Review of Jody Azzouni's *Ontology without Borders*
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1. Introduction

Let's start with the familiar picture: there are objects and there are properties. Metaphysical disagreement along each axis is familiar enough. We can disagree about what objects there are and about what those objects are like. For example, some believe in fictional characters, while others deny there are such things, and, among those who believe in things like Sherlock Holmes, some take fictionalia to be mental particulars, abstract entities, concrete possibilia, or objects of some other sort. Disagreement about what properties there are and about what properties are like often requires a bit more philosophical baggage. For example, some believe in non-natural moral properties, irreducible mental properties, or objective aesthetic properties, while others reject the existence of such properties. Moreover, those who accept the existence of properties disagree about whether they are universals, tropes, or entities of other sorts. The diversity and pervasiveness of metaphysical disagreement on these fronts is equal parts daunting and exhausting. What to do?

Well, if we incline to follow the lead of Jody Azzouni's *Ontology without Borders,* we should side with the ontological nihilist and simply deny that there is any of this stuff. No objects. No properties. Importantly, however, that doesn't mean there's *nothing*. There's a world, of course, but it's not *really* an object. And it has features, but they're not *really* properties. As Azzouni puts it, worries about objects and properties more or less evaporate once we embrace ontological nihilism: "object boundaries, properties, and predication are a package projection onto the world, there is no metaphysical issue left."(p. 193) All of our superficial talk of objects and properties is, according to Azzouni, a projection or a way of "contouring the real" which at bottom is a reality with no grounds for individuating objects and properties. As a consequence, it is a reality without objects, properties, or much of anything that metaphysicians usually disagree about.

Viewed one way, ontological nihilism and Azzouni's object projectivism offer a way of trying to make good on the deep-seated hostility many philosophers bear towards metaphysical debate over objects and properties. But, to riff on Quine's joke: if nominalism has all the attractions of a desert, then ontological nihilism has all the attractions of outer space— disorienting, seemingly empty, and profoundly inhospitable. Azzouni's efforts to develop a semantic and metaontological framework that can sustain ontological nihilism via an apparatus of neutral quantification and projectivism are, for this reason, fairly impressive and are helped along by Azzouni's snappy writing and the consistency of his philosophical vision.

2. Surveying *Ontology without Borders*

Ontology without Borders divides into two parts. The second part presupposes certain elements of the metaontological picture advanced in the first part, but the first part is more or less silent on concerns about ontological borders or ontological nihilism. As a result, the first half of the book serves largely as an introduction to the broader view of the ontology-semantics interface Azzouni has developed elsewhere. This structure has the somewhat frustrating consequence that Azzouni's metaontological picture is initially developed by attending to other concerns and only

subsequently turned towards ontological nihilism, feature metaphysics, and object projectivism. Throughout, a vast amount of ground is covered in service to Azzouni's pitch for a large-scale account of language and reality rather than, say, chasing down potential objections to the view developed. After a quick summary of the book, I'll set out some central concerns about the big metaphysical picture on offer here.

Chapter One is Azzouni's most direct engagement with recent debates in metaontology. After introducing a taxonomic distinction between immanent and transcendent viewpoints towards quantifiers, Azzouni takes issue with Eli Hirsch's quantifier variantism as a species of the former. Where immanentists hold that quantifier domains are "individuated not just by their non-logical vocabulary but also by what their unrestricted quantifiers range over," (p. 5) transcendentalists hold that we "have no choice but to interpret alien quantifier domains as subsets of [our] own quantifier domain." (p. 9) After providing some evidence that Carnap and Quine fall on the immanentist and transcendentalist sides of the debate respectively, Azzouni offers a series of arguments that Hirsch's quantifier variance fails, on its own terms, to make sense of ontological disagreement. Merits of this chapter aside, its ultimate contribution to the aims of the book remains a bit unclear. Azzouni suggests that this discussion will "prepare us for the evaluation of quantifier onticity that takes place in later chapters," (p. 4) but the detour through Hirsch's view didn't—for me, anyways—shed additional light on Azzouni's own view or ontological nihilism.

