

Foreword

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People disagree about all sorts of matters. Sometimes they disagree about *how* things are, for example, about whether a certain wine is corked, or about whether a certain book is interesting, a thesis original, a type of act morally reprehensible. Sometimes people disagree also about *what* things are. Is the duck-billed platypus a kind of mammal? Are viruses organisms? Is light a wave or a stream of particles? What is virtue? Indeed, sometimes people disagree even about *whether* certain things exist at all, about what *there is* (τὸ ὄν or τὰ ὄντα). That is, their disagreements may at bottom be *ontological*. For example, suppose some of us disagree about whether there is, or is not, orange juice in the refrigerator. This could be represented (albeit somewhat pretentiously) as an ontological disagreement—though here, only about a small and not especially exciting part of what there is, namely what there is in the refrigerator.

If we wish to settle or resolve our disagreement about the orange juice, we will, barring very unusual circumstances indeed, surely not turn to philosophy. We will rather simply walk over to the refrigerator, open the door, and look whether or not there is a carton, bottle, or pitcher of orange juice in it. Other cases may in practice prove vastly more difficult to settle. Consider the issue of whether there is life, or intelligent life, on other planets, in faraway galaxies. This is something about which people (can) clearly disagree. And here it may prove very difficult, even physically impossible, to go to those planets and “check” in order to resolve the disagreement. Nevertheless, we are inclined to think that checking is the natural thing to do, is the right way of seeking to address and settle this question. Again, no help from philosophy is wanted or needed; in fact, it is unclear what philosophy could contribute towards settling the matter.

There thus are disagreements which could be thought of as ontological disagreements and which call for empirical resolution. Other ontological disagreements—say, whether your phone number occurs in the decimal expansion of π —appear most immediately to call rather for mathematical or arithmetic methods for their resolution: if we had a proof to the effect that this is impossible, the question

would be answered in the negative; if, on the other hand, we, at some stage of calculating the value of π , encountered your phone number in the decimal expansion, or if we had a proof that this would be, not only very likely, but bound to happen if we carried our calculations far enough (beyond the fifteen trillion decimal digits of π that have actually been calculated thus far), we would have answered the question affirmatively. Absent either having received such a result by calculation, or having a proof, the question is open, and is one about which it is possible to disagree. But, as with questions about what is in the refrigerator or about whether there is life on planets in faraway galaxies, there seems to be no role for a *distinctively* philosophical contribution towards settling the question about the expansion of π . Similarly, there seems to be no distinctive role for a philosophical contribution towards settling ontological questions that appear to depend on administrative, legal, or political decisions. Whether there is, or ever was, such a thing as the Kingdom of Tavolara is not an empirical question, or not exclusively an empirical question. (Checking whether the island, Tavolara, exists might be a necessary step towards, but is not sufficient for, arriving at an answer about the Kingdom.) Yet neither does this seem to be an ontological question of the kind philosophers worry about. It is a matter that only politics, political historiography, or the institutions of international law can resolve, just as it is a matter of international law and politics whether the Grand Duchy of Flandrensis exists today, or is a matter of legal stipulation and practice that there are such things as binding contracts, trust funds, labor unions, or bicycle lanes on particular roads.

There are, however, also ontological questions that do seem plausibly to fall within the purview of philosophy, and about whose answers philosophers may (and do) variously disagree. Traditionally, these include “weighty” questions, which many people, including most non-philosophers, would take to be characteristically “philosophical” ones. Think of the three that Kant mentions: Does God exist? Is the soul immortal (i.e., are there immortal souls)? Is our will free (i.e., is there such a thing as a free will)? It is *prima facie* much clearer that philosophy has a central role to play in thinking about these questions, not least because (some) philosophers have sought, and to this day seek, to clarify just what is being asked in each case, and to reflect on what would count as settling these questions, or on whether they can be settled at all. Indeed, even if one holds that one or more of these questions will, after having been suitably clarified, reformulated, or further divided into a number of sub-questions, call for an empirical answer, or empirical answers, it still seems that these are philosophical questions in a way in which questions about the contents of refrigerators, life on faraway planets, the decimal expansion of π , or the Kingdom of Tavolara are not. They are philosophi-

cal questions precisely insofar as a large part of the difficulty in answering them, or in denying that they can be answered, lies in the sort of conceptual clarification that is required to determine what exactly needs to be settled (perhaps empirically) in order to answer them.

