

ONTIC TERMS AND ONTOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: Terms such as ‘exist’, ‘actual’, etc., (hereafter, “ontic terms”) are recognized as having ontologically “innocent” or non-commissive uses, besides their commissive uses. (E.g., ‘Pegasus exists’ will be true when ‘exist’ is relativized to a world of Greek myth.) In this paper, I identify five different non-commissive uses for ontic terms, and along the way I attempt to define (by a kind of *via negativa*) the commissive use of an ontic term, focusing on ‘actual’ as my example. The problem, however, is that the resulting *definiens* for the commissive use of ‘actual’ is itself equivocal between a commissive and a non-commissive reading, and thus I consider other proposals for defining the commissive use, including two proposals from David Lewis. However, each proposal is found to be equivocal in the same way—and eventually I argue that it is *impossible* to define an ontic term unequivocally. Even so, this is not meant to overshadow the fact that we can *understand* an ontic term as univocally commissive, in certain conversational contexts. I close by applying these observations to criteria of ontological commitment, and Realist/Anti-Realist debates.

[182 words]

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I will be discussing in this paper the use of ontologically significant expressions [a.k.a. “ontic terms”] such as ‘exist’, ‘there is’, ‘actual’, ‘real’, etc. Paradigmatically, such terms are used to assert the existence of various entities, as in sentences such as ‘ I exist’, ‘There are black swans,’ ‘Santa Claus is real,’ and so forth.

What interests me, however, is the fact that ontic terms have ontologically “innocent” or non-commisive uses as well. That is, there are containing sentences which do not entail that the satisfier of the term is actual. For instance, ‘Pegasus exists’ will be *true* when ‘exist’ is relativized to a Pegasus-world, as David Lewis (1986) taught us. That is so, even though this use of ‘exist’ would not indicate that Pegasus is *actual*.¹

Normally of course, no special problem arises when a term has more than one use. But with ontic terms, things are different: I will argue that the multiple uses make it *impossible to define* an ontic term unequivocally. This fact is philosophically significant since, as I shall argue, it presents an obstacle to a criterion of ontological commitment (in the standard sense of that phrase). Concordantly, it also becomes difficult to articulate an unequivocal statement of Realism about x , for any x . Even so, I eventually show that, in a non-standard yet pertinent sense, both a criterion of ontological commitment and an unequivocal statement of Realism remain possible.

¹ Nor does this semantic point entail Lewis’ modal metaphysics, where Pegasus is in some sense “real.”

A preliminary remark is in order. In section one, I proceed by first considering ontic terms as they occur in *natural* languages. (Only later do I extend the import of these remarks to regimented languages.) In this, I am assuming of course that ontic terms in natural languages have both commissive and non-commissive uses. Yet this is already a departure from Azzouni (2007) who contends that *every* ontic term in natural language is non-commissive. Still, even though ‘There are black swans’ on Azzouni’s view never *entails* the actuality of black swans, he accepts that in many conversational contexts, asserting this will ontologically commit you to black swans. Yet that is because ontological commitment, on his view, is a *pragmatic* phenomenon, rather than a semantic one.

Now in the end, I want to be neutral about whether Azzouni is right that natural language ontic terms are uniformly non-commissive. But I shall begin with the contrary assumption, for expository reasons. Yet after section one, I shall illustrate how the main issue is still relevant, even if we accept Azzouni’s view.

I. Five Ways to be Innocent.

Assuming that natural language ontic terms have commissive uses, how would we define such a use? In addressing this, we might examine cases where such terms are *not* commissive, in order to identify their commissive use by a kind of *via negativa*. In the present section, then, I document the various non-commissive uses for this purpose. In the next section, I shall bring out a problem for the resulting definition.

Interestingly, sometimes an ontic term is non-commisive simply because it has no ontological meaning whatsoever.² For instance, consider that ‘really’ can be used just as a kind of “intensifier,” as in the following:

(1) The Fonz is really cool.

Here, ‘really’ only signals a high degree of “coolness,” akin to the word ‘very’; the term is not used to indicate the *bona fide* existence of anything. Similarly, consider the following:

(2) The Fonz bought canned vegetables instead of real vegetables.

