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The New Anti-Metaphysicians

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My topic is two recent attacks on metaphysics by two very distinguished philosophers, Bas van Fraassen and Hilary Putnam. I must concede at the outset that neither of these philosophers describes his target as "metaphysics." Van Fraassen's announced target is "*analytic* metaphysics" and Putnam's announced target is "ontology." It is my conviction, however, that if either of these attacks were successful, very little that could be called metaphysics would survive it. I therefore stand by my title and am happy to call both van Fraassen and Putnam anti-metaphysicians.

I will discuss only two texts, van Fraassen's Terry Lectures (particularly the lecture "Against Analytic Metaphysics") and Putnam's Hermes Lectures (particularly the lectures "A Defense of Conceptual Relativity" and "Ontology: An Obituary").[1]

There are striking similarities between the central argument of van Fraassen's attack on analytical metaphysics and the central argument of Putnam's attack on ontology. Each argument has at its core an example of a simple metaphysical question—one might even say a "toy" metaphysical question—that is supposed to serve as an illustration of what is wrong with the questions addressed by analytical metaphysics and ontology. Both these toy questions, moreover, have to do with parts and wholes, and indeed are very closely connected questions about parts and wholes—are almost the same question. I'm not sure what significance to attribute to that fact, since, as we shall see, the arguments that van Fraassen and Putnam use to draw conclusions from their examinations of the two toy questions are very different.

Both arguments turn on the promise that examination of a toy question will display the defects of the analogous but far more complicated questions addressed in the actual practice of analytical metaphysics and ontology. In each case, finally, the diagnosis of what is wrong with the toy question depends on a thesis in the philosophy of language (a different thesis in each case). I will attempt to show that both these theses are false—that van Fraassen and Putnam are both wrong about the way language works, and wrong in ways that vitiate the lessons they attempt to draw from their examinations of the toy questions. The present lecture is

nothing so ambitious as a "positive" defense of metaphysics or ontology. My only conclusion is that if there is something fundamentally "wrong" with metaphysics or ontology (and in some moods I do find it tempting to suppose that there is), neither van Fraassen nor Putnam has uncovered this defect.

I will first discuss van Fraassen's arguments.

I

Analytical metaphysics, van Fraassen tells us, does not consist in an attempt to answer perennial metaphysical questions, questions that have troubled humanity in one form or another for millennia. Analytical metaphysicians, rather, *create* the questions they attempt to answer. Their medium of creation is words: they create the questions that they attempt to answer by using terms of ordinary language in special technical senses while pretending to use them in their ordinary senses. (Although, as I have said, van Fraassen's official description of his target is "analytic metaphysics," he almost immediately drops the qualification "analytic" and speaks simply of "metaphysics" and "metaphysicians." And, as I have said, he is right to do so, for it is metaphysics that is his target.)

Van Fraassen's argument for the thesis that metaphysicians create "the problems of metaphysics" by linguistic legerdemain takes the form of a commentary on the "toy" metaphysical question that I alluded to a moment ago. And that question is, "Does the world exist?" If a metaphysician did indeed propose that question, he would typically do so in the following way. He would propose a "precise" definition of the word "world" and then proceed to the question whether there existed a unique thing that the word, so defined, applied to. "Attend to us," the metaphysicians who are creating a metaphysical problem whisper seductively to the ordinary folk, "and listen as we provide you with a really precise definition of 'world,' a definition adequate to the austere demands of our science."

And how will they define 'world'? Van Fraassen invites us to consider a metaphysician's definition of "world," a definition he regards as a typical metaphysician's definition. He takes the definition from Kant's *Inaugural Dissertation*—which was, of course, written when Kant was still slumbering dogmatically: A world is "a whole that is not a part." This definition, van Fraassen contends, can serve as a useful example of the way metaphysicians play fast and loose with the ordinary words and phrases that are central to the illusory problems they invent. His examination of the definition—his uncovering of the fastness and looseness characteristic of the creation of metaphysical problems—begins with these words.

> Actually, at first sight, Kant has not given us a very good definition. Look at this chair: it has parts…but is not itself a part of anything else. But it is not a world, is it? There is one heavy-handed way to deal with such an objection. Kant could simply insist that our ordinary commonsensical way of taking the chair to be separate and not a part of something is mistaken. He could say that it is part of something bigger. …But then he would be giving in to one of the

> temptations that make for really bad philosophy, surreptitiously and underhandedly turning the ordinary word "part" into technical jargon while ostensibly keeping it intact. (7)

