

Review of Thomas Hofweber's *Ontology and the Ambitions of Metaphysics*

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This book unifies and extends the author's previous work across metaphysics and the philosophy of language and logic with a careful eye toward the foundations of ontology. The result is rich, skillfully crafted, and mandatory for anyone working in (meta-)ontology or nearby areas in the philosophy of mathematics and language where entities like numbers, properties, and propositions generate controversy. It will repay a careful reader's interest many times over.

The lynchpin of Hofweber's book is a thesis about quantification and, in turn, about the metaphysical commitments of certain bodies of discourse. Roughly put, Hofweber holds the quantifiers of ordinary language to be polysemous, admitting of either an ontologically committal *external* reading or an *internal* reading which places no demands on what exists. A parallel thesis applies to singular terms and delivers two potential views regarding a given body of discourse. If this discourse is externalist (i.e., rightly interpreted along externalist lines), then the existential quantifiers carry ontological commitment and the relevant singular terms aim to refer. If the discourse is internalist, then the existential quantifiers do not require the existence of any entities nor do the singular terms purport to refer to entities out there in the world. And, while some might take internalism about a body of discourse to support skepticism or agnosticism about the entities in question, Hofweber argues that, if internalism is true of discourse about some putative entities, it follows that, externally speaking, there are no such entities.

Sorting out which bodies of discourse are properly viewed as internalist or externalist is therefore a critical task for metaphysics and Hofweber brings some impressive resources from linguistics to bear across his four case studies. He argues that our talk about numbers, properties, and propositions is internalist in nature, but he defends an externalist view of our discourse about ordinary objects. The result is a limited variety of nominalism on which there are no numbers, properties, or propositions; however, Hofweber is quick to point out that this falls short of demonstrating that there are no other abstract entities or, for that matter, no other mathematical entities like sets or topological spaces.

Denying the existence of numbers is no small matter and Hofweber's explanation for why we are tempted to admit them in the first place is noteworthy. Very roughly, our introduction of apparently singular terms for numbers is a misleading byproduct of our cognitive limitations and what Hofweber calls 'cognitive type coercion', which leads us to recast arithmetical claims of higher linguistic types (e.g. claims featuring internalist quantifiers and bare determiners) into claims featuring apparently singular terms.

Parallel issues arise in the case of propositions. While externalists about propositions hold such entities to exist and meet a variety of theoretical needs, internalists maintain that these needs can be satisfied by our proposition-talk without admitting that, externally speaking, there are any such entities. A key point of

contention between externalists and internalist concerns the fate of inexpressible propositions. For, if externalism is true, there is almost certainly a plurality of mind-independent propositions, some of which are inexpressible since they outstrip our representational capacities. But, given Hofweber's account of internal quantification, internalists about propositions must somehow explain away the peculiar consequence that, internally speaking, all propositions are expressible. Accommodating internalism ultimately pushes Hofweber toward what he calls 'conceptual idealism', on which the internalist domain of propositions depends upon our representational capacities even while the existence of objects is a matter independent of us.

These and many other bold metaphysical theses are enfolded in Hofweber's broader methodological narrative, which centers on three puzzles about ontology: how *hard*, *important*, and *philosophical* are ontological questions? Although each of these puzzles admits of conflicting answers, Hofweber holds the internalist/externalist distinction to be the key to satisfactorily resolving them. Questions like "Are there numbers?" will, for example, seem *easy* to those who interpret number-talk internally and *difficult* to those who interpret such talk externally, but these conflicting judgments are simply the result of failing to distinguish between internalist and externalist interpretations. The disagreement between those who hold ontological questions to be profoundly *important* and those who take them to be *unimportant* is explained in a similar fashion. For, if ontological questions about numbers are external, the fate of arithmetic would indeed hang upon their answers but, once we recognize that internalism is true of number-talk, we can see that the fate of arithmetic is independent of whether or not numbers exist. Hofweber's proposed answer to the third puzzle regarding the philosophical status of ontological questions is more complex, but, in rough outline, he contends that ontological questions are rightly settled outside philosophy just in case the relevant domain of discourse is external as in the case of ordinary objects. But, when it comes to internalist domains like arithmetic, ontological concerns fall within the province of philosophy, since the verdicts issued by the relevant disciplines are ontologically non-committal and so do not require the existence of the relevant entities. It is therefore the work of philosophy to settle whether there are any such entities, though, as noted above, Hofweber takes the nonexistence of entities in a given domain to follow directly from internalism about that domain.

Hofweber concludes the book by sketching a synoptic view about the proper aims of metaphysics. But, before doing so, his most polemical chapter takes aim at those who would give grounding or fundamentality pride of place in metaphysics and, in turn, take ontological questions to be elliptical for questions pertaining to fundamentality. Hofweber's chief complaint is that the resulting conception of ontology involves an objectionable kind of esoteric metaphysics, which invokes novel and inaccessible ideology. Here, I suspect some fans of fundamentality will be tempted by a *tu quoque* that targets Hofweber's distinction between internal and external uses of quantifiers. For, just as grounding aficionados rely on a careful stock of examples, Hofweber builds the case for internal quantification on the back of claims regarding 'general communicative need' and the controversial status of inferences from 'Fred

admires Sherlock' to 'There is someone Fred admires'. There is, I suspect, no plausible methodological stricture on core metaphysical notions that admits internalist quantification while turning away primitive grounding or *vice versa*.

For those sympathetic to the internalism/externalism distinction, a striking feature of Hofweber's view is that internalism about a domain immediately settles external ontological questions in the negative. This is in marked contrast with those who would admit this distinction and then proceed to avow agnosticism, skepticism, or non-cognitivism about external ontological questions. Much hinges on this thesis connecting internalism and existence, but the case in its favour is incomplete. Hofweber presses the intuition that, since internalist singular and general terms like 'seven' and 'the natural numbers' do not aim to refer, we can make no sense of how they might, externally speaking, pick something out; however, it's far from clear that this semantic thesis is mandatory. For, when speaking externally, our arithmetical discourse might admit of a licit interpretation on which 'the natural numbers' refers to the entities that best satisfy relevant theoretical roles—e.g., sets in the arithmetical case. (A close cousin of this debate arises when considering Kripke's and Lewis' views on the semantics of fictional terms like 'Sherlock Holmes' and 'unicorns'.) To be sure, any semantic thesis connecting the internal and the external will be a contentious one, since it hinges on the nature of reference and the identity of linguistic expressions. But it is at precisely this point where Hofweber's view requires elaboration if it is to settle external ontological questions and the puzzles that come with them.