

State of the Art Essay

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The Nature of Metaphysics

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1 What is Metaphysics?

The best approach to an understanding of what is meant by 'metaphysics' is by way of the concepts of appearance and reality. It is a commonplace that the way things seem to be is often not the way they are, that the way things *apparently* are is often not the way they *really* are. The sun apparently moves across the sky – but not *really*. The moon seems larger when it is near the horizon – but its size never *really* changes. We might say that one is engaged in 'metaphysics' if one is attempting to get behind all appearances and to describe things as they really are. This statement points in the right direction, but it is certainly rather vague. What would it *be* to 'get behind all appearances and describe things as they really are'? How could one determine whether someone was engaged in this activity? What does 'engaging in metaphysics' look like?

We can say this: if one is attempting to 'get behind all appearances and describe things as they really are', if one is 'engaging in metaphysics', one is attempting to determine certain things with respect to certain statements (or assertions or propositions or theses), those statements that, if true, would be descriptions of the reality that lies behind all appearances, descriptions of things as they really are. (Primarily to determine which of them are true and which of them are false. But also, perhaps, to determine various other things about them, such as which ones are reasonable to believe, and which ones are logically consistent with one another.)

Let us call this 'reality that lies behind all appearances' simply Reality (with a capital). And let us call statements that, if true, would be descriptions of this Reality *metaphysical statements*. Which statements are, if true, descriptions of Reality? This is a difficult question, because it cannot be determined simply from examining a speaker's words whether the speaker has made a metaphysical statement: one must also examine the context in which those words were spoken. It is necessary to do this because different 'restrictions of intended reference' may be in force in different contexts, and this has the consequence that the same words can express different things in different contexts. If, for example, you look into your refrigerator and say sadly 'There's no beer', you are not asserting that the

existence of that beverage is a myth or an illusion. And this is because, in the context in which you are speaking, you and your audience know that your statement is intended to describe only the state of things inside your refrigerator. Let us see how this point might apply in a case in which we want to know whether a speaker has made a metaphysical statement. The late Carl Sagan, in his television series *Cosmos*, made the following much-quoted statement: 'The cosmos [i.e. the physical universe] is all there is or was or ever will be'. Was this a metaphysical statement? Well, that depends. In the context in which Sagan made his statement, were there any restrictions of intended reference in force? Did Sagan, perhaps, intend his statement to apply only to physical things? Was he perhaps saying only that the cosmos was the totality of physical things, past, present and future? In that case, his statement was not a metaphysical statement, but simply an explanation of the meaning of the word 'cosmos'. Or did Sagan perhaps make his statement in a context in which there were *no* restrictions of intended reference in force? Did he mean to say that *everything* – everything without qualification – was a part of the cosmos? (Notice that, on the 'unrestricted' interpretation of his statement, the statement implies that there is no God or anything else that is not physical; on the 'restricted' interpretation, the statement has no such implication.) In that case, his statement can plausibly be described as a metaphysical statement – for if we learned that there was no God or anything else non-physical, would we not learn something about the reality that lay behind all appearances?

One requirement on a metaphysical statement, then, is that it be made with no restrictions of intended reference in force. A second, and closely related requirement, is that the statement represent a serious attempt by the speaker to state the strict and literal truth. We often express ourselves carelessly or loosely or metaphorically. (Restriction of intended reference might be seen as a special case of not speaking 'strictly'.) We say things like 'The sun is trying to come out', 'The car doesn't want to start', 'Time passes slowly when one is bored' and 'Dark, angry clouds filled the sky'. Since metaphysics is an attempt to get at how things really are, this requirement is not hard to understand. Those who say things like these do not mean to assert that the sun, the car or the clouds are conscious beings, or that time can pass at different rates, and, therefore, at least some of the features of these statements do not represent an attempt to say how things really are. Our second requirement can also be expressed this way: the speaker must be willing to take responsibility for the strict and literal consequences of the words he or she has used to make the statement.

May we then understand a metaphysical statement as one that (1) is made in a context in which no restrictions of intended reference are in force and (2) is such that the speaker who makes it has made a serious effort to speak the strict and literal truth? This would not be satisfactory, for to call a statement 'metaphysical' is to imply that it is a very general statement, and these two conditions include nothing that implies generality. An example may help us to understand the kind of generality that a statement must have to be a metaphysical statement. Suppose Alice says, 'All Greeks are mortal'. Let us assume that when she makes this statement, no restrictions of intended reference are in force: she means her

statement to apply to *all* Greeks, and not only to the members of some 'understood' special class of Greeks. And let us assume that this statement represents a serious effort on her part to speak the strict and literal truth. (Since the statement contains no figurative language and no 'well, I hope you see what I mean' linguistic shortcuts, this assumption is reasonable enough.) Perhaps these two assumptions imply that her statement, if true, describes Reality, but it certainly does not describe very *much* of Reality. After all, it tells us only about Greeks; it tells us nothing about elephants or neutron stars or even non-Greek human beings. It is therefore not sufficiently general to count as a metaphysical statement.