In this, ‘real’ is not used to distinguish vegetables with one ontological status from those of a different status. Instead, ‘real’ is used to distinguish vegetables by some other category. [This sort of example is what prompted Austin (1959) to call ‘real’ a “trouser word.”]³ So in a vacuous way, ‘real’ in these cases is used in an ontologically “innocent” way, since it is not even used with a distinctly ontological meaning.⁴ In this, the notion of a “distinctly ontological meaning” may seem unclear—but as far as I can tell, it is sufficient to say that an ontic term has such a meaning only if it is used neither as an intensifier nor as a “trouser

² I won’t discuss the use of ‘actually’ where it is merely a pragmatic device to indicate something unexpected: ‘Actually, artificial creamer is more unhealthy than coffee.’ After all, the sentence is equivalent to the same sentence minus ‘actually’; so there’s nothing semantic to discuss here. (Ram Neta objects that the sentence will embed in the antecedent of conditionals differently, if ‘Actually’ is deleted. But I suspect this is because the embedding forces ‘Actually’ to be a *bona fide* ontic term, instead of a pragmatic device.)

³ As a special case, ‘real’ may be used to distinguish vegetables from fake (plastic) vegetables. Yet since fake vegetables exist just as much as real ones, ‘real’ here would just be used as a “trouser” word. It would have *epistemic* significance in particular; it would contrast vegetables from things that only *look like* vegetables.

⁴ One might object that the sentence nonetheless implies that uncanned vegetables exist, so we cannot yet conclude that ‘real’ is devoid of ontological import. Yet (1) does not always have this implication since, for all the English sentence makes explicit, it may occur in a work of fiction.

word.” (Hereafter, I shall use “+ON” to indicate that an ontic term has a distinctly ontological meaning.)

Since (1) and (2) feature ‘real’ (or a cognate) where it does not have such an ontological meaning, it seems fair to say the term is ambiguous (given also that ‘real’ sometimes is +ON). Importantly, however, I shall illustrate that even when an ontic term is +ON, the term can still be read commissively or non-commissively. But whether these two readings suggest further *ambiguity*, as opposed to *polysemy* or some kind of hidden *indexicality*, is not something I shall address. I shall rather say in a neutral way that the +ON ontic terms are *equivocal*.⁵

So if we are interested in defining the *commissive* use of an ontic term, it seems clear that the term must be at least +ON. Yet this is not sufficient for the commissive use. Initially, it may be surprising that ontic terms can be used non-commissively, even when they are +ON. Yet there are at least three kinds of case where this is so, some of which are familiar. Consider for instance the following:

(3) Napoleon is an actual person.

‘Actual’ in (3) is +ON, since it is used to contrast an item with one ontological status from those with a different status. Yet the term still permits two readings: On one reading, (3) implies that Napoleon exists *now*, where ‘actual’ contrasts what is *presently* actual with what is not. And if people do not survive their deaths, (3) is false on that reading. But (3) also has an uncontroversially true reading, where Napoleon is contrasted with a fictional person—where the sentence just puts Napoleon in a different ontological category than the

⁵ Cf. Fodor (2006); p. 99, n. 20. Note that vague terms are not *eo ipso* equivocal on the present usage. Of course, categories such as “vagueness” versus “polysemy” versus “indexicality” might themselves be vague, but I shall pass over this here.

Fonz. And on that reading, the ontic term would be used non-commissively, given that its containing sentence would not entail the actuality of Napoleon at the *present* time.

Some may grant that (3) permits these two different readings, but still deny that the second reading interprets ‘actual’ in a “non-commissive” manner. Since (3) on that reading suggests at least that Napoleon is *non-fictional*, this ontologically “thick” implication seems to make the term commissive.

However, ‘commissive’ is a term of art, and we could stipulate things either way. Yet I think it will be more instructive if we reserve the term ‘commissive’ for cases where a term like ‘actual’ is used in the *strongest* sense of the term, to put it roughly. Or to put it in different rough terms, ‘actual’ is used commissively when it would not make sense to follow the assertion “*x* is actual” with the question “Yes, but is *x* *really* actual?” (Such a question would not make sense if it is obvious that ‘actual’ is used in the *strongest* sense possible.) Hence, in light of (3), I shall count an ontic idiom as “commissive” only if its containing sentence entails that the relevant object is *presently* actual.