Now this passage contains a puzzling transition. Van Fraassen first observes that we have an ordinary commonsensical way of looking at a chair, and that when we look at it in that way, we do not regard it as part of any larger object. But then he implies—in effect, he asserts—that anyone who says something that doesn't reflect this ordinary commonsensical way of looking at chairs must not be using the word "part" in its ordinary sense but in some special, technical sense. But why is this supposed to follow? In my view, anyone who supposes that it does follow must be appealing, consciously or unconsciously, to a form of argument that I will call, perhaps somewhat tendentiously, the Postwar Oxford Fallacy—after a region of space-time in which it was a prominent feature of the philosophical landscape. The Postwar Oxford Fallacy works like this. A fifties Oxford philosopher—let's call him Don—hears a contemporary non-Oxonian philosopher, Bertie, utter some philosophical sentence, *p*. Don seeks out the Man on the Clapham Omnibus (remember him?) and asks him whether *he* would say that *p* or whether *he* thinks it is true that *p*. The Man on the Clapham Omnibus (Manny, for short) says that he wouldn't say that or that he doesn't think that. Don concludes that Bertie and Manny are using some word or phrase that occurs in *p* in different senses—and proceeds immediately to affirm the further conclusion that the sense in which Bertie is using that word or phrase is not its ordinary English sense. Here's a particular case. Bertie is a philosopher who believes that any two material things have a fusion that is also a material thing, and thus believes that (since there is at least one material thing that does not share a part with this chair) this chair must be a part of at least one larger material thing. Don hears Bertie advance this thesis and asks Manny whether he would say that this chair was a part of some larger thing. Manny answers "No." Don concludes that Bertie must be using "part" in some sense other than its ordinary English sense.

Now why do I say that the Postwar Oxford Fallacy is a fallacy? Indulge me for a moment and consider a madman, for philosophers, and metaphysicians especially, are often compared to madmen and I don't deny that the comparison is a useful one. Our madman says that cows are—one and all—demons. Don hears him propound this thesis, and proceeds to ask Manny whether he would say that cows are demons. Manny says he wouldn't say that and that it's an obviously false thesis. Don concludes that the madman must mean something other by at least one of the words "cow," "demon," and "are" than what those words mean in ordinary English. But, of course, Don's reasoning is incorrect. The madman is a madman precisely *because* he believes that cows are demons in the ordinary senses of these words. And the author of the *Inaugural Dissertation* was a metaphysician precisely because he believed that every chair was a part of something bigger—in the ordinary sense of "part."

I think it's worth asking why Manny answered "No" when Don asked him whether he would say that this chair was a part of some larger thing. (I'm assuming for the sake of argument that Manny would actually *answer* Don's question. I'm inclined to think, however, that what would actually happen is that Manny would give Don a worried look and would proceed to back slowly away from him.) All right. He answers "No." Why does he give that answer? Here's *my* hypothesis. Manny is no metaphysician, and he's not an anti-metaphysician either. He's no philosopher of any stripe. He has in fact no idea, no idea whatever, what the point of Don's question is. Casting about for some way to make sense of Don's bizarre question, he supposes that Don must be asking him whether he supposes that the chair is the visible part of some larger, mostly invisible, artifact—and so, of course, says that the chair isn't a part of any larger thing. If that hypothesis is right, and I do think it's pretty plausible, one obviously cannot infer from his answer to Don's question that he and the metaphysician who believes that the chair is a part of, for example, the fusion of the chair and the table are using "part" in different senses.

I conclude that the Postwar-Oxford Fallacy is indeed a fallacy. It may, for all I have said, be that someone who says that every chair is a part of some larger material thing must be using "part" in some technical sense. My position is simply that if this is so, you can't demonstrate that it's so by pointing out an ordinary speaker might well be induced to say that there is nothing that a typical chair is a part of. That just doesn't *follow*—for there are other possible explanations of the ordinary speaker's statement. I've given one, and I can think of others.

Immediately following the passage I quoted a moment ago, van Fraassen makes a remark that sounds as if it might have something to do with the linguistic point I've been making. But it's not addressed to the same point, and the point it is addressed to seems to be based on another sort of mistake about language. This is what he says:

> A better response is open to [Kant]. He can point out that in this example I trade…on the context-sensitivity of our language. A moving company would count this chair as a part of the furniture. …In one context it is a whole which is not a part, but in another context it is correctly called part of something else. This is a correct observation about our ordinary uses of the word "part." But…Kant then needs to refine his notion of "world" [for] it would not suit his purpose to say that in some contexts a chair is one of many worlds. [He must therefore] remove such context dependence. [He must find] a single context, in which everything short of all there is counts as a part of something else…a God's-eye context.

In this passage, van Fraassen seems to be in danger of losing sight of the question that is in dispute: Kant has defined a "world" as a whole that is not a part; must he, in offering this definition, be using "part" in some special, technical sense? If the passage I have just quoted is to be relevant to *that* question, the "moving company" example must show that the *meaning* of "part" is context-dependent. But it shows no such

thing. It is simply an illustration of a familiar and uncontroversial fact about the effects of context on what is expressed by sentences, to wit that the domains of the quantifiers that occur in those sentences may be (and generally are) determined by context. Suppose, once more, that Don has asked Manny whether the chair is a part of anything larger and that Manny has answered "No." Suppose that Don then says, "But what about the load of furniture. Isn't the chair a part of *that*?" Manny's response, I predict, will be something like this: "Oh, I didn't know we were talking about things like loads of furniture." The case is precisely analogous to the following case. Alice is induced to say, "Nothing is taller than a giraffe." Her interlocutor then asks, "But what about that elm—isn't it taller than any giraffe?" Alice replies, "Well, of course—but I thought we were just talking about giraffes and other animals. I didn't know that I was supposed to be comparing giraffes with things like trees." When Alice first says that nothing is taller than a giraffe and then concedes that the elm is taller than any giraffe, she's not using the phrase "taller than" in one sense in the first assertion and in another sense in the second. What has changed is her domain of quantification, not the sense of any of the words or phrases she is using. And the same point applies to the Man on the Clapham Omnibus and the load of furniture. When that poor soul first says that the chair is not a part of anything and then concedes that it's a part of the load of furniture, he's not using the word "part" in one sense in the first assertion and in another sense in the second. The change has been in his domain of quantification, not in the sense of any of his terms. (Could one contend that Kant's definition presupposes a "God's-eye domain of quantification"? Well, suppose that Kant's quantifiers were simply unrestricted. God can use unrestricted quantifiers, of course, but they're no special property of his; you and I and Kant can use them too.)

