Comments on Chalmers's "Ontological Anti-Realism"*

Jonathan Schaffer
University of Massachusetts-Amherst

Chalmers seeks to develop a coherent anti-realist framework, on which questions about what exists go indeterminate. I will suggest that Chalmers *half succeeds*. He develops a coherent (and new, and cool) framework, but one that requires at least *half*-realism—realism with respect to the fundamental structure of the world.

1. Ordinary and Ontological Existence Assertions

First, is any distinction between ordinary and ontological existence assertions? Chalmers claims that there is a "natural" distinction. I don't see it. So here are three arguments that there is no such distinction, at least with respect to truth-conditional semantic content.

The argument from inter-contextual links: Existence claims made in ordinary and ontological contexts are not independent. For instance, if I say "there are tables" at the bar, and "there are no tables" during the conference, it will seem as if I have contradicted myself. I owe you some explanation. Likewise if I say "numbers exist" in one context, it seems that you are free to disquote me—in any other context—as having said that numbers exist. These practices would be in *error* if ordinary and ontological existence assertions had different content. (Of course they may be in error. But then an explanation is needed for how we are prone to such errors.)

The argument from metaphysical practice: Metaphysical practice presupposes that there is no ordinary/ontological distinction. Thus the descriptive metaphysician seeks to describe folk ontology, the revisionary metaphysician to revise it, and the conservative metaphysician to conserve it. If there were no connection between ordinary and ontological existence assertions none of this would be possible. The ontological existence assertions of the descriptive metaphysician would not be able to match the ordinary existence assertions of the folk. Most metaphysicians are competent speakers of the language (more or less). If there is a 'natural distinction' here, then an explanation is needed for how we could have been so blind to it.

The argument from linguistic implementation: Ordinary and ontological existence assertions may employ the very same wording (for instance, "numbers exist"). To get the same words to express different meanings (given a compositional semantics), there must be either (i) some ambiguity or context-dependence attaching to the denotation of "exist" (and any other idioms of existential quantification), or (ii) some further covert variable hidden in this sort of sentence. But as far as I can see, "exist" does not pass any of the standard tests for ambiguity or context-dependence, and this sort of sentence does not pass any of the standard tests for a covert ordinary/ontological variable. I can't take the time to set up all the tests and run through them here. So suffice it to say that I am skeptical that a compositional semantics will allow for the sort of distinction Chalmers draws, and would invite him to tell us more about how that might go.

By my lights the best treatment of quantified expressions involves a covert variable for *domain restriction*. With covert variables there is a decent error story to be told. So by my lights we can tell a natural and syntactically defensible story about variation in the content of existence assertions, which couples with a decent error theory. But this story treats ordinary and ontological existence assertions *the same way*, as both involving existential quantification over some domain. Perhaps many ordinary existence assertions are intended to take restricted domains; perhaps many

* These comments presuppose familiarity with Chalmers's "Ontological Anti-Realism"—no summaries attempted here.

ontological existence assertions are intended to be unrestricted. This would suffice to explain any feeling of a 'natural difference' here.)[1]

I have only argued that ordinary and ontological existence assertions have the same truth-conditional *semantic content*. Chalmers allows that the 'correctness difference' between these assertions may be merely pragmatic. But in that case the mathematician's truism "there are prime numbers" would still establish the metaphysician's claim "there are numbers," even if assertion of the latter might go infelicitous. A merely pragmatic difference seems beside the point.

I don't want to spend more time on this issue, because it seems to me that *Chalmers does not really need this distinction*. Chalmers ultimately wants to analyze ordinary existence assertions by a contextually determined furnishing function, and to analyze ontological existence assertions by supervaluating over admissible furnishing functions. *This does not require any ordinary/ontological distinction*. Suppose that all existence assertions (treating them all the same now) are to be analyzed by supervaluating over the allowed furnishing map(s) of the context. Suppose also that ordinary contexts tend to determine one (or just a narrow band) of furnishing maps, while ontological contexts tend to allow many (along a wide range) of furnishing maps. Then one recovers Chalmers's analysis of the various existence assertions, without needing to draw any ordinary/ontological distinction. Chalmers generally tries to stay neutral where his framework is neutral, so I would conclude this section by suggesting he go neutral here as well.