Another example of a non-commissive +ON term is the one I mentioned at the outset, where the term is *relativized to a non-actual world*. Interestingly, even ‘actual’ can be relativized to non-actual worlds, as Lewis (1986) himself grants (p. 98-99). For instance, suppose a person is unsure if Pegasus an actual creature in Greek Myth, or has been mistakenly imported into Greek Myth, from some other mythic tradition, by popular culture. Then, in a Greek-Myth-centered context, we might appropriately respond:

(4) Pegasus is an actual creature.

But although we have said something true, (4) of course does not entail that Pegasus is genuinely *actual*. And that is so even though ‘actual’ here is +ON. Yet there is no mystery here since (4) in context would apparently be shorthand for something like “Pegasus is an

actual creature *in a world described by Greek Myth*.” And on that construal, of course, (4) does not entail that Pegasus is a denizen of *our* world.⁶ Yet since the bit in italics is suppressed, the ontic term can be read either commissively or not, as dictated by context.

So from our examples thus far, we have the following conditions on the commissive use of an ontic term:

(D1) An ontic term is used commissively iff (i) the term is +ON, and (ii) its containing sentence implies that the object of the term is presently a denizen of the actual world.

Now it may turn out that clause (i) is superfluous once we have clause (ii), and I shall address this matter soon. For now, I shall continue to include (i) in our present definition (at the risk of redundancy).

One shortcoming of (D1), however, is that (i) and (ii) do not seem to be sufficient for a commissive use. A further non-commissive use seems possible, even when an ontic term satisfies (i) and (ii)—though this is a use which is far less familiar. Indeed, it is a quite mysterious use, though the linguistic evidence seems formidable. Consider:

(5) Pegasus exists as a creation of the imagination.

It is natural to read (5) as true in the actual world. Yet if so, then ‘exists’ is apparently satisfied by an *actual object*. But of course the sentence would not entail that Pegasus is actual in the way that real, live horses are actual. Quite the contrary, the truth of the sentence means that Pegasus is *only imaginary*. So for this reason, we can say ‘exists’ in (5) is non-commissive. And that is so, even if we read the term as concerning *present-tense*

⁶ I assume here that world-relative use of ontic terms subsume uses where an ontic term is relativized to a fiction (since the term can be construed as relativized to the world described by the fiction). However, Bill Lycan reminds me that this is controversial; see for example Proudfoot (2006). So if preferred, fiction-relative uses can be separated from world-relative uses as a distinct kind of non-commissive use.

actuality. For the ontic term in (5) is non-commissive because of what Pegasus is in the actual world, viz., a figment of the imagination.

Some will balk at any suggestion that Pegasus is actual. I grant, of course, that Pegasus is not actual in the *commissive* sense of ‘actual’. Nevertheless, if (5) has a reading where it is true in the actual world (as I think it does), then Pegasus must be an actual satisfier of the ontic term. But because of his imaginary status in the actual world, ‘actual’ in this context would not be commissive. For in this case, ‘actual’ is satisfied by objects that actual people construct in their imaginations, besides what we usually think of as actual objects (in the commissive sense).

Of course, some may want more explanation concerning the “actuality” of Pegasus in this non-commissive sense, and I offer further explanation elsewhere.⁷ But my present aim is just to record the different non-commissive uses of ontic terms, so as to inform our definition of the commissive use. Suffice it to say, then, that ‘exists’ in (5) is used non-commissively in a novel way, since the actual truth of its containing sentence means that Pegasus is “actual” in one sense, though of course he is merely imaginary. That linguistic point appears to be solid, even though the metaphysics behind the point may be puzzling.

Notably, the ontic term in (5) is *not* equivocal, since it does not have a commissive reading at all. Even so, it does not follow that ontic terms are *never* equivocal between a commissive use, and the non-commissive use illustrated at (5). For instance, ‘Pegasus exists’ has a reading where it is elliptical for (5), though of course, ‘Pegasus exists’ could also have its ontic term read commissively, so that the sentence comes out false.

⁷ See Chapter Three of *Metasemantics*.

In any case, the upshot is that the ontic term in (5) apparently satisfies both clauses of (D1), even though it is not used commissively.⁸ If this is correct, it now looks like a proper definition of the commissive use would require a third clause:

(D2) An ontic term is used commissively iff (i) the term is +ON, (ii) its containing sentence implies that the object of the term is presently actual, and (iii) its containing sentence does not imply that the object is merely imaginary.

