

From an Ontological Point of View

JOHN HEIL

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

1.1 The Inescapability of Ontology

The twentieth century was not kind to metaphysics. In the English-speaking world, metaphysics was deflated by neo-Kantians, logical positivists, logical empiricists, as well as by philosophers who regarded the study of ordinary language as a fitting replacement for traditional philosophical pursuits. Elsewhere, philosophers promoting phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existentialist and deconstructionist creeds showed themselves equally disdainful of tradition. Metaphysical talk was replaced by talk about metaphysical talk; concern with conceptual schemes and patterns of ontological commitment supplanted concern with ontology. Presumably, we have something like direct access to ways we think and talk about the world. The world itself remains at arm's length, a subject for study by the empirical sciences. Metaphysics as traditionally conceived seems to pit philosophers against scientists in a way that is bound to favour the scientists and make the philosophers look ridiculous.

Attempts to keep philosophy aloof from metaphysics are largely self-defeating. Whether we approve or not, the world has an ontology. Theorists and theories of the world are themselves parts of the world.¹ This homely complication is too often forgotten or ignored by those who regard the world as a construct. If the world is theory dependent, what of theories themselves? Do these stand alone, or does their existence depend in some fashion on other theories ('theories all the way down')? Whatever the story turns out to be it will include an ontology measurable against competing ontologies.

I shall have more to say on this topic in subsequent chapters. For the

¹ Hilary Putnam (1981: p. xi) puts this nicely: 'the mind and world jointly make up the mind and world.' I prefer not to draw Putnam's difficult anti-realist conclusions from this observation.

present I want only to note the inescapability of ontology. We can suppress or repress ontological impulses. In so doing, however, we merely postpone the inevitable. Honest philosophy requires what the Australians call ontological seriousness. In the chapters that follow I endeavour to provide central ingredients of a fundamental ontology. I believe that what I have to say fits well with what we have learned or might learn from the empirical sciences and—importantly, in my judgement—with ordinary canons of plausibility. My defence of the conclusions I draw, however, will be indirect. The test of the overall view is not its derivability from uncontroversial truisms, but its power: the extent to which it enables us to make sense of issues we should otherwise find perplexing.

Wherever possible I have avoided technical terminology. Much current philosophy strikes me as technically astute but philosophically barren. The deep issues should be addressable in ways that are intelligible to non-philosophers willing to think hard about them. A technical vocabulary can be liberating, but it can be constraining as well, channelling thoughts along familiar paths. Occasionally this can lead to the dismissal out of hand of alternatives that could otherwise appear attractive. Philosophers, of all people, should be open-minded, especially in domains where there is little or no settled agreement. If over-reliance on a technical framework produces philosophical blind spots, we should be willing to forgo, or at least re-examine, the framework once we hit an impasse.

1.2 Consciousness

Such an impasse currently exists in the philosophy of mind. Many philosophers (and many non-philosophers) are convinced that the Problem of Consciousness is the last Big Problem. Physics (we are told) has all but provided a complete account of the material world. Consciousness, in contrast, is said to remain an utter mystery. To be sure, some theorists have attempted to deflate the mystery, but the overwhelming sentiment is that the deflators have missed the point. The dispute has the earmarks of classical philosophical disputes. Not only is there disagreement over particular answers, but there is little agreement over what the appropriate questions are. One possibility is that

we are floundering because we lack an adequate conceptualization of the territory. Without this, our questions remain out of focus; we are in no position to recognize correct answers even if we had them, or to distinguish truths from pretenders.

An adequate conceptualization of the world and our place in it is founded, not on the analysis of concepts, but on an adequate ontology. Ontology is not an analytical enterprise. Earlier I noted that in engaging in ontological investigation we are endeavouring to make sense of issues we should otherwise find perplexing. The issues in question arise in the sciences, in the humanities, and in everyday life. To this extent they include an ineliminable empirical element. My belief is that, if we get the ontology right, these issues will take care of themselves in this sense: the remaining questions will be largely empirical hence susceptible to techniques we standardly deploy in answering empirical questions.