Chapter Two considers the status of "exist' in natural language. Azzouni's project here hangs on a distinction between "criterion-transcendent" and "criterion-immanent" words. (No special relation is intended here between this distinction and the similarly named one above.) According to Azzouni, kind terms like 'cat' and 'water' are *criterion-transcendent*: "We take such words as continuing to be used with the same public meaning despite changes in what seemed to be *de facto* necessary and/or sufficient conditions on that usage." (p. 40) *Criterion-immanent* terms like "legal tender" or "refrigerator" are claimed to differ in the propriety of their retroactive application conditions. Where criterion-*transcendent* terms, when subject to radical change in criteria, retroactively change what *was once* an instance, criterion-*immanent* terms generally only require revising the present extent of application. Put roughly, if the meaning of 'legal tender' changes, "items once regarded as legal tender aren't legal tender any longer but are described as *having been* legal tender."(p. 42) This distinction is briefly extended from the case of 'exists', which Azzouni argues is criterion-transcendent, to argue against Amie Thomasson's metaontological claim that there is no "covering" usage of terms like 'object' or 'thing' that could allow us to sustain certain ontological disagreements. If these words are criterion-transcendent, then, according to Azzouni, Thomasson is mistaken that ontological questions are defective when unmoored from sortal-specific or "frame-level application condition" questions.

Chapter Three, "Ontological Neutrality in Natural Languages," is the beginning of the core of the first part of the book. It outlines Azzouni's preferred view, quantifier neutralism, and its orthodox foil, quantifier onticity. Proponents of quantifier onticity hold that quantifiers are "operators on subsets of domains of things that *exist*" (p. 55) and, as a result, proponents of onticity take sentences featuring quantification to constitute de facto avowals or denials of ontological commitment. Azzouni's case against onticity proceeds by ostending a range of sentences that rely upon quantification to state truths "without functioning in those sentences to

either ontologically commit or deny." (p. 56) We are, for instance, given sentences like "Hilary Clinton is depicted by the *New York Times* as more civilized than Donald Trump" and "Sherlock Holmes is depicted by the *New York Times* as more intelligent than Mickey Mouse."(p. 57) Drawing upon such examples, Azzouni contends that flat-footed Quineanism badly misconstrues the metaphysical import of what speakers typically intend by conflating the ontological demands of these and other sentences. He subsequently characterizes his preferred account of ontological commitment in natural language: "Ontological commitment is a pragmatic matter—not one of public meaning—and speakers impose an ontological understanding of their sentences (in ontological debates) by a battery of tools, including rhetorical stress and contextual clues…" (p. 63) Azzouni then takes aim at other views that reject onticity—most notably, views like Thomas Hofweber's that hold quantification to be polysemous between heavyweight (read: ontologically committal) and lightweight (read: non-committal) varieties. By the end of this chapter, Azzouni takes himself to have shown that neutralism, which denies that quantification invariably carries ontological import, squares with our formal tools for doing semantics, and is apt for making sense of natural language, too.

Chapter Four and Five begin to build out the ontology-semantics interface that neutralism requires. As Azzouni puts it, "[t]ruth values happen upon sentences in a variety of ways" (p. 74) Where straightforward correspondence induces truth-values when our discourse is *ontologically saturated*, claims like "The Thing was invented by Lee and Kirby" are ontologically unsaturated in one (though not all positions), since The Thing doesn't exist. As a result, the truth conditions of ontologically unsaturated claims are induced by what Azzouni calls "coherence conditions" which issue from something like an assemblage of *Fantastic Four* comics and a range of related social practices. Azzouni rightly notes that practices vary wildly and therefore zeroes in on "coherent" practices, which distribute truth values that obey classical logic. He then suggests that, while this view of the inducement of truth-values admits truth-value gaps, it need not violate bivalence. Azzouni subsequently distinguishes between *object-based property attributions* and *truth-based property attributions*. "Jack Kirby is human" is of the former sort, since Jack Kirby exists; "The Thing is orange" is of the second sort, since there is no object, The Thing, although our practices induce the truth of such a claim. Azzouni concludes this first part of the book with an overview of how the apparatus of neutralism and its bicameral account of truth-inducement helps with intentional identity puzzles (e.g., Hob and Nob cases) and contested scientific posits like averages and idealizations.