Again, there may be some kind of redundancy in this, but let that pass for now.

Before moving on, some philosophers may wonder about the non-commissive use of ontic terms in mathematical truths, such as the following:

(6) There exists an even prime.

As is well-known, when (6) is asserted in a high school classroom, it will ordinarily not entail Realism about the number two. (That is so, even if the speaker happens to be a mathematical Realist.⁹) Yet ‘exists’ here does not necessarily illustrate a further type of non-commissive use. For if numbers turn out to be useful fictions, for example, then the use of ‘exists’ in (6) would be of the same kind as that in (5). Or, if numbers turn out to be mere possibilia, then the truth of (6) would mean that ‘exists’ is relativized to a non-actual

⁸ Some might ask whether ‘exists’ in (5) is +ON. I am inclined to say so, because it attributes *some* positive ontological status to Pegasus, viz., it marks him as something that we have *actually* imagined. This is in contrast possibilities we have never imagined (at least in the sense of “mentally pictured”).

⁹ If you are a Realist, then the ontic term in (6) may be unavoidably commissive (if numbers are *essentially* Real). If so, then using an ontic term commissively would not be sufficient for ontological commitment, since clearly (6) can be asserted in a non-committal way. Accordingly, this type of Realist may have to side with Azzouni (2007) in denying that ontological commitment is a *semantic* affair.

world. I leave it as an exercise to consider how other views of numbers might affect the semantics of ‘exist’ in (6).¹⁰

II. Defining the Commissive Use.

At this point, we may ask how well (D2) fares as a definition of the commissive use. The main problem, I think, is that clause (ii) of the definition uses the term ‘actual’—which is itself an ontic term that has both commissive and non-commissive uses. Consider for instance that ‘Pegasus is actual’ is *true* if ‘actual’ concerns what is actual *in a world of Greek myth*. In this case, ‘actual’ is equivocal between the same readings that ‘exists’ had in (3). Yet if ‘actual’ is equivocal, then (D2) is also equivocal. And this would be a liability since, on some readings, (D2) will count certain ontic terms as “commissive” when they are not. For instance, if ‘actual’ in clause (ii) is relativized to a world of Greek myth, then ‘exist’ in (3) will be counted as “commissive” in the case where (3) is true. So if we are to avoid this, clause (ii) must replace ‘actual’ with something unequivocal.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that ‘actual’ in clause (ii) is inevitably equivocal *in context*. In the context of this discussion, in particular, we of course understand the commissive ‘actual’ in clause (ii), [or at least, understand it well enough, for many purposes]. Yet here is where issues about *regimentation* become relevant. I take it that the aim of regimentation is to construct a language which is free from all the unclarities, imprecisions, and indeterminacies that occur in natural languages. Standardly, this involves giving a clear, precise, and determinate definition of each term in the regimented language.

¹⁰ There probably are other novel, non-commissive uses of ‘exist’ in certain philosophical discussions, e.g., about mathematics. But I limit myself here to uses of ontic terms that are not foreign to ordinary discourse.

In particular, then, regimentation would apparently require a commissive ontic term to be defined in unequivocal terms. Yet that is precisely where (D2) is lacking.

So philosophically speaking, the issue of defining a commissive ontic term really is an issue within regimentation. (Linguists of course may find the issue of interest for their own purposes.) And as concerns regimentation, it is orthogonal to the issue whether ontic terms in *natural* languages have commissive uses, or are uniformly non-commissive [as Azzouni (2007) contends]. For either way, it is agreed that ontic terms in natural language are (at the very least) not always commissive. And so, both sides must start with the natural language ontic terms with their non-commissive uses, and from there try to get to a univocally commissive ontic term, for the regimented language.

Since my interest in the issue really concerns regimentation, we can simplify things if our goal is not to define the commissive use in general (for any language), but rather just to define a specialized ontic term for the regimented language, say, the term ‘**actual**.’ The aim then would be to use whatever resources we have in our home language to define ‘**actual**’ as univocally commissive.

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

(D3) x satisfies ‘**actual**’ iff (i) the term is +ON, (ii) its containing sentence implies that the object of the term is presently actual, where ‘actual’ is used commissively, and (iii) its containing sentence does not imply that the object is merely imaginary.