What sort of statement would be 'sufficiently general'? Might we say that to be sufficiently general to be a metaphysical statement, a statement must be about *everything*? This will not do, and for two reasons. First, *any* 'all' statement is in one sense 'about everything'. For example, the statement 'All Greeks are mortal' is logically equivalent to 'Everything is mortal if it is a Greek'. (Every elephant and every neutron star and every non-Greek immortal is mortal if it is Greek.) It is therefore not easy to say in any precise and useful way what it is for a statement to be 'about everything'. Second, even if we ignore this difficulty and decide to rely on our intuitive sense of which statements are 'about everything', we shall run up against the fact that most philosophers would want to classify as 'metaphysical' many statements that we would, speaking intuitively, say were not 'about everything'. For example: 'Every event has a cause' (this statement is, intuitively, not about everything, but only about events); 'Every physical thing is such that it might not have existed' (... only about physical things); 'Any two objects that occupy space are spatially related to each other' (... only about objects that occupy space). And there is a further problem: most philosophers would want to classify as metaphysical certain statements that are not 'all' statements, not even ones that pertain to some special class of things like events or physical things: 'There is a God'; 'Some things have no parts'; 'There could be two things that had all the same properties'.¹

Perhaps in the end, all we can say is this: some 'categories' or 'concepts' are sufficiently 'general' that a statement will count as a 'metaphysical statement' if – given that it is made in a context in which no restrictions of intended reference are in force, and given that the person who makes it is making a serious effort to say what is strictly and literally true – it employs only these categories. Among these categories are many that we have already used in our examples: 'physical thing', 'spatial object', 'cause', 'event', 'part', 'property'. If we so define 'metaphysical statement', then the concept of a metaphysical statement will be open-ended and vague. It will be open-ended in that no final list of the categories that can occur in a 'metaphysical statement' will be possible: we could try to make a complete list (we might go through all the historical texts that were uncontroversially 'metaphysical' and mark all the categories we came across that seemed to us to be 'sufficiently general'), but, even if we had a list that satisfied us for the moment, we should have to admit that we might have to enlarge the list tomorrow. It is vague in that there will be borderline cases of 'sufficiently general' categories: 'impenetrable', 'pain', 'straight' and 'surface' are possible examples of such

borderline cases. But there will also be perfectly clear cases of categories that are not 'sufficiently general': 'Greek', 'chair', 'elephant', 'neutron star', 'diminished seventh chord', 'non-linear partial differential equation'... (Words like 'chair' and 'elephant' can occur in a work on metaphysics, but only in examples meant to illustrate – or in counterexamples meant to refute – theses whose statement requires only very general concepts.)

Where does this leave us? Let us suppose that Charles has made a certain statement. Let us suppose that when he made this statement, no restrictions of intended reference were in force. Let us suppose that Charles was willing to take responsibility for the strict and literal consequences of the words he has used to make the statement. And let us suppose that all the concepts or categories that Charles employed in making this statement were 'sufficiently general'. (And let us suppose that his statement was not some logical truism like 'Everything is either material or not material'.) Then, or so I would suggest, Charles has made a statement that, if true, describes Reality. That is, he has made a metaphysical statement. And if we try to decide whether his statement is true or false, reasonable or unreasonable, probable or improbable, consistent or inconsistent with various other metaphysical or non-metaphysical statements, then we are engaged in metaphysics.

2 Is Metaphysics Possible?

Is metaphysics, so conceived, possible? – that is, is it possible to 'engage in metaphysics' in the above sense and to reach any interesting or important conclusions? Various philosophers have argued that metaphysics is impossible. The thesis that metaphysics is impossible comes in what might be called strong and weak forms. The strong form of the thesis is this: the goal is not there, since there is no Reality to be described; all the statements we have called metaphysical are false or meaningless. (And it is hard to see how all metaphysical statements could be simply false. If one metaphysician says that everything is material and another says that it is false that everything is material, then, if their statements are meaningful, one or the other of them must be true.) The weak form of the thesis is this: the goal is there, but we human beings are unable to reach it, since the task of describing Reality is beyond our powers; metaphysical statements are meaningful, but we can never discover whether any metaphysical statement is true or false (or discover anything else interesting or important about the class of metaphysical statements).