Chapter Six presents Azzouni's argument against the existence of "boundaries" or "borders," which doubles as an argument against objects. I'll return to it below, but, roughly put, this argument holds that ontological boundaries are either brute or explicable in terms of objects' properties and relations. According to Azzouni, neither approach is tenable. The result, then, is that there are no object boundaries and, consequently, no objects. Depending upon how you count, this master argument unfolds over about six pages and, while its concision is impressive, there are many who will find their preferred view or kneejerk response left undiscussed.

Chapter Seven and Eight set out the details of Azzouni's feature metaphysics. Where Azzouni's master argument directly targets objects, he subsequently turns to the issues that arise with ontologies that admit properties. When pressed to compare competing trope and universal theories, Azzouni insists that "we can't understand what this metaphysical difference can

possibly amount to." (p. 173) Azzouni argues that, in place of properties, we require an ontology of features on which all that is real is "the feature presentation" which is a worldly, non-property that admits of "arbitrary contouring… into the boundaried items belonging to quantifier domains." (p. 176) This requires pairing a feature-placing language that is sensitive to how reality really is along with the apparatus of object projectivism implicit in Azzouni's earlier discussions of quantifier neutralism. On the resulting view, we project objects and object boundaries in our thought and talk without requiring them to be part of the furniture of the world. The most critical work of this section is therefore to show how, in place of old-fashioned object metaphysics, we might sustain object projectivism, according to which "along with the projection of object boundaries on the world, there is a projection of a predication relation and a corresponding set of properties and relations that various features are transformed into." (p. 192). This requires, among other things, giving an account of how we can focus our theoretical attention at various levels and "portions" of the "feature presentation" and how these practices might underwrite scientific investigation into a mind-independent reality void of objects and properties.

Chapter Nine briefly touches on some of the applications and details of object projectivism as it concerns induction and laws of nature, indiscernibility principles, mathematical entities, artifacts, and the puzzle of material constitution.

3. The Master Argument against Boundaries

Let's return to Azzouni's master argument against object boundaries sketched above. In doing so, it is worth noting an interesting rhetorical feature of this master argument. It is specifically focused upon the question of how to make metaphysical sense of boundaries or "ontological borders" and, after concluding that we cannot, Azzouni infers there are no objects. It's conspicuous that this argument seizes upon boundaries rather than the objects that they're boundaries of. Consider a rhetorical analogy: there's no way to provide a plausible metaphysics of holes, so there are no doughnuts. The worry, in each case, is that we are abandoning exceptionally plausible theses—e.g., that there are people or doughnuts—because we fare poorly when trying to account for the relevant entities' derivative, metaphysically recalcitrant features. This is, I think, reason to suspect that something has gone wrong, but confirming these suspicions requires some care in formulating and assessing Azzouni's argument.

The first horn of Azzouni's dilemma holds that the boundaries of objects are "just (a possibly distinguished subset of) their properties and relations." On the second horn, these boundaries are "brute—something worldly, but additional to their properties and relations." Azzouni's presentation of this argument is notably abbreviated, so the intended notion of properties and relations isn't all that clear. Consider, then, a parallel issue: are the identities of objects to be understood in terms of their properties and relations or as a brute matter? If we take properties in their abundant sense, it's not clear what the latter option could be, since any object will have the property *being that very object* and so trivially the former option will be correct. To make sense of our parallel question, we therefore require the distinction between qualitative and non-qualitative properties and relations. And, as best as I can understand Azzouni's challenge, it requires this same distinction and asks whether we can make sense of object boundaries via qualitative properties or if boundaries are a brute, non-qualitative affair, floating free of the qualitative character of the world.