Yet since we are trying to precisify the “commissive” use of ‘actual’, it is not very helpful to say that its containing sentence entails that its object is actual in the “commissive” sense. That would presuppose the very notion which we wanted to make precise.

For our purposes, then, we need to find some univocal expression that is equivalent to ‘**actual**,’ so to replace the equivocal ‘actual’ in clause (ii), and avoid circularity in the process. But note that if the expression we seek is *equivalent* to the commissive ‘actual’, then the revised clause (ii) would clearly render clauses (i) and (iii) logically redundant. After all, it is enough to define our technical term ‘**actual**’ by some expression that is equivalent to ‘actual’ on its commissive use. Yet it is worth mentioning (i) and (iii), since they are informative of certain features of this use. But for brevity, hereafter I will omit them.

Of course, it will not suffice to define ‘**actual**’ by natural language ontic term that has a non-commissive reading, as in the following:

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

After all, without further comment, ‘exists’ remains open to a non-commissive reading that would render (D4) extensionally inadequate. The same point holds for other ontic terms such as ‘real’, ‘nonfictional’, etc. Accordingly, the following proposed definitions would be similarly inadequate:

(D5) x satisfies ‘**actual**’ iff x is nonfictional.

(D6) x satisfies ‘**actual**’ iff there is a $y = x$.

(D7) x satisfies ‘**actual**’ iff x is real.

After all, each term on the right-hand side has a non-commissive reading, e.g., where they are relativized to non-**actual** worlds. Thus, ‘nonfictional’ in (D5) has a reading where it is relativized to a world of Greek Myth—and if the term is read in that way, then the following is true:

(7) Pegasus is nonfictional.

And if ‘non-fictional’ were read this way in (D5), then given the truth of (7), Pegasus would satisfy ‘**actual**’. In the same manner, if the conversation concerns a world of Greek Myth, the following sentences are also true:

(8) There is a $y = \text{Pegasus}$.

(9) Pegasus is real.

And so without further qualification, (D6) and (D7) are also inadequate to define ‘**actual**’.

There is a different class of putative definitions for ‘**actual**’ which include:

(D8) x satisfies ‘**actual**’ iff x is physical.

(D9) x satisfies ‘**actual**’ iff x it is in space-time.

(D10) x satisfies ‘**actual**’ iff x is mind-independent.

And it is not implausible to see Azzouni (2004), (in preparation) as committed to something like (D10). Note first that (D8)-(D10) are distinctive from the other definitions, in that they attempt to identify the satisfiers for ‘**actual**’ by their *metaphysical* rather *ontological* status. In other words, the satisfiers for ‘**actual**’ are characterized by their *nature*—not according to whether they really and truly exist. Yet because of that, (D8)-(D10) will be inadequate to define ‘**actual**’. For in other possible worlds, certain non-**actual** objects have the status of being “physical,” “in space-time,” and “mind-independent.” In a world described by Greek Myth, for instance, Pegasus is physical, occupies space-time, and is a mind-independent object. Yet it remains the case that he is not **actual**. So when we go across possible worlds, these definitions count certain non-**actual** objects as **actual**.¹¹ Thus, without further supplement, none of (D8)-(D10) are adequate as definitions. (Naturally, one might want to clarify that we have in mind **actual**

¹¹ (D10) also is problematic in implying that the mind is not **actual**, even though it refers to “mind.”

physical objects, **actual** objects in space-time, or **actual** mind-independent objects. But this would be to engage again in circularity.¹²)

III. A Proposal from Lewis.

Of course, contemporary metaphysicians are unaccustomed to seeing ‘actual’ as having a non-commisive use, and so may balk at such a suggestion. Yet it seems that English indeed permits non-commisive uses of the term. Even David Lewis (1986) grants that ‘actual’ can be used as a “blanket” term for everything that exists—which for Lewis, includes mere possibilia (p. 99). But of course, this is not how he uses the term. He writes:

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)

But importantly, Lewis attempts to define the commisive ‘actual’ here using a novel strategy, viz., *ostension*. The suggestion is something like:

(D11) x satisfies ‘**actual**’ iff x is in *this* world.¹³

I do not doubt that we understand (D11) univocally in many contexts. Even so, it is not made explicit which world the demonstrative is fixed on. And for that reason, (D11) as formulated has multiple readings in English, some of which concern the **actual** world, and some of which do not. [One can imagine a context where a world of Greek Myth is the

¹² Circularity here would not result in completely uninformative definitions; the definitions would teach you, e.g., that actual objects are physical. But ‘actual’ (used commisively) is doing the real defining work here, since it alone defines ‘**actual**,’ whereas ‘physical,’ ‘in space-time,’ and ‘mind-independent’ do not.