Kant, in offering his definition of "world," certainly assumes that there are objects like the sum or fusion of two chairs—and many other "larger" objects of the same general sort; he is assuming, in fact, that, for any *x*s (or at least any *x*s in some very comprehensive domain) there is something that has those *x*s as parts *in the ordinary sense of* "*part*." That's a metaphysical assumption, to be sure. But it's a metaphysical assumption that can be stated using only the ordinary word "part"—and without *misusing* the ordinary word "part." At any rate, that seems evident to me, and van Fraassen has said nothing that casts doubt on it.

It is important to note in this connection, that, since sums of chairs, if they exist, must have properties other than mereological properties—size and shape and weight, for example—there are assertions that do not explicitly involve the concept "part" that will, in certain contexts, imply the existence of sums of chairs. Move some chairs into an empty room (empty of everything but air and water vapor and dust motes). I, a metaphysician, who believe in sums of chairs, look into the room into which you have moved the chairs and, because I believe in sums of chairs and for no other reason (I am not, for example, hallucinating), say, "There is something in the room—something that is solid and occupies space—whose volume exceeds the volume of any of the chairs in the room." That's a metaphysical

assertion. (In this sense: I made it because, and only because, it's a joint consequence of facts about the way matter is distributed in the room *and* a metaphysical thesis that I accept.) And I made this metaphysical assertion *without* using the word "part." Was I then using some *other* word or phrase, some word or phrase not involving the concept "part," in some sense other than its normal sense? What word or phrase would that be? "Volume"? "Solid"? Surely not. Well, what about "there is something," then? What about the existential quantifier? That operator is an item that belongs to the purely logical vocabulary that is the scaffolding of all our discourse, and it makes no sense to suppose that it might have different senses—a thesis which I will not defend at this point in the lecture, since it will be central to my discussion of Putnam's attack on ontology.

I think I have made my point. If a metaphysician asks whether there is a whole that is not a part—a present-day metaphysician would be likely to frame this question in slightly different words, perhaps "Is there something of which everything else is a proper part?"—that metaphysician may well be using "part" in its everyday sense. There may indeed be something wrong with the metaphysician's question. There may be something wrong with it that is peculiar to itself, or it may display some fundamental defect that is common to all metaphysical questions. But, if it is a defective question, its defect is not displayed in the statement that the metaphysician who poses it *has to be* using the word "part" in some special technical sense (all the while pretending to use it in its ordinary sense). For that statement is false.

I now turn to Putnam's obituary for ontology.

II

The obituary is written for the most part in Putnam's customary genial tone, but his peroration, the concluding short section or long paragraph (84-85) of the lecture "Ontology: An Obituary," is built round a string of astonishingly caustic metaphors: ontology is a "disease" against which Putnam hopes to inoculate his audience; he might say more about ontology, but any further discussion of the topic would be "flogging a dead horse"; ontology, whatever it may have been in the past, has become a "stinking corpse."

What is this disease, this dead horse, this stinking corpse? The seminal document of ontology (for our time, at least) was, Putnam tells us, Quine's "On What There Is." Putnam's discussion of ontology, taken as a whole, ascribes to that discipline a more comprehensive set of theses than those set out and defended in "On What There Is," but the main target, the central target, of Putnam's attack on ontology is a thesis that is certainly on prominent display in that remarkable essay, even if Quine does not state it explicitly. It is this: That the existential quantifier has only one sense, has the same sense everywhere it occurs (and this thesis is so understood as to apply not only to the backwards E but to its ordinary-language counterparts as well: like the logical symbol, the English expressions "there is" and "exists" have the same sense in every context). In the Peroration, Putnam formulates the offending thesis this way:

> …there is, somehow fixed in advance, a single "real," a single "literal" sense of "exist"…one which is cast in marble [sic], and cannot be either contracted or expanded without defiling the statue of the god… (84-85)

(And he would say the same about "there is." He agrees with Quine on one important matter at least: "exists" and "there is" are—if proper attention is paid to their differing syntactical properties—interchangeable.) If we accept this thesis, he says, "…we are already wandering in Cloud Cuckoo Land."

Putnam's argument against the thesis that "there is" has only one sense turns on an example he has used in several of his works to establish various conclusions, all of them involving something he calls "conceptual relativity." The case involves two fictional characters whom Putnam calls Carnap and the Polish Logician. I'll call them Rudolf and Stanislaw. Rudolf—as an aid to thinking about some fundamental questions of inductive logic—imagines a simple world that, he says, contains exactly three individuals, **x1**, **x2**, and **x3**. Stanislaw, however, says that the little world Rudolf has imagined contains *seven* individuals, for, in addition to the three individuals Rudolf has stipulated, it contains their various mereological sums or fusions: **x1 + x2, x1 + x3, x2 + x3**, and **x1 + x2 + x3**.