Let us briefly examine an example of the strong form of the thesis that metaphysics is impossible. In the years between the world wars, the 'logical positivists' argued that the meaning of a statement consisted entirely in the predictions it made about possible experience. And they argued that metaphysical statements, statements that purported to describe Reality, made no predictions about experience. (The metaphysician asks, 'Is time real, or are temporal phenomena mere appearances?' But our experiences would be the same – they would be

just as they are – whether or not time was real. The metaphysician asks, 'Are there universals, or is the appearance of there being attributes and relations a mere appearance, an illusion created by the way we think and speak?' But our experiences would be the same – like *this* – whether or not there were universals. And so, the logical positivists argued, for every metaphysical question. Metaphysical theses, being essentially attempts to *get behind* the way things appear to us, can make no predictions about the way things will appear to us.) Therefore, they argued, metaphysical statements are meaningless. Or, since 'meaningless statement' is a contradiction in terms, the 'statements' we classify as metaphysical are not really statements at all: they are things that look like statements but aren't, rather as mannequins are things that look like human beings but aren't.

But how does the logical positivist's thesis fare by its own standards? Consider the statement,

The meaning of a statement consists entirely in the predictions it makes about possible experience.

Does this statement make any predictions about possible experiences? Could some observation show that this statement was true? Could some laboratory experiment show that it was false? It would seem not. It would seem that everything in the world would look the same – like *this* – whether or not this statement was true. And, therefore, if the statement is true it is meaningless; or, what is the same thing, if it is meaningful, it is false. Logical positivism would therefore seem to say of itself that it is false or meaningless; it would seem to be, as some philosophers say, 'self-referentially incoherent'.

We have not the space to consider all the attempts that have been made to show that the idea of a reality that lies behind all appearances is in some sense defective. (Current exponents of 'anti-realism' are only the latest example of such philosophers.) I must record, without further argument, my conviction that all such attempts are victims of self-referential incoherency. The general case goes like this. Alfred the anti-metaphysician argues that any proposition that does not pass some test he specifies is in some sense defective (it is, say, self-contradictory or meaningless). And he argues that any metaphysical proposition must fail this test. But it invariably turns out that some proposition that is essential to Alfred's anti-metaphysical argument itself fails to pass his test. Or so it seems to me that it invariably turns out. The reader is warned, however, that most anti-metaphysicians will say that I am mistaken, and that their own anti-metaphysical arguments are not self-referentially incoherent. (The remainder will say that everyone who is anyone in philosophy knows that 'the self-referential incoherency ploy' is invalid. This response has all the merits of a certain famous, if apocryphal, solicitor's brief: 'No case. Abuse plaintiff's counsel'.)

What about the 'weak form' of the thesis that metaphysics is impossible? In my view, the weak form of the thesis can be usefully discussed only in the context of a comprehensive and detailed examination of some actual and serious attempts at

metaphysics. And we are not, in the present essay, in a position to do this in sufficient detail for the effort to have any value.²

Let us tentatively conclude that no decisive case has been made for the impossibility of metaphysics. In the remainder of this essay, I will attempt to give some content to the very abstract remarks I have made about the nature of metaphysics by examining a particular metaphysical problem.

3 A Metaphysical Problem: The Existence and Nature of Universals

One very important part of metaphysics has to do with what there is, with what exists. This part of metaphysics is called ontology. Ontology, that is, is that part of metaphysics that deals with metaphysical statements having general forms like 'An X exists' and 'There are Y's'. (In this essay, it will be assumed that 'there is (are)' and 'exist(s)' mean essentially the same thing – that there is no important difference in meaning between 'Horses exist' and 'There are horses'. There are philosophers who deny this thesis: such philosophers exist.) In ontology, the second of our three requirements on a metaphysical statement is especially important – the requirement that the philosopher who makes a metaphysical statement be willing to take responsibility for the strict and literal consequences of the words used to make the statement. This is because we very frequently say things of the forms 'An X exists' and 'There are Y's' when we do not think there are *really* any X's or Y's. An example will help to make what is meant by this clear.