In pursuing ontological themes it is tempting to imagine that there is not a single, correct ontology, but many. Given one ontology, we can see how certain issues could be handled; given an alternative ontology, the same issues might be dealt with, perhaps more elegantly. It is true, certainly, that ontologies differ in these ways. I cannot, however, bring myself to believe that there is no correct ontology, only diverse ways of carving up ontological space. One impediment to a conception of this kind is that it is hard to make ontological sense of it. What is the ontology of ontology? In any case, I shall proceed on the assumption that our goal should be to get at the ontological truths. This may require triangulation rather than anything resembling direct comparison of theory and world. In that regard, however, ontological theories are no different from theories generally.

1.3 Conceivability and Possibility

Some philosophers are attracted to the idea that what is conceivable is possible. One proponent of this thesis, David Chalmers, deploys it as the linchpin of an elaborate defence of a kind of mind–body dualism (D. Chalmers 1996). Chalmers argues from the conceivability of ‘zombies’ (creatures physically indiscernible from ordinary human beings, but altogether bereft of conscious experiences) to the

conclusion that mental properties are ‘higher-level’ properties, distinct from, although dependent on, their lower-level physical ‘realizers’. These higher-level mental properties ‘arise from’ suitably organized physical systems owing to contingent laws of nature. These laws are ‘basic’ in the sense that they are independent of fundamental physical laws: laws governing consciousness are not derivable from laws governing physical processes. Chalmers sees this kind of nomological independence as grounding the possibility of worlds like ours physically, but lacking consciousness. These are the zombie worlds.

If conceivability implies possibility, the question must be: what is conceivable? Is it conceivable that water is not H₂O? It is conceivable that our chemistry is mistaken, so it is at least epistemically conceivable that water is not H₂O. It does not follow from this that water’s being H₂O is a contingent matter. What of the zombies? Doubtless zombies are epistemically conceivable: we seem able to imagine zombies. This, however, is consistent with zombies being flatly impossible. For us to move from the conceivability of zombies to the possibility of zombies, and from there to mind–body dualism, we should have to be certain that the conceivability in question is not merely epistemic conceivability. This, I think, is less straightforward than it is sometimes thought to be.

A triangle’s having more than three angles is not conceivable. Triangles, of necessity, have three angles: only a three-sided figure could count as a triangle. When it comes to zombies, however, matters are less clear. The conceivability of zombies depends on a range of substantive, but largely unacknowledged, *ontological* theses. Chalmers holds that, in the actual world, functional similarity guarantees qualitative similarity. Your conscious experiences arise from your functional organization. That functional organization is grounded in your physical make-up. We could swap out components of that make-up—replacing neurons with silicon chips, for instance—but, so long as your functional organization remains intact, the character of your conscious experience would remain unaffected. Imagine now subtracting the laws that tie consciousness to functional organization. If Chalmers is right, this would leave the physical world unaffected.

The possibility envisioned by Chalmers depends on a particular conception of properties: objects’ qualities (including conscious qualities) can vary independently of their causal powers (or, as I prefer, their

dispositionalities). This, in fact, is merely one of a number of substantive ontological theses required for the conceivability of zombies. Others include the idea that laws could vary independently of the properties and the notion that the world comprises 'levels of being'. If these theses are false, the conceivability of zombies is cast into doubt. If you find the zombie possibility hard to swallow, you might be moved to reject one or more of these supporting theses.

I shall discuss these matters in detail presently. My aim here is simply to point to the ineliminability of metaphysics, and, in particular, ontology, from serious discussion of issues in the philosophy of mind.

1.4 The Picture Theory

Although my focus is on fundamental questions in ontology, I have a good deal to say about the relation language, or thought, or representation bears to the world. My contention is that metaphysics as it has been conceived at least since Kant has been influenced by an implicit adherence to a Picture Theory of representation. I leave it to others to decide the extent to which the Picture Theory I describe resembles Wittgenstein's famous doctrine (Wittgenstein 1922/1961).

I do not contend that many philosophers nowadays explicitly endorse the Picture Theory; its acceptance is largely implicit. This makes the theory's influence both more subtle and more difficult to defuse than it might be otherwise. In large measure, learning to be an 'analytic philosopher' today is a matter of inculcating tenets of the Picture Theory. It was not always thus, although, given the inevitable practice of reformulating the views of historical figures in a more contemporary and congenial idiom, this can fail to be obvious. Whatever its standing among philosophers, I believe the Picture Theory is manifestly incorrect. I suspect, as well, that many philosophers would accept this verdict while continuing to practise in ways that belie their rejection of the theory's tenets.