The question, "Does the imaginary world Rudolf and Stanislaw are considering contain three individuals or seven individuals?" is Putnam's "toy" metaphysical question, the question that plays a role in his argument against ontology analogous to the role played by "Is there a world?" in van Fraassen's argument against analytical metaphysics. And, indeed, the two questions are, as I have said, very close to being the same question. When Rudolf spoke of imagining a "world that contains exactly three individuals," he cannot possibly have meant the world itself, the world he is imagining, to have been one of the three individuals it contains. But Stanislaw can say, "Yes, in the imaginary world we're considering, one of the individuals in that world is the world itself: the world is the individual **x1 + x2 + x3**; that's the one individual in the imaginary world that is, as Kant should have said, a whole that is not a proper part."

Now, if Quine and his fellow wanderers in Cloud Cuckoo Land are right and "there is" has a "single, fixed-in-advance sense," the story of Rudolf and Stanislaw is the story of a straightforward case of disagreement about what there is. If the Cloud Cuckoo Landers have it right, a disagreement about how many individuals there are in Rudolf and Stanislaw's little world is much like a disagreement about how many moons Mars has or how many days there are in April. If one person says that there are two Martian moons and another that there are three, those two people mean the same thing by "there are" and at least one of them has to be wrong—and so for a disagreement about how many days there are in April.

Putnam's position is, of course, that Rudolf and Stanislaw's disagreement is *not* a straightforward case of disagreement about what there is. Rudolf and Stanislaw, Putnam tells us, are using "there are" in

different senses. Rudolf is using the phrase in its ordinary sense, and Stanislaw is using it in a conventionally extended sense. He has retained many of the pre-existing conventions for using "there are"—including those conventions embodied in the rules for constructing valid deductions that involve quantifiers (rules that you can find in your favorite logic text). But he has gone on to adopt the following convention (an *extension* of the pre-existing conventions governing "there are"): When speaking of individuals, it is permissible to speak *as if*, for any non-empty set of individuals, there is a unique individual that has every member of that set as a part and each of whose parts overlaps some member of that set.[2] Putnam does not deny that there is an obvious and important sense in which the sentences Rudolf endorses are "incompatible" with the sentences Stanislaw endorses, but he maintains that the relevant sense of "incompatible" is this: the fact that the two philosophers endorse sentences that, on the level of superficial syntax, contradict each other, is a consequence of their subscribing to incompatible *conventions governing the use of "there is"* (as opposed to: the fact that they endorse syntactically contradictory sentences is a consequence of their accepting incompatible *theses about what there is*).

This is Putnam's position. Is it right? Well, let's look at the argument. I certainly do not want to deny that there could be a convention like the one that, according to Putnam, governs Stanislaw's use of "there is." We may even suppose that the convention actually has a formal, institutional foundation. We may imagine that all the citizens of Warsaw have signed a statement that reads as follows.

> We the undersigned do solemnly agree and declare that on and after the date 1 January 1937, it shall be permissible for all signatories to this document to speak *as if*, for any non-empty set of individuals, there is a unique individual that has every member of that set as a part and each of whose parts overlaps some member of that set.

And we may imagine that the Warsavians have been as good as their word. They *do* talk that way, and they talk that way *because of* the convention they have established. But I would ask this: When the Warsavians entered into that convention, did their doing so indeed entail that they thereby came to use "there is"/"exist" in a new and extended sense? Or was their agreement simply an agreement to play a sort of a game—to regard it as permissible, within the rules of the game, to speak as if certain sentences were true, sentences whose meanings were already established before the game was formulated and whose already-established meanings (and the already-established meanings of the words they contain) were entirely unaffected by the invention and the playing of the game?

It is clear to me, at least, that the latter position is the correct one. In my view, Stanislaw and Rudolf mean the same thing by "there are" and "exist." I will present an argument for this thesis and then consider what I suppose Putnam's reply would be.

I have in several places defended the univocacy of both "there are" and "exist" by an appeal to the univocacy of number and the intimate connection between number and existence. (As Frege has said, "Affirmation of existence is in fact nothing but denial of the number zero."[3]) "There are Fs" and "Fs exist" are, I contend, equivalent to "The number of Fs is not zero." And number-words like "zero" or "three" or "seven" (and the world 'number' itself) do not change their meanings when they are applied to things in different logical or ontological categories. If I say that four is the number of the Stuart kings of England, the canonical Gospels, *and* the cardinal points of the compass, that's not a syllepsis like "Aunt Maude went home in a short while, a flood of tears, and a Buick." If number-words did change their meanings when they were applied to things in different categories, the following straightforward problem of arithmetic would be meaningless: "Seven poets have written twenty-one poems between them. Each has written the same number of poems. How many poems has each written?" And it seems that Putnam must agree with my contention that number-words are univocal in all their applications. He must agree, in particular, that Rudolf and Stanislaw mean the same thing by "three" and "seven." He cannot be asking us to suppose that Stanislaw means by "seven" what Rudolf means by "three." That thesis would indeed have the consequence that their disagreement was merely verbal, but not in any way that would refute the arguments of "On What There Is." And if Rudolf and Stanislaw mean the same things by "three" and "seven," they mean the same thing by "zero," and hence the same thing by the schema "the number of ___s is not zero"—and hence the same thing by the schemas "there are ___s" and "___s exist." Whatever the consequences of the convention that Stanislaw has adopted may be—of his decision to speak as if every non-empty set of individuals had a fusion—those consequences will not, therefore, include his coming to use "there are" in a new and extended sense, for he will be using that phrase in the same sense as the sense in which he used it before he adopted that convention.

