Metametaphysics

Do Ontological Questions Have Determinate Answers?

Metametaphysics

- Metaethics asks:
  - What are we saying when we make ethical assertions
    - E.g. "Such-and-such is good"
  - Do ethical assertions have a determinate truth-value?
  - What determines the truth/status of ethical assertions?

- Metametaphysics asks:
  - What are we saying when we make metaphysical assertions
    - E.g. "Such and such entities exist"
  - Do metaphysical assertions have a determinate truth-value?
  - What determines the truth/status of metaphysical assertions?

Ontological Questions

- The basic ontological question: "What is there?"

- Specific ontological questions:
  - "Are there numbers?"
    - Yes: Platonists
    - No: Nominalists

  - "Are there mereological sums of arbitrary objects?"
    - Always: Universalists
    - Never: Nihilists
    - Sometimes: Others

Ontological Determinacy

- Q: Do these ontological questions have a determinate answer? Must one of (say) Platonism or nominalism be correct?

- Yes:
  - Quine
  - Lewis, van Inwagen, Sider
  - Most contemporary metaphysicians?

- No:
  - Carnap
  - Putnam, Hirsch, Yablo
  - Many contemporary non-metaphysicians?

Internal and External Questions

- Carnap, "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology" (1951)
  - Existence questions always involve linguistic frameworks: e.g. the framework of mathematics, or of propositions.

- There are two sorts of existence questions.

  - *Internal questions:* questions of the existence of entities *within* a linguistic framework
    - "Are there any odd perfect numbers?"
    - "Is there an apple on the table?"

  - *External questions:* questions concerning the existence of the framework's system of entities as a whole
    - "Do numbers exist?"
    - "Do ordinary physical objects exist?"

Internal and External Claims

- Carnap: Internal claims (answers to internal questions) are typically true or false

- Their truth or falsity is framework-relative
  - determined by the rules of the framework, plus experience (and/or?) the world.

- Their truth or falsity may be
  - analytic (e.g. mathematical claims)
  - empirical (e.g. claims about ordinary objects)

- External claims are neither true nor false
  - The choice between frameworks is practical rather than factual
  - Any further question is a "pseudo-question", without "cognitive content".

A Carnapian Intuition

- Question: Given that objects X and Y exist, does their sum exist?

- Carnapian intuition: There's no deep further fact here.
  - Once one knows about X and Y, one thereby knows everything relevant there is to know
  - There isn't a further fact here of which one is ignorant
  - One can't even conceive of two relevantly different states of affairs here.

- Once God fixed the facts about elements, how were further facts about mereological sums fixed?
  - By a further decision (contingent truth?)
  - By conceptual necessity (analytic truth?)
  - By pre-existing metaphysical necessity (brute metaphysical truth?)

- None of these options seem attractive.

A Realist Intuition

- So-called "external questions" aren't questions about language or about frameworks, but are straightforward questions about existence.

  - $\exists x$ number (x)
  - $\forall x \, \forall y \, \exists z \; z = \text{sum}(x, y)$

- Sider, van Inwagen

  - The predicates don't seem to be vague, and the rest is just first-order logic.
  - "What part of '$\exists$' don't you understand?"

"Syracuse's Most Holy Place"