My conviction that the Picture Theory is ill considered does not stem from my being in possession of a better, more plausible account of the connection words (or concepts, or thoughts, or representations generally) bear to the world. I have no such account, nor do I know of any. It is easier to recognize that a theory is defective than to advance a

more promising alternative. Most readers will agree with my assessment: the Picture Theory is hopeless. Readers will diverge, however, in the extent to which they agree with my further claim that this theory has been, and remains, widely influential. Suppose I am wrong about that. In that case, my diagnosis of where we have gone off the rails ontologically will be misconceived. The ontological theses I defend, however, could still be correct. Indeed I believe these theses stand quite on their own. But this is to get ahead of myself.

What exactly is the Picture Theory? As I conceive of it, the Picture Theory is not a single, unified doctrine, but a family of loosely related doctrines. The core idea is that the character of reality can be ‘read off’ our linguistic representations of reality—or our suitably regimented linguistic representations of reality. A corollary of the Picture Theory is the idea that to every meaningful predicate there corresponds a property. If, like me, you think that properties (if they exist) must be mind independent, if, that is, you are ontologically serious about properties, you will find unappealing the idea that we can discover the properties by scrutinizing features of our language. This is so, I shall argue, even for those predicates concerning which we are avowed ‘realists’.

The Picture Theory encompasses the idea that elements of the way we represent the world linguistically ‘line up’ with elements of the world. Few theorists would think this is so for the ways we ordinarily speak about the world. But consider the language of basic physics. Here it looks as though we have something close to what we need: a name corresponding to every kind of object (‘electron’, ‘quark’, ‘lepton’), and a predicate corresponding to every property (‘mass n ’, ‘spin up’, ‘negative charge’).

What about our more relaxed talk about the world? Consider, for instance, the assertion that Gus is in pain (and suppose this assertion is true). It is at this point that the apparatus of the Picture Theory asserts itself. We want to be ‘realists’ about pain. That is, we want to say that Gus *really is* in pain, that our ascription of pain to Gus is *literally true*. An adherent of the Picture Theory will want this to imply that corresponding to the pain predicate is some property (or state) of Gus. The very same predicate applies to others, of course, to creatures belonging to very different species, and it would apply to non-actual, merely possible creatures: Alpha Centaurians, for instance. It seems

unlikely, however, that all of these creatures share a unique physical property in virtue of which the pain predicate applies truly to them. What follows? Perhaps this: either it is false that Gus is in pain (the pain predicate lacks application) or the property answering to ‘is in pain’ is something other than a physical property.

Many readers will recognize this style of argument, and many will be ready with a response: the pain property is a ‘higher-level’ property, a property possessed by actual or possible creatures in virtue of their possession of some lower-level (presumably physical) property. This lower-level property is the ‘realizer’ of the property of being in pain.

This is a version of the well-known argument for ‘multiple realizability’. I shall have more to say about the argument in subsequent chapters. For the moment I mean only to call attention to one facet of it. We want to be realists about pain. We are invited to move from the fact that the pain predicate fails to correspond to a unique physical property to the conclusion that either (1) there are no pains—there is no pain property—or (2) the property of being in pain is a higher-level property. This line of reasoning appears persuasive, I think, because we have inculcated the Picture Theory. We expect to find a property corresponding to every predicate we take to apply literally and truly to the world. If no physical property fills the bill, we posit a tailor-made higher-level property. This is a property somehow dependent on, but distinct from, lower-level ‘realizing’ properties.

1.5 Levels of Being

Once set on this course, we quickly generate hierarchies of properties. We discover that most of the predicates we routinely use to describe the world fail to line up with distinct basic-level physical properties or collections of these. We conclude that the predicates in question must designate higher-level properties. Now we have arrived at a hierarchical conception of the world, one founded on the inspiration that there are levels of reality. Higher levels depend on, but are not reducible to, lower levels.