Our friend Jan is an adherent of the metaphysical position known as materialism, the thesis that everything – everything without qualification – is material. We notice, however, that, despite her allegiance to materialism, Jan frequently says things that, when taken strictly and literally, are inconsistent with materialism. For example, just this morning we heard her say, 'There's a big hole in my favourite blouse that wasn't there yesterday'.³ But no material object is a hole: material things are made of atoms, and nothing made of atoms is a hole; holes, so to speak, result from the *absence* of atoms. And yet Jan has said that there was one of them in her blouse. We point out to her that she has made a statement that is on the face of it inconsistent with materialism, and she replies:

It's true that I said there was a hole in my blouse, and that this statement, taken strictly and literally, implies that there is a hole; and it's true that a hole, if there really were such *things* as holes, wouldn't be a material thing. But I was speaking the language of everyday life; by the standards of metaphysics, I was speaking loosely. What I *could* have said, and what I would have said if I'd known that you were going to hold me responsible for the strict and literal consequences of my words, is that my blouse is *perforate*. The predicate 'is perforate', when it is applied to a material object like my blouse, simply says something about the object's *shape*. If you perforate a coin, the resulting object will have a shape different from that of an imperforate, but otherwise identical, coin. When I say that a given material thing is perforate, this obviously does not imply that there is *another* thing, a thing not made of atoms, a thing

called a 'hole', that is 'in' the material thing. The words 'there's a hole in this thing' are just an idiomatic way of saying 'this thing is perforate'.

This speech provides an example of a philosophical tool, extremely important in ontology, called 'paraphrase'. Various idioms and expressions that are perfectly serviceable for everyday, practical purposes have metaphysically unwanted implications when they are interpreted strictly and literally – which is the way we are supposed to interpret a metaphysician's idioms and expressions. To find a *paraphrase* of a statement involving such 'misleading' forms of words is to find a way of conveying what the statement is intended to convey that does not have the unwanted implications. (This is what we imagined Jan doing with the statement 'There's a hole in my blouse'.)

Metaphysicians have not spent a lot of time disputing about whether there really are holes. But they have spent a lot of time disputing about whether there really are so-called abstract things (such as properties, relations, propositions and numbers). The medieval dispute about the reality of 'universals' is an especially important example of this. This ancient dispute, or something very much like it, goes on today in several different forms. One of these 'forms' is due to the work of the American philosopher W. V. O. Quine.⁴ We shall examine it. It will be our example of a way to approach a metaphysical problem.

A universal is, near enough, a property – such as humanity (the property that is 'universal' to the members of the class of human beings and to the members of no more inclusive class), wisdom, the colour blue and widowhood. There are *apparently* properties. There is, for example, apparently such a thing as humanity. The members of the class of human beings, as the idiom has it, 'have something in common', and what could this 'something' be but the property 'humanity'? It could certainly not be anything physical, for – Siamese twins excepted – no two human beings have any physical thing in common. And, of course, what goes for the class of human beings goes for the class of birds, the class of white things and the class of intermediate vector bosons: the members of each of these classes have something in common with one another, and what the members of a class have in common is a property – or so it appears. But there are metaphysicians who contend that this appearance is mere appearance and that *in reality* there are no properties. Other metaphysicians argue that in this case, at least, appearances are not misleading and that there really *are* properties. The metaphysicians who deny the real existence of properties are called nominalists and the metaphysicians who affirm the real existence of properties are called platonists.⁵ (Each of these terms could be objected to on historical grounds. But let us pass over these objections.)

How can the dispute between the nominalists and the platonists be resolved? Quine has proposed an answer to this question.⁶ Nominalists and platonists have different beliefs about what there is. How should one go about deciding what to believe about what there is? According to Quine, the problem of deciding what to believe about what there is is a very straightforward special case of the problem of deciding what to believe. (The problem of deciding what to believe is no trivial problem, to be sure, but it is a problem everyone is going to have somehow to

come to terms with.) Let us look at the problem that is our present concern, the problem of what to believe about the existence of properties. If we want to decide whether to believe that there are properties – Quine tells us – we should examine the beliefs that we already have, and see whether any of them commits us to the existence of properties. If any does, then we have a reason to believe in the existence of properties: it is whatever reason we had for accepting the belief that commits us to the existence of properties – plus the general intellectual requirement that if one becomes aware that one's belief that *p* commits one to the further belief that *q*, then one should either believe that *q* or cease to believe that *p*.⁷ But let us consider an example. Suppose we find the following proposition among our beliefs:

Spiders share some of the anatomical features of insects.