To better illustrate Azzouni's challenge, consider a world empty save for a qualitatively homogenous sphere. Suppose for a moment that we hold any proper subregion occupied by the sphere to delimit an object that exactly occupies that region. Accordingly, there are vastly many ways of slicing the sphere into two equal parts. (I set aside topological niceties here.) Here, then, is one way to instantiate Azzouni's objection. Consider a slicing that leaves us with halves, A and B. Given the qualitative homogeneity of the sphere, there seems to be no principled way to qualitatively single out A and B from any other sliced pair. And, if that's right, we can't use qualitative resources to explain why A and B would be distinct from (or identical with) a distinct sliced pair, C and D. In this regard, Azzouni seems quite right: there is no reason to think that qualitative properties and relations can provide a complete account of boundaries.

We are therefore forced upon the second horn. If there are infinitely many sliced pairs that overlap one another, this fact cannot be accounted for in qualitative terms. It is an irreducibly non-qualitative matter. In cautioning against accepting this result, Azzouni relies upon rhetoric heavier than anywhere else in the book. We are told that "We can't make metaphysical sense of there being something in the world above and beyond the properties and relations of objects that distinguishes objects from one another—an extra metaphysical something that is an object's boundaries." (p. 138) Azzouni further remarks that there is "no metaphysical echo to our conception of an ontological boundary" (p. 138) and "no metaphysical bright lines that we are recognizing in the world that mark out what the objects are" (p. 138) and, finally, that any proposed non-qualitative account of boundaries would involve determining "what's the metaphysical 'special sauce'" (p. 144) or positing some "magical ontological flavor." (p. 139)

Given the charges of unintelligibility that beset Azzouni's own neutralist view of quantification, his heavy reliance upon unvarnished appeal to intuition is a surprising feature of the book—one that recurs in his complaints against those who find the trope-universal debate intelligible. Most will, I suspect, simply shrug and accept brute boundary facts rather than deny the existence of objects. There is, of course, value in working through different lines of response. Consider, for instance, what happens when we attend to certain non-qualitative, modal features of the world. For Humeans like David Lewis, identity and modality are yoked together in virtue of the fact that mereologically disjoint entities stand in no necessary connections to one another. In the case of simple entities, the modal fact that A could exist without B and *vice versa* will hold just in case A and B are numerically distinct. Such modal-distinctness facts, in turn, provide a means to account for boundaries among entities, since a composite object will be located wherever there are only things that are not mereologically disjoint from it. The modal features of the world are therefore a non-qualitative resource for explaining the boundaries between objects. (Azzouni, as best I can tell, is not looking for an analysis of identity facts, given worries about both analysis and the obvious futility of explaining identity without saying what it is.) Essentialists who rely upon rather different views about identity and distinctness properties are liable to have a different style for accounting for distinctness facts, and, as a result, it's a bit frustrating that Azzouni does little work to excavate potential lines of resistance. Additionally, it is worth making explicit that, if Azzouni's argument is to go through, it is the charge that boundaries are simply unintelligible that will have to do the work here rather than the fact that boundaries are brute. After all, Azzouni insists elsewhere that, unlike objects, features have no

individuation conditions. Such a fact, if it is one, seems no more or less brute than the fact that some objects A and B are distinct.

4. The Feature Presentation

The most mind-bending aspect of Azzouni's ontological nihilism isn't the denial that objects exist. It's the fact that there are no properties either. As suggested by other work on ontological nihilism, Azzouni relies upon feature-placing languages that are parasitic upon familiar claims like "It's raining" that do not require ontological commitment. In place of properties, Azzouni relies upon an exclusively feature-based metaphysics. As he puts it "Features have no residual association with objects. Whatever they are … they don't require inherence…" (p. 166) But, of course, there is a flavor or character to reality that can be investigated or described in better or worse ways.

The lurking question when developing this picture is what *exactly* distinguishes properties from features? According to Azzouni, it is ultimately a matter of which questions can be sensibly posed. When it comes to features, Azzouni insists that questions like "Do features multiply occur in various places and times or only uniquely?" (p. 173) are "illegitimate identity questions." Since features have no individuation conditions, there is no sense to made of claims that we are presented with one feature or two or whether the redness *here* is the same or different from the redness *there*. This will clearly distinguish features from properties provided that one takes such questions to be licit ones about properties. But, when we look to Azzouni's argument against properties, we find him charging competing property theories with lapsing into unintelligibility. Azzouni complains, when presented with two Max Black-style worlds with two indiscernible red spheres that differ in including universals or tropes: "How are these two universes actually different? It isn't just that the respective positions on Redness look underdetermined… it's that we can't understand what this metaphysical difference can possibly amount to?" (p. 173) If Azzouni is correct, and metaphysicians are generally deluded about the coherence of debates about properties, it looks as though there's too much unintelligibility to go around—we can't make sense of questions about features or tropes or universals. Our grip on what makes features so philosophically special is therefore lost.

