

3 WHAT CAN PHENOMENOLOGY BRING TO
4 ONTOLOGY?
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6
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10 **Abstract:** “Ontology” is understood and undertaken
11 very differently in the phenomenological tradition than
12 it is in the recent analytic tradition. Here I argue that
13 those differences are not accidental, but instead reflect
14 deeper differences in views about what the proper role
15 and methods for philosophy are. I aim to show that,
16 from a phenomenological perspective, questions about
17 what exists can be answered ‘easily,’ whether through
18 trivial inferences (in the case of ideal abstracta) or (always
19 tentatively, of course) by ordinary empirical means—seeing
20 how our observations hang together. As a result, it can get
21 us away from the obscurities, epistemological mysteries,
22 and skepticism that the neo-Quinean approach to ontology
23 has left us in and provide a clearer and less problematic
24 approach to questions of ontology.
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28 *What Is ontology?* “Ontology” is a term that played a prominent role in
29 work in the phenomenological tradition in the work of Husserl, Heidegger
30 and Ingarden. It is also a term that plays a prominent role in contemporary
31 analytic metaphysics. These two traditions, however, understood ‘ontology’
32 in quite different ways. There is some temptation to think that we should
33 leave them asunder, just adding warnings to our students to not be confused
34 by these different uses, and treating any difference between them as
35 involving a merely ‘verbal dispute’ between disparate traditions. By looking
36 more closely, however, we can see that the differences in how these two
37 traditions understand and undertake ontology are not accidental. Instead,
38 they reflect deeper differences in their views about what the proper role and
39 methods for philosophy are. Nor, I will argue, should we simply leave these
40 traditions safely quarantined. Instead, I will try to show how going back
41 to a phenomenological perspective on what ontology is, and how it can
42 and should be conducted, leads to a way of deflating many contemporary
43 debates in analytic ontology. It also gives a way of redirecting our work in
44 metaphysics to help us out of the quagmire the neo-Quinean approach has
45 left us in, and turn to more intelligible and useful tasks.
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1 What is ‘Ontology’? Phenomenological and Neo-Quinean Perspectives, and the Underlying Disagreement

Ontology as practiced and conceived by Edmund Husserl, Roman Ingarden, and others in that end of the phenomenological tradition, does not involve proclamations about, or ‘theories of’ what does (and does not) ‘really’ exist. Instead, it involves a purely *a priori* study of concepts or meanings, and their corresponding essences and their interrelations. When Husserl, in the *Logical Investigations*, famously examines the relations of wholes and parts, he insists that “These sorts of relations have an *a priori* foundation in the Idea of an object” (*LI* 3, §1, p.436)¹—using analyses of the general concept or idea of an object to come to conclusions that are (in his sense) ‘ontological.’

In *Ideas*, we see Husserl treat ontology as a ‘science of essence,’ distinguished from all ‘sciences of fact’ (§7, p. 55). Ontology, in Husserl’s hands, studies both concepts/meanings and the essences they represent (see Smith 2007, 135 and 138). Accordingly, in *The Crisis*, the task of a life-world ontology is presented as “a concretely general doctrine of essence” for spatio-temporal things (§37, p.142). Essences and concepts are guaranteed to be correlated, on Husserl’s view, since talk of essences may be transformed through trivial inferences into talk of concepts (see my 2007a, 279–280). Since concepts, on Husserl’s view, are correlated with the essences of objects they are concepts of, “Every concept of essence attained by an authentic method . . . belongs at the same time to universal ontology,” (*EJ* §93, p. 364). And so, developed fully and systematically, transcendental phenomenology, “would be *ipso facto* the true and genuine universal ontology” of “all conceivable being” (*CM* §64, p. 155). In so far as we are doing Husserlian phenomenology, ontology, of course, must be done ‘within the brackets.’ As long as we are making use of an eidetic reduction, we must suspend all factual, empirical beliefs, examining the ways in which objects of various types could be *presented to us* in experience—and moving from there to conclusions about what the corresponding possible or conceivable objects and their essences would be like. The methods to be used for this, at least in part, involve ‘eidetic variation,’ in which we, for example, imaginatively consider what changes a shape could undergo and yet still be a triangle (cf. Smith 2007, 330–333), or consider various possible experiences and whether they could count as still presenting *the same house*. More deeply, they may involve transcendental arguments, aiming to

Please indicate whether the italics in the Husserl quotes are original or added.