When it comes to disagreement about the answers to these philosophical questions, and to various others, there is one important aspect to which we want here above all to draw attention. It typically seems to the advocates of each of the opposed alternatives that the answer to the question—the resolution of the disagreement—*matters* a great deal. Thus the overwhelming majority of theists believe that it is a matter of utmost importance that God exists. (Epicurus might be an interesting exception.) Atheists, for their part, typically think that it is an important fact about the world that there are no divinities. Indeed, for all their disagreements about what there is, both theists and atheists (except perhaps apatheists, such as Diderot) are agreed that whether or not God exists makes a difference. Likewise, it seems to matter whether or not there is some form of personal immortality. And while the conclusion for which some philosophers argue, namely that immortality would actually be a bad thing for us (because of the “tedium of immortality”, or because “finitude” is necessary for our, human, lives to be “meaningful”), is perhaps surprising, such a conclusion is surely far less surprising than would be maintaining that immortality is irrelevant, that it makes no difference whether or not we, or some important part of us, are, or is, immortal.

This feature of “making a difference” is of course not restricted to ontological disagreements of the philosophical kind. Perhaps it does not matter very much whether there is orange juice in the refrigerator, or whether the decimal expansion of π does in fact contain your phone number. But surely the existence or non-existence of life on faraway planets can make a big difference to our lives, at least potentially. Perhaps few care about the Kingdom of Tavolara, beginning with the last descendants of the family that proclaimed its existence, the happy owners of the restaurant *Da Tonino, Re di Tavolara* on the island’s bay. But surely the existence or non-existence of the Kingdom would make a significant practical difference to those living on the island, e.g. concerning the taxes they owe, and to whom they should pay them. Surely, the existence or non-existence of a binding contract will make a huge difference to the relevant parties. And, to take a rather different kind of case, if some of us believe in ghosts and think that certain houses are haunted, while others of us hold that there are neither ghosts nor haunted houses, this almost certainly will bear on some of our decisions, say, decisions about whether or not to buy, and to move into, a supposedly haunted house. Disagreements often matter—sometimes a great deal—and they do so in many spheres

of life and in inquiries of many kinds, including of course in philosophical investigations. Disagreements about what there is are no exception.

Still, we want to draw attention to this feature of “making a difference” because one striking fact about certain ontological disagreements with which philosophers have engaged recently is that the “side” one takes does *not* seem to make a difference; indeed, it seems to make *no difference at all*. For example, those who deny that numbers are among what there is typically take pains to assure us that this denial is in no way meant to challenge or undermine ongoing arithmetical and mathematical practice. Indeed, they often assure us that their distinctively “philosophical” form of denying that there are numbers is to be distinguished sharply from “obviously insane” forms of denying that there are numbers—forms of denying this which would call for rejecting our arithmetical and mathematical practices as illegitimate. Similarly, those who deny that there are objects such as tables and chairs, over and above some more fundamental “items” arranged table-wise and chair-wise, do not typically deny that our more ordinary ways of speaking, including speaking of tables and chairs, are acceptable, at least in a way, or to some extent. Thus this kind of denial that there are tables and chairs, by contrast to an “obviously insane” kind of denial, looks, again, as if it might well make no difference.

But not making any difference in these ways can easily give rise to any number of perplexing questions. Are those who say that numbers do not exist and those who maintain that they do exist *really* disagreeing with one another? Are they even disagreeing *at all*? If they *are* disagreeing, what exactly are they disagreeing about? (It is surely not helpful at this stage to insist that they are *simply* disagreeing about whether or not numbers exist.) And if they are *not* disagreeing, or are not *really* disagreeing, how are we to understand the fact that they take themselves to be disagreeing? Are the parties to such a putative disagreement just confused? Or talking past each other? If it is a matter of confusion, what kind of confusion is involved? If it is a matter of talking past each other, how does this come about? Are the relevant parties perhaps attaching different meanings to the statements that give expression to their disagreements, or to specific locutions that appear in those statements? If so, just *what* is each party saying?

Carnap and Quine famously provided important, influential discussions of issues relating to questions of this kind, and for some time their views seemed, to many, to settle matters in one way or another. More recently, however, those questions and the “meta-ontological” disputes they lead to have again become the object of vigorous inquiry and debate. Some contributors to the debate continue to engage with those earlier discussions. Others do not, or do not do so directly, but

rather aim at redefining the very terms in which the discussion should be conducted. Yet together they all reflect a renewed interest in the philosophical dimension of ontological disagreement. This issue of *The Journal of Philosophy* is devoted entirely to work arising out of such renewed interest, and to its relevance to the broader questions that define the aims and scope of ontology in contemporary metaphysics.

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