A plausible case can be made for the thesis that this belief commits us to the existence of properties. We may observe, first, that it is very hard to see what an 'anatomical feature' (such as 'having an exoskeleton') could be if it were not a property: 'property', 'quality', 'characteristic', 'attribute' and 'feature' are all more or less synonyms. Does our belief that spiders share some of the anatomical features of insects therefore commit us to the existence of 'anatomical features'? If we carefully examine the meaning of the sentence 'Spiders share some of the anatomical features of insects', we find that what it says is this:

There are anatomical features that insects have and spiders also have.

And it is a straightforward logical consequence of this proposition that there are anatomical features: if there are anatomical features that insects have and spiders also have, then there are anatomical features that insects have; if there are anatomical features that insects have, then there are anatomical features – full stop.

Does this little argument show that anyone who believes that spiders share some of the anatomical features of insects is committed to platonism, to a belief in the existence of properties? How might a nominalist respond? Suppose we present this argument to Ned, a convinced nominalist (who believes, as most people do, that spiders share some of the anatomical features of insects). Assuming that Ned is unwilling simply to have inconsistent beliefs, there would seem to be four possible ways for him to respond to this argument:

- 1 He might become a platonist.
- 2 He might abandon his belief that spiders share some of the anatomical features of insects.
- 3 He might attempt to show that it does not after all follow from this belief that there are anatomical features.
- 4 He might admit that his beliefs (his belief in nominalism and his belief that spiders share some of the anatomical features of insects) are apparently

inconsistent, affirm his nominalistic faith that this inconsistency is apparent, not real, and confess that, although he is confident that there is some fault in our alleged demonstration that his belief about spiders and insects commits him to the existence of properties, he is at present unable to discover it.

Possibility (2) is not really very attractive. It is unattractive for at least two reasons. First, it seems to be a simple fact of biology that spiders share some of the anatomical features of insects. Second, there are many, many 'simple facts' that could have been used as the premise of an essentially identical argument for the conclusion that there are properties. (For example: elements in the same column in the Periodic Table tend to have many of the same chemical properties; some of the most important characteristics of the nineteenth-century novel are rarely present in the twentieth-century novel.) Possibility (4) is always an option, but no philosopher is likely to embrace it except as a last resort. What Ned is likely to do is to try to avail himself of possibility (3). He is likely to try to show that his belief about spiders and insects does not in fact commit him to platonism. What he will attempt to do in respect of this belief (and of all the others among his beliefs that apparently commit him to a belief in properties) is just what Jan did in respect of the belief that apparently committed her to a belief in holes: he will try to find a *paraphrase*, a sentence that (1) he could use in place of 'Spiders share some of the anatomical features of insects' and (2) does not even seem to have 'There are anatomical features' as one of its logical consequences. If he can do this, then he will be in a position to argue that the commitment to the existence of properties that is apparently 'carried by' his belief about spiders and insects is only apparent.⁸ And he will be in a position to argue – no doubt further argument would be required to establish this – that the apparent existence of properties is mere appearance (an appearance that is due to the forms of words we use).

Is it possible to find such a paraphrase? (And to find paraphrases of all the other apparently true statements that seem to commit those who make them to the reality of properties?) This is a difficult and technical question. I record my conviction that it is at least very hard to do so.⁹ If Quine is right about 'ontological commitment', therefore, there is no easy way for anyone to be a consistent nominalist.

It must be emphasized that we have said almost nothing about the *nature* of 'properties'. If what we have said so far is correct, some of the sentences we use to express certain very ordinary and non-metaphysical beliefs, sentences like 'Spiders share some of the anatomical features of insects' and 'Elements in the same column in the Periodic Table tend to have many of the same chemical properties' define what we may call the 'property role'; a property is whatever it is (beyond ordinary things like spiders and chemical elements) that using these sentences to express our beliefs carries prima facie commitment to. And if what we have said so far is correct, it is very hard to avoid the conclusion that objects of *some* sort play the property role. But philosophers who accepted this conclusion could differ fundamentally about the nature of the objects that play this role. Some philosophers think that the property role is played by things that are in some sense