I think that the argument I have just given is unanswerable, but I should not expect Putnam to agree. I anticipate a reply along the following lines.

> I agree that Rudolf and Stanislaw mean the same things by particular number-words like "zero" and "three" and "seven"—and the same thing by the general word "number." I'll even agree for the sake of argument that they mean the same thing by "individual," although I might say more about that. But it doesn't follow that they mean the same thing by the phrase "the number of individuals" or by sentences like "The number of individuals is three." In my view, they mean different things by the phrase (and therefore by sentences in which it occurs) because they are party to different and incompatible conventions for counting individuals. If you ask Rudolf to count the individuals in the imaginary world, he will count as follows: "**x1**—one!; **x2**—two!; **x3**—three! Done!" But Stanislaw's count will go like this: "**x1**—one!; **x2**—two!; **x3**—three!; **x1 + x2**—four!; **x1 + x3**—five!; **x2 + x3**—six!; **x1 + x2 + x3**—seven! Done!" Even if one assumes mathematical platonism,

> even if one assumes that when Rudolf and Stanislaw utter the word "three" they both use it to refer to the authentic, unique, God-given number three, that extravagant assumption is entirely consistent with my thesis that Rudolf and Stanislaw are party to different conventions for counting individuals, and therefore mean different things by "the number of individuals." If they were considering a still simpler world, and if *both* of them said of that world, "The number of individuals it contains is one," even in that case they'd mean different things by "the number of individuals"—a fact that would remain a fact if it were somehow true that, in both their mouths, the phrase "the number of individuals" denoted the same thing, the (unique, God-given) number one. After all, two definite descriptions with different senses can have the same referent. And the same point applies to the count "zero" and its denial: Although Rudolf and Stanislaw both utter the sentence "The number of individuals is not zero" assertively, they mean different things by it—and this despite the fact that they mean the same thing by "is not zero" (and even if, as I'm granting for the sake of argument, the same thing by "individual"). Your argument is therefore fallacious, since "the number of ___s is not zero" no more has a single, fixed-in-advance sense than do "___s exist" and "there are ___s."

How effective is this reply? That you must decide for yourself. It seems to me to have absurd consequences—but one philosopher's absurd consequence is another's odd but tolerable consequence. I will explain my conviction that the reply has absurd consequences by presenting a "parody" convention for counting individuals, fully aware that Putnam will say that it's a perfectly possible convention, albeit a pointless one—and that if it's absurd, its absurdity consists entirely in its pointlessness. (I might have used for this purpose a notorious "counting convention" devised by Church in the widely circulated scrap that has been given the title "Ontological Misogyny" by its gleeful admirers—a convention according the count of human female individuals is zero. But I'll devise my own example, a rather more abstract and impersonal one.)

According to the convention I propose, a significant proportion of the counts of individuals will be increased by one—by the simple expedient of adding the null individual to those counts. The null individual, you may remember, is defined as the sole individual that is a common part of all individuals. (That mysterious object has occasionally been added to the apparatus of mereology so that mereology will be a Boolean algebra with the null individual as its 0-element.) Here is the first part of the convention I propose: parties to the convention agree to speak *as if* there is such a thing as the null individual, as if there is a unique individual that is a common part of all individuals. It is important to keep in mind that this convention applies to existence, not to parthood: the convention constrains those party to it to speak as if *there is* a thing that is a common part of—for example—van Fraassen and Putnam, *in the ordinary sense of "part."* And this convention is meant to be taken as literally as possible. It is not to be understood as depending on some semantical trick. It does not, for example, "work" by

specifying some *non*-individual like the number 0 and saying that otherwise denotationless terms that purport to denote individuals (like "the largest dragon") are to denote that object by default—and that "the individual that is a part of every individual" therefore denotes that object. According to the convention I am laying out, the identity-sentence "the null individual = the largest dragon" is *false*, since there is a null individual and there is no largest dragon.

But there is more to the convention than the mere existence of the null individual. I will illustrate the next component of the convention—the Extended Null Individual Convention, or ENIC—by showing how it applies in the case of cats. Since the null individual is the common part of all individuals, it is a common part of all cats (the only one, I will assume). I propose that the common part of all cats be known as "the null cat": the null individual is also the null cat. And I stipulate that, as the name implies, the null cat *is* a cat. (If we like, of course, we can say that the null cat is not a *proper* cat, a proper cat being a cat other than the null cat.) Since the null cat is a cat, it must therefore enter into the count of cats. If according to the standard or default count of cats there are n cats, according to ENIC there are $n + 1$ cats. If, in some simple world, the standard cat-count goes like this: "Fluffy—one!; Tiger—two!; Done!" the ENIC count in that world will go: "The null cat—one!; Fluffy—two!; Tiger—three!; Done!" And what goes for the count of cats will go for lots of other counts: there is, according to ENIC, one more dog, one more cube, and one more ball than there are of these kinds of thing by the standard count.