My contention is that the idea that there are levels of reality is an artefact spawned by blind allegiance to the Picture Theory. The Picture Theory gives us a model for the relation words bear to the world. Some

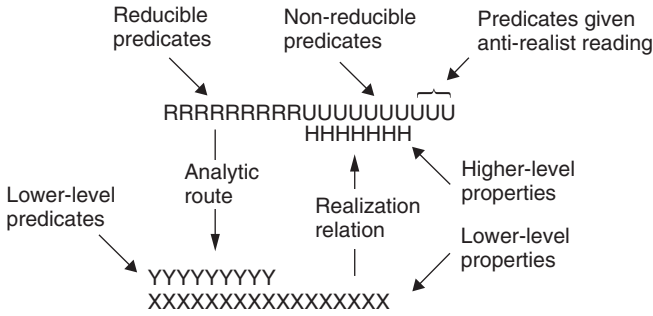


Figure 1.1. The levels conception

of what we say aligns with the basic facts. Other things we say are analysable in terms that correspond to items at the basic level. When this is so, we have an analytic route to the basic level. When it is not so—when, in other words, reduction fails—we are faced with a choice. We can go anti-realist: we can decide that the words in question apply to nothing at all, that they are ‘projections’ of our attitudes, or that we do not use the words with the intention of asserting truths (but only to express attitudes). When anti-realism seems unattractive or unworkable, we can accept that the disputed words do indeed line up with features of the world: higher-level features.

The levels conception as mandated by the Picture Theory is illustrated in Figure 1.1. *Xs* represent reality at the basic level; *Ys* are predicates that line up with items at this basic level. *Rs* and *Us* represent what could be called higher-level predicates. Some of these higher-level predicates, the *Rs*, are analysable in terms of the *Y*-predicates. When this occurs, we establish that the *Rs* are (or are really, or are nothing but) the *Ys*. The remaining higher-level predicates, the *Us*, are those that resist reduction. Some of the *Us* line up with higher-level properties, the *Hs*, while some apply to nothing at all. The model is oversimplified in at least one way. In actual practice, we should discover many levels of predicates, and so many levels of properties.

I shall argue that the higher-level items, the *Hs*, are a product of the Picture Theory operating hand in hand with a familiar conception of philosophical analysis. In abandoning the Picture Theory—as I urge—we abandon the need for levels of reality. In leaving behind levels, we leave behind myriad philosophical puzzles. These, if I am right, are puzzles of our own making.

In turning away from the Picture Theory, we turn our backs on the idea that ontology can be settled by analysis. Clarifying the nature of items picked out by our concepts is not a matter of analysing those concepts until we are in a position to read off the items' nature from the analytic outcome. What is the alternative? We must, I think, take seriously the idea of truth making. When a claim about the world is true, something about the world makes it true.

Imagine that you want to uncover the ontology of statues. (Why would you care? You might care because, having read countless philosophers on the topic, you are unsure of the relation a statue of Zeus bears to the lump of bronze that makes it up.) You might begin by asking whether talk of statues could be analysed into talk of material out of which statues are made. Alternatively, you might ask what the truth-makers might be for assertions of the form, 'This is a statue.' The history of philosophical analysis provides little reason to think that in this case, and in most other philosophically interesting cases, we could hope to find an analytic route from concept to truth-maker.

1.6 Propositions

One reason the Picture Theory has remained viable is the casualness with which philosophers introduce talk of propositions into discussions of truth making. 'Electrons have a negative charge' is true in virtue of electrons being negatively charged. What is this 'in virtue of' relation? Many philosophers contend that it is entailment: true assertions are entailed by their truth-makers. Entailment, however, holds between representations. Electrons being negatively charged, like the electrons themselves, entails nothing. Recognizing this, philosophers who regard truth making as entailment typically reformulate their thesis: the proposition that electrons are negatively charged entails the truth of assertions that electrons are negatively charged.

Thus deployed, propositions are patently representational entities, items having definite truth values. But what are propositions? In this context, propositions function as intermediaries standing between the world and statements or assertions about the world. As such, propositions are posited entities, at once linguistic (they are true or false) and non-linguistic (they are language independent,

though ‘expressible’ by sentences in a given language). When pressed, philosophers will describe propositions as states of affairs or sets of possible worlds. But wait! Neither sets of possible worlds nor states of affairs—electrons being negatively charged, for instance—have truth values.