2. Worlds, Domains, and Discounted Furniture

Anti-realism (in Chalmers's sense) has long been troubled by the objection that existence claims only require the logical resources of quantification and identity, and it is hard to see what could be indeterminate with these. Chalmers notes that there is still room for indeterminacy about *the domain of quantification*. And he points out that the actual world is a concretum while domains are set-theoretic abstracta, so that the existence of the world does not yet supply a canonical domain for the existential quantifier. *This is an excellent point.*

I think Chalmers's furnishing functions do provide a coherent framework, but one that is not nearly as neutral as Chalmers suggests. In particular, I will now argue that his furnishing functions actually *presuppose* heavyweight realism about fundamental structure.

The argument for heavyweight realism about fundamental structure: Furnishing functions are maps from a world to a domain. But a function is a map from one structure ('the input') to another ('the output'). One cannot have a well-defined function without there being some articulated structure to the input. In particular we must be able to specify *the arguments* of the function. Any function is either complete or partial. It is either injective or not. It is either surjective or not. None of these classifications would make sense unless the input ('the world') already comes with some fundamental articulated structure inbuilt, to feed into the function.

The realism about the fundamental structure of the world has to be *heavyweight*. Or at least, it cannot be given by 'analytic' or 'trivial' ampliative conditionals like "if you have

[1] I may have misunderstood Chalmers here. He may well be willing to accept the quantifier domain restriction story as a version of the ordinary/ontological distinction (provided, presumably, that ordinary contexts tend to involve different restrictions than ontological ones). If so I have no quarrel whatsoever with the ordinary/ontological distinction, nor should any realist. The mathematician asserts that prime numbers exist. If that univocally establishes the determinate existence of numbers within the restricted domain of the mathematician, then the realist metaphysician who works in any domain that encompasses the mathematician's will be univocally committed to the determinate existence of numbers.

particles arranged tablewise, then you have a table," because the world-bit is telling you whether or not you have particles arranged tablewise in the first place. *That* cannot be analytic or trivial.[2]

Perhaps Chalmers can made do without functions, and invoke some other sort of relation between (i) a world without any inbuilt structure, and (ii) a quantifier domain. Perhaps—but then I want to hear what this other relation is. Or perhaps Chalmers can substitute families of functions for his functions, or something like that. But then—without further adjustments—he would lose determinacy for ordinary existence assertions. Or perhaps Chalmers can rely even more heavily on context, to supply not just an intended furnishing, but also an intended fundamental architecture. But I think this puts far too much pressure on context—I doubt that speakers have determinate intentions about fundamental metaphysical structure to attach to their assertions. In any case, though there are certainly many further moves to consider, I conclude that the framework that Chalmers *actually* supplies is at least *half-realist*, in the sense that it presupposes heavyweight realism about fundamental structure.[3]

Please note: Chalmers is *not* opposed to half-realism. He is officially neutral.[4] What I am suggesting is that his furnishing functions are not so neutral—they *require* heavyweight realism about fundamental structure, in order to make sense of mappings.

The resulting half-realism is, to my mind, not implausible. With realism about fundamental structure one still gets a solid grounding in the world—one does not feel the sense of ontological vertigo that full anti-realism induces.

3. Quine, Aristotle, and Chalmers

What is ontology? Chalmers begins with the now standard Quinean line, on which "The basic question of ontology is 'What exists?'" But elsewhere he considers the gloss that ontology is "an attempt to discover the fundamental structure of reality" *These are different*. The Quinean view does not require there to be any fundamentality ordering at all. It only asks after an (unstructured) set of entities.

The view that ontology studies fundamental structure is *Aristotelian*. For Aristotle, metaphysics is the science that studies *substances* (fundamental entities): "Substance is the subject of our inquiry; for the principles and causes we are seeking are those of substances. For if the universe is the nature of a whole, substance is its first part" (*Meta*.1069a18-20). The Aristotelian view is thus stronger than the Quinean view, in the sense that if you start with the unstructured Quinean domain, there is no guarantee that you can recover a hierarchical ordering. But if you start with the Aristotelian substances and grounding relations, you can solve for the Quinean domain, by taking the closure of the substances under the grounding relations. You generate the remaining entities.