¹³ Instead of a demonstrative, Lewis sometimes uses the pronoun ‘our’ to the same effect, as in ‘ x satisfies ‘**actual**’ iff x is in *our* world.’ However, since ‘our’ is contextually shifty in the manner of a demonstrative, the points I make about the ostensive definition carry over to this other definition as well.

topic, and (D11) introduces a term-of-art for denizens of *that* world.] Now again, none of this shows that (D11) will be completely misunderstood in context—for instance, we all immediately grasp that the term is +ON. But I think we have indeed shown that (D11) fails to describe in strictly unequivocal terms what ‘**actual**’ means.

It is important, moreover, that in some contexts the ostensive definition does *not* communicate a strictly univocal understanding of ‘actual’, even by English speakers who understand the definition quite well. Indeed, one such context occurs in Lewis’ own discussion of modal realism. At one point, Lewis considers Lycan’s (1979) objection that modal realism implies the absurdity that “all possibilities are actual.” This would follow from his modal realism if Lewis’ use of ‘actual’ is equivalent to his use of ‘real.’ Yet it is precisely here that Lewis reports that he does not use ‘actual’ as a “blanket term” to cover all possibilia, even though he calls all possibilities “real.” He pushes Lycan even further, saying that “Nobody could have thought I *meant* to use either ‘actual’ or ‘world’ as a blanket term” (p. 99, his italics).

However, note first it is unclear what Lewis means by ‘real’. If ‘real’ is used non-commisively, then it would be *trivial* to say that possible worlds are “real.” Yet since modal realism is not supposed to be trivial, it must be that ‘real’ is used *commisively*, just like how Lewis uses ‘actual’. Thus, since modal realism says that possible worlds are “real,” it would follow that all possible worlds are actual. So it is understandable if Lewis’ critics failed to grasp his use of ‘actual’. In order to avoid triviality, it seems his possibilia are meant to be “real” in a *commisive* sense, that is to say, **actual**, though he denies this.

But to be fair, I think there are a few replies Lewis could make here [though I am starting to doubt whether any of these replies work. See Parent (in preparation)]. Yet regardless of how this turns out, the main point for our purposes is that the confusion with

‘actual’ arises, despite Lewis’ ostensive definition. For although the ostensive definition communicates to us that ‘**actual**’ +ON—and more exactly that it is satisfied by objects in *this* world—there is still an issue about which world *this* world is. So in the relevant context, the equivocal phrase ‘in *this* world’ gets the better of us: The ostensive definition fails to transmit a univocal understanding of what Lewis means by ‘actual’ in that context. So the ostensive definition of ‘actual’ does not always suffice for a univocal understanding of the term.

IV. Another Proposal from Lewis.

I have made this visit with Lewis-scholarship to illustrate that the equivocal status of the +ON ‘actual’ is not an idle concern. One might have thought that *strictly speaking* this term is equivocal, but within a context it is not. Yet there *are* contexts where it remains equivocal, and philosophically important contexts at that. Accordingly, although I have been selling the issue as an issue for regimentation, it is clear now that the issue bears on modal metaphysics as well. So continuing the search for a univocal definition of ‘actual’ is far from idle.

Now Lewis (1986) offers a second way to describe the semantics of 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 here, then, would be to define a commissive ontic term by construing it as a *restricted quantifier*—a quantifier that does not range over all possibilia but just over this-

worldly things. But as the phrase ‘this-worldly things’ makes clear, restricting the quantifier depends on the same ostensive strategy that (D11) used in defining ‘**actual**’.

Accordingly, the difficulty with (D11) appears here as well.

However, a further strategy is suggested by Lewis’ *iteration* of ontic terms in succession. In particular, instead of using ‘exist’ alone, Lewis goes commissive by compounding two ontic terms to obtain ‘really exist’. And the iteration may seem to result in an expression which is univocal.