It will probably be evident to you that this statement of ENIC will not do as it stands. ENIC will require a substantial amount of technical elaboration if it is not to lead to unanswerable questions, to paradox, or outright contradiction. For example, it follows from ENIC that the null individual is both a cube and a ball. And doesn't that imply a contradiction: that there is something that both has and does not have vertices? And what about the count of *proper* cats—cats other than the null cat? Isn't the null individual the null proper cat (it's the common part of all proper cats)—and hence a proper cat and hence *not* the null cat? And what do we do if we want to count the cats in Sally's house? How do we determine whether to include the null cat in *that* count? Do we count it in the guise "the null cat-in-Sally's-house"—or do we try to decide whether the null cat is in Sally's house and include it in the count of cats in Sally's house only if it is indeed in Sally's house?

I'll have to ask you simply to bear with me and to grant for the sake of argument that all these problems can be solved by various exercises of solemn technical foolery. A lecture is no occasion for technical foolery—not so much because it's foolery as because it's technical: an oral presentation is not the ideal vehicle for the presentation of technical detail. All right: assuming that the very idea of alternative counting-conventions makes sense, the convention I have outlined is one possible alternative convention for counting individuals. It gives a count of cats and dogs and many other classes of individuals that differs from the standard count. And,

owing to the intimate relation between counting and existence, it endorses existential statements that our standard conventions do not endorse. For example, in the simple world that contains only two cats by the standard count, ENIC endorses the existential statement, "There is a cat that is neither Fluffy nor Tiger." And in both that world and the real world, ENIC endorses "There is a thing that is both a ball and a cube"—since the null individual is both the null ball and the null cube.

Now what are we to say about this convention, the Extended Null Individual Convention? Is the *only* thing that one can say against it that it is pointless? (It certainly has that defect.) I think we can say this against it: the idea of the null individual—the object that the convention requires those who subscribe to it to include in so many counts of individuals—doesn't make any sense. And, therefore, however you describe ENIC, you shouldn't describe it by saying that it provides a new way of counting individuals or a new, conventionally extended meaning for the existential quantifier. Even if we do not insist that the null individual is also the null dog and the thing that is both the null cube and the null ball, it's still true that it is a part of both Bas van Fraassen and Hilary Putnam. And that doesn't make any sense: we *know* (unless there has been some radical surgery of which we are not aware) that nothing is a part of both those philosophers. We *know*—I do, anyway—that there is no sense of "there is" in which "there is" something that is a part of both Bas and Hilary. If, therefore, one uses "there is" in the way prescribed by ENIC, one is not using the English phrase "there is" at all—one is simply *pretending* to use that English phrase. "Well, it's true in the *standard* sense of 'there is'—given the facts about how matter is distributed—that there is nothing that is a part of both Bas and Hilary, but in the new and extended sense that ENIC confers on the existential quantifier, there indeed is a thing that is part of Bas and Hilary. Just examine the convention you have devised, and you'll see that it confers truth on 'There is something that is a part of Bas and a part of Hilary'."

So says the Interlocutor. But *I* say that when the Enicians (so to call those who have adopted ENIC) use the existential quantifier, they aren't. That is, they're only pretending to use it. They're using marks on paper and articulate sounds that are graphically and phonetically indistinguishable from the marks and sounds used by people who really do use the existential quantifier, but, in using those marks and sounds, they are simply pretending to use that well-known operator. They are just playing with words—in fact, not with words at all, but with marks on paper and sounds. But if Putnam is right, they're not just playing with marks and sounds. If, therefore, you agree with my contention that the Enicians are just playing with marks and sounds, you will agree with my contention that Putnam's thesis that the sense of "there is" can be extended by convention is mistaken.

I have one more point to make—a point that belongs to metaphysics and not to the philosophy of logic or the philosophy of language. It is this. Owing to features peculiar to Putnam's example—the little imaginary world—his general thesis about the quantifier can seem more plausible

than it deserves to seem. The use Putnam makes of the example seems to rest on an unstated assumption. I might put the assumption in these words: the only difference between accepting and rejecting "automatic" or universal mereological summation is that—well, if one accepts universal summation one affirms the existence of "all those sums" and if one rejects universal summation one does not. But there is more to be said. If you are a philosopher and you maintain that there are things of a certain kind, the Fs, then you should have something to say about any philosophical problems that the Fs raise. And this is true irrespective of the sense of "there are" that you may have used to make this assertion—assuming that "there are" *can* have more than one sense. If, for example, a philosopher affirms the existence—in any sense of "existence"—of tropes, that philosopher must somehow deal with all the pointed questions about tropes that have been raised in the philosophical literature. The philosopher who says that there are such things as tropes cannot respond to some philosophical difficulty alleged to infect the idea of a trope by saying, "I don't have to say anything about that alleged difficulty because, when I say that there are tropes, I'm using 'there are' in a sense such that all the things that 'there are' in that sense are, by definition, philosophically unproblematical."