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[2] Though the fundamental structure need not be a structure of particles. It could be a monistic structure of just the world itself (indeed this may be the most natural way to read Chalmers's functions), or it could be stuff or processes or property distributions, etc. I think Chalmers is committed to the *existence* of fundamental structure, but not to any particular view of its *nature*.

[3] Note that I am *not* concerned here with the use of abstracta within semantics. Chalmers can have all that. I am concerned with the prior issue of the *input* to the semantics.

[4] Indeed, Chalmers explicitly mentions his attraction to half-realism, combined with anti-realism about the remaining non-fundamental structure. And in other work (such as on consciousness and on the 'entry by entailment' thesis) Chalmers is explicitly in favor of realism about the fundamental.

By my lights, Quine got ontology wrong. The interesting ontological disputes are never about what exists, but rather about *what grounds what*. For instance, the real dispute about numbers is *not* whether they exist (of course they do; this follows immediately from the truism that there are prime numbers). The real dispute is about whether they exist as transcendent substances independent of the human mind (Plato), or whether they exist as constructions of the human mind (Kant). The real dispute is not about existence. It is about mind-independence.[5]

Here are some further examples of classic ontological disputes that concern grounding rather than existence:

- *Realism vs. idealism*: a dispute about whether material objects are mind-dependent.
- *Universalism vs. nominalism*: a dispute about whether properties are mind-dependent.
- *Dualism vs. Materialism*: a dispute over whether minds are matter-dependent.
- *Substantivalism vs. Relationalism*: a dispute over whether spacetime is dependent on distance relations between objects.
- *Monism vs. Pluralism*: a dispute over whether the whole depends on its parts, or whether the parts depend on the whole.

In general, if the *x*s depend on the *y*s, and the *y*s exist, then the *x*s exist thereby. For instance, if tables are constructions of the human mind as Berkeley maintained, and minds exist (with the appropriate perceptions), then tables exist thereby.

By my lights, we should be extremely permissive about existence. Numbers, properties, propositions, partialia, possibilia—you name it, it exists. (Intuitions otherwise can *always* be explained away by domain restriction.) The interesting question is what if anything these entities exist *in virtue of*. I think Aristotle got it right. Go back to the *Metaphysics*. The whole discussion is about substances. There are virtually no existence questions. In one place Aristotle does ask whether numbers exist, and he replies immediately that of course they do, "with the character ascribed to them by mathematicians" (*Meta*.Mu.3). The real discussion is about whether numbers are substances or not (in particular about whether they are 'separable' from the concrete realm).[6]

Suppose we start from the Aristotelian position that ontology must identify the substances. Questions about existence are not that important. But still, what about them? What I suggest we take from Chalmers is a new way of being Aristotelian. One way to shrug off the existence questions is by being very *permissive*, in the way I have been suggesting. But one could also be *dismissive* as to whether there is even a fact of the matter. So my concluding suggestion is that the best way to understand Chalmers is as developing a coherent (and new, and cool) dismissive Aristotelian framework. So understood, Chalmers would not be rejecting traditional Aristotelian ontology, but merely dismissing Quine's question.

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[5] There is room for other positions on numbers. For instance, one might hold that numbers (like all abstracta) are dependent on the concrete realm, without specifically being mind-dependent. This is the view I would attribute to Aristotle.

[6] Aristotle elsewhere does occasionally consider existence questions with respect to time, place, the void, and the infinite (*inter alia*). But throughout he always acknowledges existence, and is primarily concerned with *in what way* something exists. Thus he comes to say of the infinite:

> The infinite, then, exists in no other way, but in this way it does exist, potentially and by reduction. It exists fully in the sense in which we say 'it is day' or 'it is the games'; and potentially as matter exists, not independently as what is finite does. (*Phys*.3.6)

As Owen summarizes with the example of time, "The philosophical query 'Does time exist?' is answered by saying 'Time is such and such' and showing the answer innocent of logical absurdities" (1986: 275).