But in fact, it does not. For the phrase ‘really exist’, and similar compound ontics, can be contextually relativized to a non-actual world just as much as any one ontic term in isolation. Thus, the compound ontic terms in the following sentences can all be relativized to a world of Greek Myth, so that the following sentences come out true:

(10) Pegasus really exists.

(11) Pegasus is actually nonfictional.

(12) In reality, Pegasus is a nonfictional being that actually, truly exists.

Again, when the topic is Greek Myth, (10) for example will be shorthand for “Pegasus really exists *in a world of Greek Myth*.”

An especially striking example of a non-commissive, compound ontic occurs if the discussion concerns the “play-within-a-play” in Act V.i of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

If your interlocutor insists that there is no lion in the nested play, you may respond:

(13) *I’m not making up this up; there really and truly is a lion, Snug.*¹⁴

Again, in the right context, you would be saying something true, even though you have asserted the existence of something that is not **actual**, not even in Titania’s world.

¹⁴ N.B., the ontic phrases here would be non-commissive for two reasons, since they are about a character that is not only *imaginary*, but also is part of a *non-actual world* (i.e. the world of Shakespeare’s play).

Thus, we have not yet unearthed an ontic-expression in the language which is unequivocally commissive.¹⁵ However, Lewis may not be to blame for these circumstances. We have been canvassing options for defining the commissive use of an ontic term, in an extensionally adequate, unequivocal, and non-circular manner. But in fact, there is a general argument to the effect that *such a definition is impossible*. First, I think it can be established that:

(14) To define an ontic term unequivocally, one must employ an unequivocal ontic term.

However, if (14) is established, we can then observe in addition that *every* ontic term seems equivocal.¹⁶ For it always seems possible for context to relativize the use of an ontic term to a fiction, as in the Greek Myth examples. After all, in these fiction-centered contexts, it is not as if we are *forbidden* from using some of these terms. Yet if all ontic terms are thus equivocal, then given (14), it would follow that an unequivocal definition of a commissive ontic term is *impossible*.

The argument for (14) is this: Suppose that OI is an ontic term that applies to an object *a*. (Notation: *a*_OI.) Suppose further that Z is a term which correctly interprets OI as univocally commissive, so that the true interpretation ‘‘OI’ applies to *a* iff *a*_Z’ is also univocal. Now since ‘*a*_Z’ is meant to be equivalent to ‘*a*_OI’ where ‘OI’ is commissive,

¹⁵ Someone might suggest 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 the fact is that redundancy is always possible in English, even if there is no reason for a speaker to do it. And that means iterating ontic terms does not guarantee an ontic-phrase that is univocally commissive.

¹⁶ Azzouni (in preparation) also makes this point.

the interpretation is true only if ‘ a_Z ’ entails that a is **actual**. And if ‘ a_Z ’ entails that a is **actual** then ‘ Z ’ is a commissive ontic term (and univocally so). QED.¹⁷

V. Wittgensteinian Understanding and Primitive Ontic Terms.

The impossibility of an unequivocal definition has, I think, important philosophical consequences. The immediate consequence is that, given the standard conception of regimentation, there is no way to introduce a commissive ontic term into the regimented language. And this, moreover, is bad news for *a criterion of ontological commitment*. The usual strategy is to identify ontological commitments in a regimented language by those sentences containing a commissive ontic term.¹⁸ Yet if it is impossible to define a commissive term into a regimented language, then a criterion of ontological commitment is also impossible.¹⁹

The flip-side of this, notably, is that no sentence of the regimented language would univocally express *Realism* about an entity, property, relation, or what have you, since this

¹⁷ Some have worried that this form of argument generalizes too readily, so that other equivocal terms will turn out to be undefinable as well. I am not aware of any convincing example of this however. Usually, there is no problem in defining an equivocal term in a univocal way, e.g. ‘bat’ may be defined in unequivocal terms as the instrument used in baseball to hit the ball. [Of course, certain terms in this may be vague, but vague terms are not *eo ipso* equivocal (see n. 5)].

¹⁸ Quine (1948) is of course the *locus classicus* on this. N.B., my characterization of criteria for ontological commitment is compatible with Azzouni (2004), who utilizes an existence predicate as his commissive term, rather than the existential quantifier.