Thus, if the existence of a fusion of **x1**, **x2**, and **x3** raises a philosophical problem (one that is not raised by **x1** or **x2** or **x3** "individually"), Stanislaw is responsible for dealing with that problem. And, of course, Rudolf is not. And Stanislaw cannot avoid responding to this problem by saying that he is using "exists" in a sense in which it is true by definition that a sum of **x1**, **x2**, and **x3** exists if **x1**, **x2**, and **x3** exist. That may be so, but it won't solve the problem. At any rate, it doesn't, by definition, automatically solve *all* such problems. Maybe it solves the problem, "Even if there is such a thing, how do you know about it?" Maybe it solves lots of alleged problems, but one can't affirm that it will solve them all, not without so much as examining them. If, for example, some philosopher says to Stanislaw, "I have a proof that the fusion of **x1**, **x2**, and **x3** would both have and lack the property F," Stanislaw can't reply by saying, "That's no problem, for I'm so using 'exist' that a fusion of **x1**, **x2**, and **x3** exists if **x1**, **x2**, and **x3** exist in the standard or default sense of 'exist'. Therefore, either there's a mistake in your proof, or the fusion *has* contradictory properties—and exists despite the fact that it has contradictory properties."

And the thesis of automatic mereological summation does raise awkward philosophical problems. It does not, so far as I know, imply that there are objects that both have and lack a certain property. The problems it raises are not *that* awkward. But they are awkward enough. I will give one example of such a problem.

If there is such a thing as the sum of **x1**, **x2**, and **x3** (in any sense of "there is"), we can ask about its persistence conditions. We can ask whether it can change its proper parts, for example. It's composed of **x1**, **x2**, and **x3** *now*, at t_1—but suppose **x3** were annihilated and a short time later at t_2 another simple, **x4**, was created *ex nihilo*. Might the object that was the sum of **x1**, **x2**, and **x3** at t_1 be the object that was the sum of **x1**,

x2, and **x4** at t_2? Note that **x1**, **x2**, and **x3** do not individually confront the problem of whether they can change their proper parts, since none of them has any proper parts to change. (At any rate, Rudolf seems to have tacitly assumed that **x1**, **x2**, and **x3** had no proper parts, for if any of them did, then—assuming that none of **x1**, **x2**, and **x3** is a part of any of the others—the imaginary world would contain more than three individuals.) And, therefore, Stanislaw faces a philosophical problem that Rudolf does not face.

No doubt Putnam will say that any such problem is to be solved by an appeal to convention. I expect he will tell us that there is not just one sense of 'there are' in which there are, automatically, sums of any objects. There are many such senses. And, in particular, there is at least one for any coherent specification of persistence conditions for sums. Well, fair enough. Let's suppose that that is so. In that case, the philosopher who adopts a sense of "there is" according to which there is a sum of **x1**, **x2**, and **x3** *and* that sum has the persistence condition Alpha must attend to such philosophical problems as may be raised by mereological sums that have the persistence condition Alpha.

Let me give an example. Suppose one decides to adopt a conventional sense of "there is" according to which, for any non-empty set of individuals, "there is" something that is the fusion of that set and according to which all the sums that "there are" obey the principle of mereological essentialism—the principle that the identity of a thing is determined by its parts: same parts, same sum and same sum, same parts. If the principle of mereological essentialism is not a persistence condition, it certainly entails one (in conjunction with "automatic mereological summation"): that a sum that exists at a given moment *t* will exist at all and only those moments at which all the parts it has at *t* exist. (That's not a contrived example of a persistence condition for sums. It is the one that is adopted by the friends of universal mereological summation. It is in fact so "natural" that many people seem to suppose, on no ground that I have been able to discover, that it is somehow contained in the concept "mereological sum."[4]) But to embrace mereological essentialism for sums is to embrace mereological essentialism *simpliciter*. For everything is a mereological sum—whether in the little imaginary world of Stanislaw and Rudolf or in the real world or in any possible world. Even mereological simples are sums. The object **x1** (in the imaginary world), for example, is the sum of the things identical with **x1**, or, if you like, the fusion of its unit set. And I am the mereological sum of my parts—whether I am a living organism, a brain, or a Cartesian ego, all my parts are parts of me, and each of my parts overlaps one or more of my parts.

Now mereological essentialism raises difficult philosophical problems in the area of personal identity. It seems to have consequences in the matter of personal identity that can justifiably be described as "awkward." For example, mereological essentialism seems to imply that the living organism you see before you—the living organism that I and many other philosophers would say was *myself*—is only accidentally

