bit unclear what exactly “*this* world” is.

IV. Another Proposal from Lewis.

This visit with Lewis also 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.

¹⁵ 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.

Notably, Lewis offers us a second 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)

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 using ‘exist’ alone, Lewis goes commissive by composing the phrase ‘really exist’. And this iterative phrase may seem to be univocally commissive.

But in fact, ‘really exist’ and similar compound ontic terms can be contextually relativized to non**actual** worlds, 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:

(10) Pegasus really exists.

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

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

The reason, again, is that in the right context (10) means that Pegasus really exists *in a world of Greek Myth*. Another striking case 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:

(13) I’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, which is imaginary even in the world of the play.¹⁶

V. 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. But in fact, there is a general argument to the effect that such a definition is impossible. First, it can be established that:

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

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

Second, we can observe that *every* ontic term seems equivocal. For context can always remove the ontologically committing feature of an ontic term, e.g., by relativizing it

¹⁶ One may protest that there would be no reason for a speaker to use an iterative construction, other than to identify an ontic-phrase as commissive. So we *should* see these phrases as only having a commissive use. But redundancy is always possible in English, even if there is no reason for a speaker to do it.

to Greek Myth. 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 (14), it would follow that a univocal definition of a commissive ontic term is impossible.

Some have worried that this argument 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. ‘bat₁’ may be defined unequivocally as the piece of wood in baseball used to hit the ball. (Terms in this may be *vague*, but again, ‘equivocal’ here does not denote vague terms as such.)

Granted, something like (14) 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 ‘bat₁’, *there is no univocal equivalent* to ‘**actual**’ in the vernacular. Any of the candidates will themselves be ontic terms, and as such they can be used in both the commissive and noncommissive ways.

VI. Understanding and Primitive Ontic Terms.

The impossibility of an adequate definition has, it seems, noteworthy philosophical consequences. On the standard conception of regimentation, for instance, there is no way to define a commissive ontic term for the regimented language. And this, moreover, is bad news for a criterion of ontological commitment. The usual strategy is to read off ontological commitments from the sentences using a commissive ontic term.¹⁷ Yet if we

¹⁷ N.b., this is meant to be compatible with Azzouni’s (2004) criterion, which depends on a commissive existence-predicate rather than a quantifier.

cannot introduce a commissive term into the regimented language, then such a criterion will go missing.¹⁸ The flip side of this is that no sentence of the language could express *Realism* about an entity, property, relation, or what have you. And since Anti-Realism is the denial of Realism, no sentence of the language would express Anti-Realism either.

To repeat, none of this shows that we cannot univocally *understand* an ontic term in context (or at least, understand it well enough for many purposes).¹⁹ Indeed, this is what allows us to separate 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 an unequivocal definition (in natural language at least). Thus our grasp of a commissive ontic term illustrates in one sense Wittgenstein’s (1953) claim that “there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not an interpretation*” (§201). But in the present case, the point is not shown by using skeptical possibilities for the meaning of terms (cf. Kripke’s ‘plus’ vs. ‘quus’). In the case of ontic terms, the alternatives are often *relevant* alternatives, for the noncommissive uses regularly occur in natural language.

Fortunately, the Wittgensteinian point indicates that the regimented language *can* contain a univocal ontic term in one sense. For if the term is univocally understood as commissive, then there will be no real cause for concern—even though the term will be equivocal, strictly speaking. Thus ‘**actual**’ might be introduced into the regimented language, e.g., as follows:

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

¹⁸ Even so, one might attempt to identify the ontological commitments of a theory by specifying its standard or “intended” model. However, I think this endeavor also is problematic; see Parent (2009), ch. 1.

¹⁹ Azzouni (2007) also emphasizes that terms can be used absent precise definitions (e.g., color terms).

Again, though the *definiens* can be used noncommissively, we all know it is meant to be commissive. So we might just let (D11) stand, and rely on the cues (e.g., the iteration of ontic terms, the use of italics) to prompt the appropriate reading.²⁰

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 attainable. Still, it is noteworthy that part of our constructed language, the part which signals ontological commitment, is a part that must be left somewhat unregimented.

I take this limitation to be nontrivial. In fact, although our understanding of a commissive term is good enough for many purposes, it looks insufficient for some. As concerns the Lewis-Lycan debate, for instance, I doubt that (D11) would resolve the dispute there. This is so, even though we all have some substantive understanding of what Lewis means by ‘actual’.

We began with a survey of the different noncommissive uses of ontic terms in English, in the attempt to define the commissive use. Yet we saw that a strictly unequivocal definition looks impossible. Nonetheless, an ontic term which is *understood* univocally is just as good, for most purposes. 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

²⁰ Of course for Wittgenstein, understanding ‘**actual**’ would not be a matter of knowing the interpretation at (D11) either. Instead, (D11) is what might define a commissive ontic term for the regimented language, in as much as this is possible. Though since (D11) is equivocal, one cannot ultimately protest if it is omitted and ‘**actual**’ is instead left as primitive in the language, assuming it is univocally understood.

are discussing mathematics, morality, modality, meaning, or mind, ontic terms have the potential to become hazy and out of control. And in those cases, it apparently cannot be reined in by some unequivocal definition.

VII. An Application: Metaontology.

This might be seen as vindicating Hirsch's (2005; 2008; 2009) superficialist view, where many 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. But this does not mean it has to be that way. Hirsch, however, suggests 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 whether "Composites exist" is based only on a misunderstanding. No ontological matter is ultimately disputed, and Hirsch concludes that "[t]he only real question at issue is which language is (closest to) plain English" (2005, 70).

Hirsch assumes, in line with his (2002) "quantifier variance," that the question about plain English is a question about the use of 'exist.' In Section I, however, we saw that 'exist' in ordinary English is used in *multiple* ways, many of which are not pertinent to ontological commitment. Hirsch must therefore mean that the question is: Which use of 'exist' is (closest to) the *commissive* use? Yet if that is so, then Hirsch's position is negatively affected. He is right that assertions of the form "x exists" occur regularly in plain English, where 'x' is replaced by a term for a composite. But that is irrelevant if 'exist' is used in an ontologically neutral 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; ms.) "Ontologese gambit," where ontology deploys a *specialized* use of an ontic term, the commissive use (cf. Sider's term '**existence**'). Moreover, it seems entirely possible to share an understanding of a univocal ontic term on its commissive use. (Recall again the Pope example.) And when that is so, ontological debate will not have disputants talking past each other (even if charity obliges us to interpret them that way). Rather, the debate will concern the substantive issue of whether composites satisfy a commissive term, i.e., whether composites *really exist*.

Sider's opposing view is not unproblematic, however. He seems to define commissive term '**existence**' (2009, §§10-11), yet this is the kind of thing that now seems in error. Sider's program still seems workable, however, since we can *understand* '**existence**' as univocally commissive—though it depends a bit on what 'workable' means. It is workable as an anti-superficialist view, for it illustrates how ontologists can coordinate on using an ontic term commissively. But it seems less workable if the term '**existence**' is meant to help resolve the nihilism issue. (I am unsure whether Sider intended as much, but it is worth noting regardless.) After all, the nihilism dispute persists not because it is up for grabs whether 'exist' is to be understood commissively. Rather, the debate continues because it is simply unclear whether composites satisfy a commissive ontic term, or basically, whether composites **exist**. Initially we might assert the **existence** of tables and chairs—but physics is able to call that into question, for such things 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 ‘**existence**’ could be given a univocal definition, perhaps that would provide the necessary clarity. But 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 draw attention to a certain kind of *quietism*. Though far be it from me to say such a thing.²¹

[5052 words]

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