¹⁹ Even so, it seems possible to identify the ontological commitments of a theory by specifying its standard or “intended” model. However, I think this endeavor also is problematic; see Chapter One of *Metasemantics*.

would presumably require a commissive ontic term. Conversely, since Anti-Realism is the denial of Realism, no sentence of the language would express Anti-Realism about *x*.

None of this shows, however, that we cannot *understand* an ontic term univocally, in many contexts (or at least, understand it well enough for many purposes). After all, such an understanding is what allows us to distinguish the controversial and the uncontroversial reading of ‘Napoleon is actual.’²⁰ Yet if there is no defining what it is we understand, then our understanding cannot be a matter of knowing an unequivocal definition or interpretation. So the rule for using an ontic term commissively is, apparently, a perfect illustration of Wittgenstein’s (1953) dictum “there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not an interpretation*” (§201). In the present case, however, Wittgenstein’s dictum is not argued by considering largely irrelevant skeptical hypotheses for the meaning of terms (‘plus’ vs. ‘quus’). In the case of ontic terms, the alternatives are *relevant* alternatives, since the commissive and non-commissive uses regularly occur in natural language. So even though we may not be able to *explicitly* define an ontic term on the commissive use, we can still *implicitly* understand such a term univocally, on an occasion of use.

Nevertheless, if the Wittgensteinian view is correct, then in a nonstandard sense, we *can* define a commissive ontic term into the regimented language. Namely, if we introduce an ontic term which is *understood* (in the Wittgensteinian sense) to be commissive, then often there is no real cause for worry—even though the term will be equivocal, strictly speaking. This attitude would then allow us to introduce ‘**actual**’ into the regimented language, e.g., along the following lines:

²⁰ Azzouni (2007) also emphasizes that terms can be used absent precise definitions (e.g., color terms).

(D12) x satisfies ‘**actual**’ iff it is *really real*.²¹

Again, ‘really real’ is strictly speaking an equivocal term, though in the present context we all know it is meant to be read commissively. So we might let (D12) stand, and just rely on the contextual cues (e.g., the iteration, the use of italics) to prompt speakers into understanding the right-hand side commissively.

If we are lax in this way about introducing a commissive term into the regimented language, then Realism and Anti-Realism once again become expressible in the language. And a criterion of ontological commitment can be identified, based on what satisfies the commissive term. Still, it is noteworthy that part of our constructed language—the part which is meant to signal ontological commitment—is a part that must be left somewhat unregimented.

I take this limitation to be non-trivial. In fact, although our Wittgensteinian understanding of a commissive term is good enough for many purposes, it still looks insufficient for some purposes. In particular, if you will recall the Lewis-Lycan debate in modal metaphysics, I doubt that (D12) would dispel the issue there. That is so, even though we have *some* Wittgensteinian understanding of what Lewis means by ‘actual’. (Clearly, he means ‘actual’ to be “commissive.”) Yet despite our understanding of Lewis’ commissive ‘actual’, the issues with modality are too obscure to see immediately whether Lewis can call mere possibilia “real” (in a non-trivial sense) without calling them “actual.” And so, our Wittgensteinian understanding of the term (at least initially) does not suffice to make clear what Lewis is really saying.

²¹ Of course, on the Wittgensteinian view, our understanding of ‘**actual**’ would not be a matter of knowing the interpretation at (D12) either. (D12) is given in order to introduce a commissive term into the regimented language, in as much as this is possible.

VI. Closing Remarks.

I began with a survey of the different non-commissive uses of ontic terms in English, in the attempt to define the commissive use—yet we have seen that an unequivocal definition is impossible. Nonetheless, I have concluded that a definition which is *understood* univocally in context is just as good, for most purposes. And given the expressive power this adds to the regimented language, it would be perverse to despair of the situation rather than allow a somewhat unregimented term into the language.

Still, there is the limitation this implies for modal metaphysics; moreover, it seems to me that *any* debate between a Realist and Anti-Realist about x is potentially limited in the same way. Whether we are talking about the Reality of mathematics, morality, modality, meaning, or mind, the relevant ontic terms have the potential to get out of our control. And in those cases, it apparently cannot be reined in by some unequivocal definition.

[6,461 words]

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