¹ References to works of Husserl will be noted using an abbreviation for the work title: *LI* (*Logical Investigations* 2000 [1906]) (followed by investigation number, where relevant), *Ideas* (*Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* 1962 [1913]), *CM* (*Cartesian Meditations* 1960 [1929]), *EJ* (*Experience and Judgment* 1973 [1948]), and *Crisis* (*The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* 1970 [1954]). In all cases, citations will be followed by section number and then page number in the edition/translation referenced in the bibliography, as in: (*LI*, Vol.#, §#, p.#).

1 determine what it would take for experience to seemingly present us with a
 2 house—or any kind of material object—at all. As Steven Crowell puts it,
 3 for Husserl, “Ontology—the being of things—is . . . referred to a meaning
 4 that is determined (and can be determined) only . . . by modes of givenness”
 5 (2001, 190). Ontology is based on “a prior transcendental/epistemological
 6 reflection on valid meaning” (Crowell 2001, 190).

7 But how does Husserl use the term ‘metaphysics’? In his earlier work,
 8 when Husserl uses the term ‘metaphysics,’ he does so primarily to distin-
 9 guish what he is up to from metaphysics.² As Husserl insists the *Logical*
 10 *Investigations*, “Metaphysical questions do not concern us here” (Vol. 1,
 11 §33, p. 138), and when he raises ‘metaphysical’ questions or interpretations
 12 in the *Logical Investigations*, it is largely to avoid confusion with what
 13 he takes himself to be doing there (330, 352). For the phenomenological
 14 investigations undertaken there (as Husserl puts it in the introduction to the
 15 second volume) “aspire solely to such freedom from metaphysical, scientific,
 16 and psychological presuppositions” (*LI* Vol.2, §7, p. 265).³ Metaphysics,
 17 as Husserl conceives of it in the *Logical Investigations*—and in contrast
 18 with phenomenology—aims to “answer questions concerning the nature
 19 and existence of external reality” (Zahavi 2017, 32)—where ‘reality’ is
 20 conceived of as spatio-temporal being. In his later work, Husserl seems to
 21 change his tone on metaphysics—or perhaps, as Bernet, Kern, and Mar-
 22 bach put it, to offer a view of ‘metaphysics in a new sense’ (1993, 233). In
 23 the closing section of the *Cartesian Meditations*, he insists that while phe-
 24 nomenology “*excludes every naïve metaphysics* that operates with absurd
 25 things in themselves” it “does no violence to the problem-motives” that
 26 often drove the old metaphysical tradition, and “by no means professes to
 27 stop short of the ‘supreme and ultimate’ questions,” about a first being,
 28 death, fate, and a human life as meaningful, and other ethico-religious
 29 problems “stated in the realm where everything that can have a possible
 30 sense for us must be stated” (*CM* §64, p. 156). In the *Crisis*, Husserl
 31 laments the way in which a positivistic conception of science has “dropped
 32 all the questions” which had been considered the ‘ultimate and highest’
 33 questions of metaphysics, including questions of knowledge, value ethics,
 34 freedom, and even immortality. Husserl treats these as broadly speaking
 35 “questions with the idea of reason in mind” (*Crisis*, §3, p. 9).

36 Husserl’s student, Roman Ingarden, uses ‘ontology’ in roughly the same
 37 way as Husserl. When Ingarden works on the ontology of the work of
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39 ² It might be intentional that the early Husserl wants to distance himself from metaphysics.
 40 In the work of his teacher Brentano, the term ‘metaphysics’ is generally used as a term of
 41 derision. Brentano tends to mention it *only* to note that we want to avoid descending “into
 42 the fearful depths of metaphysics” (1995 [1874], 18) with its “contrast of diverging opinions”
 43 (64) in order to avoid falling “into vague, baseless dreaming” (73).

44 ³ Bernet, Kern, and Marbach suggest that Husserl’s early conception of metaphysics treats
 45 it as a “transcendental, eidetic interpretation of the empirically factual” (1993, 233)—quite
 46 distinct from the universal ontology studied by eidetic phenomenology.