The ease with which we run together talk of propositions and talk of the world, or ways the world is, is just another facet of our commitment to the Picture Theory. This commitment encourages us to substitute descriptions for what is described in thoughts about what answers to concepts we rely on in describing the world and our place in it. The relation propositions bear to reality is so intimate that the propositions replace the reality in our thinking. When we do the ontology of propositions, we ignore their representational character and identify them with the reality they represent. In other moods, we invoke propositions as truth-bearers. It is easy to doubt that a single kind of entity could fulfil both these functions. In abandoning the Picture Theory, we leave behind one traditional motive for postulating propositions.

1.7 Ontology

Most of what follows concerns topics in basic ontology. Unsurprisingly, given what I have said already, I begin with a discussion of levels of reality, the idea that the world comprises layers of being. After spelling out what I take to be implied by such a view and discussing its liabilities, I argue that it results from giving innocuous talk of levels of description or explanation an unwarranted ontological reading. This I attribute to an implicit commitment to the Picture Theory. My recommendation is that we abandon the notion that reality is hierarchical. We can accept levels of organization, levels of complexity, levels of description, and levels of explanation, without commitment to levels of reality in the sense embraced by many self-proclaimed anti-reductionist philosophers today. The upshot is a conception of the world and our representations of it that is ontologically, but not analytically, reductive.

Today, reductionist theses have an unsavoury reputation. This I think is due largely to a conviction—encouraged by the Picture Theory—that reduction implies that talk of the reduced items (statues, for

instance, or persons) could be translated into (and so replaced by) talk of the atoms and the void (or whatever we regard as occupying the lower levels). This is taken to imply that all there is are the atoms and the void. In rejecting the Picture Theory, I reject both these implications. Truth-makers for claims about statues or people could turn out to be configurations of the atoms in the void. This, however, while providing what might be thought of as the deep story about statues and people, falls well short of establishing that there are no statues or people.

In discussing these matters, I address the role of philosophical analysis and the notion of truth making. I argue that the widely held view that truth making is to be understood as entailment is misguided in principle and potentially misleading. Again, I detect the influence of the Picture Theory, which encourages us to conflate descriptions of the world and the world.

A clear view of these issues is important if we hope to obtain a sensible notion of what realism requires. Realism is too often characterized in ways that commit realists to unattractive doctrines. (The idea that there are levels of reality is just one such doctrine.) I prefer to associate realism with mind independence. You are a realist about a given domain—material objects, say, or numbers, or minds—if you regard that domain as mind independent: the domain is what it is quite independently of how we take it to be. Are minds mind independent? Well, minds are what they are independently of how we take them to be.

With these background issues settled, I move to a discussion of objects and properties. Properties, I contend, are ways objects are; objects are property-bearers. Properties—or, at any rate, intrinsic properties of concrete objects—contribute in distinctive ways to the powers or dispositionality of their possessors. Although powers or dispositions are powers or dispositions *for* particular kinds of manifestation (with particular kinds of reciprocal disposition partner), they are not relations. An object's powers or dispositionality are intrinsic features of that object.

Some philosophers who accept a view of this kind regard properties as pure powers, pure dispositionality. I prefer to think of properties as simultaneously dispositional and qualitative. Properties contribute in distinctive ways to the dispositionality and to the qualities of their possessors. This might be put by saying that a property is a quality and is a power. The power and the quality are not 'aspects' of the

property, but the selfsame property differently regarded. This means that it is flatly impossible to prize apart powers and qualities. In the idiom of possible worlds, any world qualitatively indistinguishable from the actual world is dispositionally indistinguishable from the actual world; and any world dispositionally indistinguishable is qualitatively indistinguishable as well.

Properties—ways particular objects are—are modes, not universals. I prefer ‘mode’ to the more familiar ‘trope’. Philosophers identifying themselves as trope theorists have, by and large, accepted some form of the ‘bundle theory’ of objects: an object is a bundle of compresent tropes. I believe it is important to distinguish objects from ways objects are and a mistake to regard objects as somehow made up of their properties. Properties are ways particular objects are, not parts of objects. The traditional term ‘mode’ captures the idea nicely. A mode is a particularized way an object is, not an ingredient or component of an object.