and only very temporarily a solid object (and *a fortiori* only temporarily a living organism). If just any objects have a mereological sum, and if the persistence condition for sums is given by the principle of mereological essentialism, and if I am now the sum of certain atoms, the ones that now collectively occupy a man-shaped region of space near this podium, then I was, for millions of years, and until a few months ago, a rarified spherical shell of atomic nuclei and electrons about 13,000 kilometers in diameter and perhaps a kilometer thick. And I shall gradually resume that diffuse condition over the course of the next few months and continue in it for the remainder of my existence—a matter of many millions of years. This is an "awkward" consequence of mereological essentialism because it seems, um, counterintuitive to say that I was for many millions of years a diffuse spherical shell of planetary size (and that I shall soon resume and continue in that condition for many geological eras). One might, of course, avoid this consequence by supposing that I am not a sum of atoms but am rather an immaterial substance. But if a proposition entails the disjunction, "I am *either* an immaterial substance or have existed for millions of years as a shell of planetary size"—well, that disjunction is certainly a non-trivial consequence of that proposition. And philosophers who find that proposition an attractive hypothesis may well find it less attractive when they have seen that it has that non-trivial consequence. If, therefore, one really can adopt a conventional sense of "there is" according to which just any objects have a unique mereological sum all of whose parts are essential to it, there are considerations that should lead one to think twice about adopting that convention. If you accept the thesis that, for each non-empty set of individuals, there is an individual that is the unique fusion of those individuals—and is *essentially* the unique fusion of those individuals—you're going to confront the problem I've raised. And if it is indeed possible to use the words "there is" in such a way that that thesis is true by definition, and if you have decided to use those words in that way, you will confront that problem as a result of having decided to use certain words in a certain way. If it occurs to anyone to protest that one cannot be faced with a substantive philosophical problem in consequence of a semantical decision, I'll have to ask that person to take his or her protest to Putnam, and not to me—for his position does have just that consequence. If he is right, then one's semantical decisions can cause one to face substantive philosophical problems.

When one looks at Putnam's little world and Stanislaw and Rudolf's disagreement about the proper census of its inhabitants (it makes no difference to my present point whether it is a substantive or a verbal disagreement), it can seem that the only thing they're in disagreement about is whether that world contains composite objects (or whether to speak as if it did). And it can seem as if this disagreement, whatever its nature, has no ramifications, no philosophical consequences. It can seem, therefore, that a *dispute* about whether the little world contained three or seven objects would be a silly waste of time. One is tempted to say, "Who *cares* whether **x1** and **x3** 'really' have a sum? What *hangs* on it?" The very natural tendency one has to classify that dispute as a waste of time lends

undeserved support to Putnam's thesis that all ontological disputes involve mistaking a verbal disagreement for a substantive disagreement. (After all, disputes that involve mistaking a verbal disagreement for a substantive disagreement *are* all wastes of time: it's a waste of time to engage in a dispute about whether a line-segment *really is* a special kind of ellipse or about whether 0 cm/sec *really is* a velocity.) The support is undeserved because the fact that the debate seems silly and pointless is an artifact of the simplicity of the little world that Putnam has imagined.

When we turn from Putnam's imaginary world to the real world in all its complexity, the world that we human beings inhabit, the world that contains electrons and quarks and atoms and molecules and cells and all the macroscopic objects that have these microscopic and sub-microscopic objects as parts, matters are different. Real-world Stanislaw (the philosopher who affirms universal mereological summation in the real world) and Real-word Rudolf (the philosopher who doesn't) confront very different sets of philosophical problems. The problems they confront may all be susceptible of solution—or resolution or dissolution. (In at least this sense: both Real-world Stanislaw and Real-world Rudolf may be able, after much serious thought, to reach "reflective philosophical equilibrium.") They may even be solved—or resolved or dissolved—by some sort of appeal to alternative linguistic conventions (although I don't believe that for a moment). They will, nevertheless, be *different* sets of problems. And for that reason, if no other, a debate about the thesis of automatic universal mereological summation in the real world is not a waste of the philosopher's time.

Endnotes

1. Van Fraassen's Terry Lectures were printed as *The Empirical Stance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000). Putnam's Hermes Lectures were printed as Part I of his *Ethics without Ontology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004). Page references in the text and notes are to these two books if no other work is cited.
2. Consider the following possible objection to Putnam's argument. "Suppose we look at the story of 'Carnap' and 'the Polish Logician' this way: They *both* believe that the little imaginary world contains the fusions **x1 + x2, x1 + x3, x2 + x3**, and **x1 + x2 + x3**; but (in this context) Carnap excludes composite objects from his universe of discourse (the range of his variables) and the Polish Logician does not. It is evident that looking at the story in that way 'saves the appearances'—it nicely explains the verbal behavior of the two philosophers. But if that is what lies behind the verbal behavior that Putnam has imagined, the story does not have the philosophical moral he wants it to have. On that interpretation, the only 'convention' involved in the story is this: Carnap, unlike the Polish Logician, has adopted a convention according to which composite objects are excluded from the range of his variables. And I don't see any other way to interpret that verbal behavior that would have the consequence that it reflected a merely verbal disagreement." Commenting on this possible objection, Putnam says (41), "There is a description of the Polish Logician's use of 'exist' which does not make the assumption that

there *are* mereological sums to be 'included' or 'not included' in one's universe of discourse. …Here is the description: the Polish Logician speaks as if, corresponding to any set of (more than one) individuals in a 'Carnapian' universe, there is a further individual which has as parts the members of that set." (I can't resist the temptation to point out that "*non-empty* set of individuals" works as well as Putnam's more elaborate qualification.)

3. Gottlob Frege. *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, tr. by J. L. Austin (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 65. (Austin translates '*Nullzahl*' as "nought." I have changed this to "zero.")
4. See my essay, "Can Mereological Sums Change Their Parts?" *The Journal of Philosophy* CIII, 12 (2006): 614-30.