Italics original? (ln 24)

1 art, he considers that work “an a priori analysis of the substance of the
 2 general idea ‘the literary work of art’ ” (1973 [1931], 10). Ontological
 3 investigations, in Ingarden’s view (as in Husserl’s) involve an *a priori*
 4 analysis of the *possible* kinds, categories, or modes of being, and what their
 5 relations are. On the other hand, questions about what ‘really exists’—for
 6 Ingarden, predominantly the question of the existence of the real world—are
 7 ‘metaphysical’ problems (1964 [1960], 20) (in line with Husserl’s early way
 8 of thinking of metaphysics as addressing questions about the nature and
 9 existence of external reality). Thus, at the outset of *The Controversy Over*
 10 *the Existence of the World*, Ingarden distinguishes three sorts of questions
 11 that might be asked about any (purported) entity: questions of its mode of
 12 being, form, and material endowment. On Ingarden’s view, each of these
 13 sorts of questions “can be grasped either metaphysically or ontologically”
 14 (1964 [1960], 24), where the ontological approach involves investigating
 15 the ‘contents of the ideas’ of the object X (23), and the metaphysical
 16 approach involves asking factual questions regarding the existence or nature
 17 of X. In sum, Ingarden understands ‘ontology’ very much as Husserl does,
 18 and contrasts it with metaphysics, which he thinks of as addressing ‘factual’
 19 questions—not with questions beyond the reach of experience. Ingarden
 20 does, however, think that ontological investigations (in his sense) may aid
 21 in making progress on metaphysical problems—for example, ontological
 22 inquiries about the very concept of purely intentional objects versus real
 23 objects he treats as prior to inquiries into the metaphysical question of
 24 the existence of the world—hence all the work on ontology and a three-
 25 dimensional system of categories in *The Controversy Over the Existence*
 26 *of the World*, which he sees as preliminary to resolving the metaphysical
 27 realism–idealism question.

28 This way of understanding and approaching ontology differs sharply
 29 from the understanding of ontology that became commonplace in the con-
 30 text of analytic metaphysics, dominated in the second half of the twentieth
 31 century by a so-called **neo-Quinean** approach. As Quine famously put it,
 32 the ‘ontological problem’ “can be put in three Anglo-Saxon monosyllables:
 33 ‘What is there?’ ” (1953 [1948], 1). Quine himself, of course, was most
 34 interested in simply establishing an explicit standard for determining what
 35 a given theory is ‘ontologically committed’ to, where “the question of the
 36 ontological commitments of a theory . . . is the question what, according
 37 to that theory, there is” (Quine 1976 [1951], 204). Quine is rather explicit
 38 that he is introducing a terminological *proposal* with this use of the term
 39 ‘ontology,’ one which, he acknowledges, “Carnap does not much like,”
 40 since “he disapproves of my giving meaning to a word which belongs to
 41 traditional metaphysics and should therefore be meaningless” (1976 [1951],
 42 203).⁴ But in his own defense, Quine says (though he is “no champion of
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44 ⁴ See McGrath Unpublished for development of this point, and a reading of the Carnap/Quine
 45 debate as involving metalinguistic negotiation.
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1 traditional metaphysics”), “meaningless words, however, are precisely the
2 words which I feel freest to specify meanings for” (1976 [1951], 203).

3 Despite the historical Quine’s own reservations about traditional meta-
4 physics, and his avowed pragmatism, metaphysicians eagerly picked up
5 on Quine’s proposed use of ‘ontology,’ and set about the project of on-
6 tology conceived as the project of determining what exists. In my view,
7 and that of others (e.g., Price 2009), recent metaphysicians who consider
8 themselves neo-Quinean have drifted rather far from what the historical
9 Quine recommended and would have approved of. It is with the practice
10 and meanings of neo-Quinean metaphysicians, not the historical Quine,
11 that I will henceforth be concerned.