Modes are ‘particularized ways’, not universals. I argue that the fascination philosophers have with universals is misplaced. Universals are either Platonic entities residing ‘outside’ space and time or entities existing *in rebus*, wholly present in each of their instances. Universals have seemed attractive because they promise a simple solution to the ‘one-over-many’ problem: distinct objects can be ‘the same’ in particular respects. An apple, a billiard ball, and a rose are all red. A proponent of universals can say that these objects share a constituent: each ‘instantiates redness’. If universals are Platonic entities, instantiation is a deeply mysterious relation. If universals are *in rebus*, then a universal is wholly present in each of its distinct instances. What this could mean is hard to say.

If you accept that properties are particular ways objects are, you will want to allow that these ways can be perfectly or imperfectly similar. An apple, a billiard ball, and a rose possess similar colours. The apple’s redness is similar to, but distinct from, the redness of this billiard ball and the redness of that rose. The objects possess the same colour in the sense that two bankers might wear the same tie to work, drive the same car, or collect the same salary: although numerically distinct, the ties, cars, and salaries are similar, perhaps exactly similar. My contention is that similarity among modes can do the job universals are conventionally postulated to do. If, as I believe, proponents of universals are obliged to

posit brute imperfect similarities among universals (to accommodate certain cases of imperfect similarity), then the putative advantage of universals over modes evaporates.

Properties are ways—ways objects are. But what are objects? I have said that objects are not bundles of properties. Ways cannot be combined to yield something that is those ways. It might be thought that, in distinguishing objects (or substances) from properties, I commit myself to the existence of mysterious entities: ‘bare particulars’, property-less substrata to which we add properties to produce ordinary objects. The envisaged consequence depends on a conception of objects and properties that I reject, a conception according to which objects and properties are components of a compound entity joined together by a kind of metaphysical superglue. Once we move beyond this conception we can recognize an object—this beetroot, for instance—as something that is various ways: red, spherical, pungent. The beetroot *is* the object.

Finally, I extend earlier claims about the relation of predicates and properties to substantial terms (‘sortals’) and substances, arguing that philosophical puzzles arising over coinciding or overlapping objects (statues and lumps of bronze, for instance) depend on assumptions of a kind countenanced by the Picture Theory. Rejecting the Picture Theory makes it possible for us to be realists about statues, lumps of bronze, and most ordinary objects, without thereby having to suppose that the world is made up of large numbers of overlapping or spatially coincident entities.

1.8 Applications

The remaining chapters address familiar topics—substantial identity, colour, intentionality, and consciousness—given the ontology sketched earlier. Ordinary objects are apparently coloured, but what are colours? Following Locke, I sketch a broadly dispositional account of colour that, if successful, reconciles ordinary colour experiences with pronouncements of colour scientists bent on sorting out the physical basis of colour in objects, in light radiation, and in the brain. The ontology of properties defended previously comes into play.

The final three chapters take up central themes in the philosophy of

mind—intentionality, consciousness, and the possibility of ‘zombies’—in the light of this ontology. Dispositionality provides a grounding for intentionality, the of-ness, or for-ness exhibited by many states of mind. The nature of properties as simultaneously dispositional and qualitative is, I argue, the key to understanding the place of consciousness in the material world. Properties of conscious experiences, the so-called *qualia*, are not dangling appendages to material states and processes but intrinsic ingredients of those states and processes.

Although in addressing such topics I make use of an ontology that stands or falls on its own, an important yardstick of that ontology’s merit lies in its applications. Earlier I spoke of the power of an ontological theory. I understand power to be a measure of the capacity of the theory to resolve a wide range of problems in a natural way. On that measure, I believe the ontology sketched here stacks up well.

The time has come to stop looking ahead to where all this might lead and to start getting there. Before venturing forth, however, let me officially acknowledge my debt (registered in the preface and at various places in the pages that follow) to C. B. Martin, whose ideas underlie so much of what I have to say here.