To be sure, the principles that govern the metaphysics of objects and properties should be largely up for grabs, but it's important to note that feature metaphysics can't escape commitment to principles either. So, when Azzouni claims "I avoid stating any metaphysical principles at all—neither ones that strike me as a plausible nor ones I claim to be a priori" (p. 253), it's not clear how to understand the foundational principle of feature metaphysics: that features have no individuation conditions. And, whether or not the feature-property distinction can be sustained, it is far from obvious that boundaries are unavoidable even in feature-based metaphysics. Indeed, I take it that there is substantial pressure to grant that features admit of "presentation questions" that require us to individuate features much as we might properties.

Here's one case: Gomer believes the world is roughly as we take it to be. Edie believes that our present epoch is as we roughly take the world to be, but also believes that the world exhibits two-way eternal recurrence. How can we make sense of their disagreement? Two ways: (i) There is a feature that Gomer believes is presented once and that Edie believes is presented infinitely many times over. (ii) There is a feature that Edie believes is presented once while Gomer believes

only that the smallest, epoch-sized "portion" of the feature is presented. If we take the first route, we must be able to make sense of features being identical across presentations, which violates Azzouni's stricture on admissible questions about features. And, if we take the second route, we require the application of mereological notions like "portion" to features. The latter is a gateway drug to individuation conditions. Consider, for example, the presumption that the feature presentation is maximal—namely, that there is no portion of reality that it does not contour. Such notions are shot through with individuation—e.g., a thing is maximal just in case anything is identical with or part of that thing. We ought to be able to make sense of cases like this one but, if we do, there seems no escaping from the trappings of individuation conditions that Azzouni takes as the harbinger of metaphysical boundaries.

5. Conclusion

Let me conclude with an inchoate methodological concern. In a book replete with striking philosophical claims, the most jarring arrives on p. 167 when Azzouni tells us that "If there are no ontological boundaries in the world—if object boundaries really are projections in the sense that I've argued for… --then nothing changes. Our theorizing and language practices, how we perceive the world, and so on *already accommodate* this metaphysical fact." It's difficult for me to reconcile the vertiginous commitments of ontological nihilism—perhaps most notably, that I don't exist—with Azzouni's nonchalance on this front. To be sure, I can see, given the machinery Azzouni develops here, how he might hope to convince the reader of the perfect concord between ontological nihilism and our ordinary ways of thinking and talking. But, if upon discovering I share the same ontological status as The Thing, God, hadrons, and doughnuts—namely, no status whatsoever—the fact that a theory tells me "nothing changes" strikes me as a reason to think that there's almost certainly something mistaken about the theory.

Look, I said this worry was inchoate. And it is, because there's no part of Azzouni's picture I take to be demonstrably false nor is there one I take to be *especially* suspect. (As a procrustean Lewisian, I simply find most of the them not especially plausible.) Here, however, is a more focused worry I'm left with: if projectivism really is compatible with the ontological nihilist's view, then it's likely compatible with any view of the underlying structure to reality. So why pair it with ontological nihilism? If nothing changes even in the worst metaphysical scenario—the one where we get seemly everything terribly wrong—why tether object projectivism to ontological nihilism? As I've suggested, the master argument isn't terribly compelling, and, as best I can tell, one could deploy Azzouni's projectivism with minimal revisions within the setting of, say, monism, mereological nihilism, or outright ontological skepticism. So, while ontological nihilism provides an interesting backdrop for Azzouni's distinctive metaontology, the limited scrutiny it receives here means that it remains a view still in need of a definitive treatment.