constituents of objects, that properties are in some very subtle and abstract sense of the word *parts* of the objects whose properties they are.¹⁰ Other philosophers (including the present author) think that this conception of properties is not so much false as meaningless and that the things that play the property role are in no sense parts or constituents of objects, but simply things that can be 'said of' objects. According to this view of the nature of properties, the property 'being white' is simply something that can be said truly of table salt and the Taj Mahal and cannot be said truly of copper sulphate or the Eiffel Tower. (But what kind of thing would *that* be? You may well ask.) There has perhaps been little progress since the Middle Ages in the attempt to say anything both informative and meaningful about the *nature* of universals, the nature of the things that play the property role. But it can be plausibly argued that even if we do not understand universals much better than the medieval philosophers, we now have a better understanding of the *problem* of universals. We now see that the best way to look at the debate between the nominalist and the platonist is as follows: the task of the nominalist is to establish the conclusion that our beliefs about ordinary things do not commit us to the thesis that anything plays the property role. The task of the platonist is to attempt to establish the conclusion that our beliefs about ordinary things do commit us to the existence of things that play the property role, and to attempt to give a plausible account of the nature of these things.

Notes

- 1 These statements are in effect the denials or negations of 'all' statements – the denial or negation of a statement being the result of prefixing 'it is false that' or 'it is not the case that' to that statement. For example, 'Some things have no parts' is logically equivalent to 'It is false that everything has no parts'. (This logical point depends for its validity on the assumption that there is at least one thing. This assumption is made in standard systems of logic.)
- 2 For an extremely interesting and sophisticated defence of the weak form of thesis, see Colin McGinn, *Problems in Philosophy: The Limits of Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).
- 3 This example is based on David and Stephanie Lewis, 'Holes', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 48 (1970), pp. 206–12.
- 4 For another, very different form, see David Armstrong, *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1989).
- 5 The philosophers we are calling platonists are often called realists. I will avoid the terms 'realist' and 'realism', since they have several other meanings in metaphysics.
- 6 The issues that we are about to discuss are generally said to pertain to 'ontological commitment', a term that is due to Quine. For Quine's views on ontological commitment, see his classic essay, 'On What There Is' (chapter 3, this volume) and chapter 7, 'Ontic Decision', of his *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960).

Discussions of ontological commitment are generally rather technical – see, for example, chapter 5 in the present volume, by Susan Haack. They are technical because they represent issues of ontological commitment as essentially related to 'the existential quantifier', the symbol used in formal logic (it is most often a backwards 'E') to express 'there is' or 'there exists'. The tendency of philosophers to connect issues of ontological

commitment with the existential quantifier is (in one way) entirely justified, and (in another) somewhat misleading. It is justified because any *technically fully adequate* formulation of Quine's theses on ontological commitment must involve the existential quantifier and the related device of 'bound variables'. It is misleading because it suggests that it is impossible to present an account of the essential philosophical points contained in these theses without at some point introducing the existential quantifier – and not simply the symbol, but the technical apparatus that governs its use in formal logic and the various philosophical disputes that have arisen concerning its 'interpretation'. And this is false: it is possible to give a useful introductory account of the philosophical points contained in Quine's various discussions of ontological commitment that contains no 'existential apparatus' but the ordinary words and phrases – 'there is', 'exists' – for which the existential quantifier is the formal replacement. The discussion of 'there is' and paraphrase in the present essay is an attempt at such an introductory account of these points.

- 7 Suppose we were to discover that some belief of ours – that Mars has two moons, let us say – committed us to the existence of properties. Should that discovery move us to question, or perhaps even to abandon, our belief that Mars had two moons? That would depend on whether we had, or thought we had, some reason to believe that there were no properties. If we did think we had some reason to believe that there were no properties, we should have to try to decide whether our reason for thinking that Mars had two moons (presumably we have one) was more or less compelling than our reason for thinking that there were no properties.
- 8 Paraphrase is thus, as I have said, extremely important in ontology. But see chapter 4 of this volume by William Alston for an attempt to show that paraphrase cannot play an important role in ontology. The reader may find it instructive to try to identify the premise of Alston's argument that is rejected in the present essay.
- 9 In one sense, Quine himself believes that the required paraphrase is possible. He believes that statements like our 'spider-insect' statement can be understood in such a way that they commit those who make them to nothing other than *sets* – besides, of course, spiders and insects or whatever other 'ordinary' objects the statements may mention. But these sets, it must be emphasized, are very far from being ordinary objects. The set of all spiders, for example, is not a spider or any other sort of physical object, and reference to 'the set of spiders' cannot be dismissed as a mere linguistic device for referring to all spiders collectively: sets are *objects*. Sets are, in fact, from the point of view of those who call themselves nominalists, hardly more acceptable than properties, and, in present-day discussions of ontology, 'nominalism' is generally taken to imply that there are no such objects as sets.
- 10 See chapter 4, 'Particulars as Bundles of Universals', of Armstrong's *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*.