12 As it has come to be practiced in analytic metaphysics, the project of
13 ontology is widely seen as involving two steps. First, figure out what
14 the best ‘total theory’ is that you should accept. Second, regiment the
15 statements of the theory into standard first-order logic, and see what
16 entities one must quantify over to render those statements true. Those are
17 the (only) ontological commitments of the theory; they are all we should
18 accept as existing, “the *only* way we can involve ourselves in ontological
19 commitments [is] by our use of bound variables” (Quine 1953 [1948], 12).
20 What is the ‘best total theory’? Here, responses have varied—some have
21 had in mind the best total *scientific* theory, which metaphysicians must
22 simply wait on, regiment, and determine the commitments of. But many
23 others have gone further, addressing other theories like those of literary
24 criticism (van Inwagen 1977) or the social sciences. In recent years, it has
25 become common to treat metaphysical views themselves as ‘theories’ like
26 scientific theories, which may be evaluated according to their possession
27 of various ‘theoretical virtues’ (Paul 2012). Appeal to these theoretic
28 virtues, the hope is, will enable us to choose the best ‘total theory’ and
29 accept (only) its ontological commitments. As Laurie Paul puts it, “We use
30 theoretical desiderata as guides to truth in metaphysics just as we use such
31 desiderata as guides to truth in science” (2012, 21). Theoretical desiderata
32 include simplicity, explanatory power, fertility, and elegance (21). “If such
33 theoretical desiderata are truth conducive in science, they are also truth
34 conducive in metaphysics” (21).

35 As the approach evolved, the standard practice came to include putting
36 forward competing theories, clarifying their ‘ontological commitments,’
37 and evaluating such theories largely according to the relative parsimony,
38 explanatory power, unity, etc. Such an approach to ‘ontology’ is clearly,
39 unlike the phenomenological conception, *a posteriori* (waiting, as it does,
40 on the results of the natural sciences), and is aiming to address (what Ingar-
41 den would have considered) the metaphysical question of what (actually,
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really) exists—not just to determine *a priori* a range of *essences* that mark out *possible* entities and their essential interrelations.⁵

In sum, then, we have two different uses of ‘ontology.’ On the phenomenological use, it is a purely *a priori* study (distinct from any matters of fact) of what is involved in the *very idea* of possible objects or categories of various sorts, their essential features and interrelations, and in undertaking it, eidetic variation plays a prominent role. On the neo-Quinean analytic use, it is an *a posteriori* determination of what exists, undertaken by finding the best **theory** (the one that has the greatest theoretic virtues) and assessing its quantificational commitments.

One might think that this is a potentially confusing, but otherwise harmless, verbal dispute—the two traditions **happen** to use the term ‘ontology’ in different ways, and we just need to be careful not to confuse them if we wish to speak to each other.

This isn’t just a ‘verbal dispute’—instead it reflects a deeper disagreement about what we can and should do, in doing philosophy. Phenomenology and ordinary language philosophy, as I have argued elsewhere (2002, 2007a), were both born out of the same crisis: How can we characterize the proper methods and subject-matter of philosophy, given the increasing success of the sciences, and their increasing separation from philosophy—first, as the natural sciences peeled off, and by the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, as the social sciences and psychology also separated themselves from philosophy? Both phenomenologists and ordinary language philosophers sought to provide a role for philosophy independent of all empirical inquiry—including psychological inquiry. That role lay in analyzing meanings, language, or concepts—and the essences we can come to speak of as their correlates (more on this **later**). As Crowell puts it, “Husserl and Heidegger share an orientation toward a common philosophical problem—the phenomenon of meaning” (2001, 5). As I have argued elsewhere (2007a, 2002), there were historical influences of phenomenology on ordinary language philosophy (especially via the work of Gilbert Ryle) and greater methodological commonalities than are commonly realize. Both sides aim to abstract from the particularities of natural language terms, and express interest instead in the essences, objects , or

Note: Date on Thomasson, “Phenomenology and the Development of Analytic Philosophy” was changed to 2002, the date of publication.

⁵J. N. Findlay describes the difference especially well in his introduction to the *Logical Investigations*: “As regards Husserl’s contributions to ontology, the *Logical Investigations* introduces us to a richness of categorial distinctions We have none of the misplaced economy, suitable in natural science, where it is all-important to have only a few explanatory ultimates or laws, carried over into the realm of thought-distinctions, where it encourages one to massacre some valuable concept, or to warp the expression of some well-understood principles, in order to satisfy the exigencies of a cheese-paring behest not to multiply entities, and which so fears the ‘jungle’ of ramifying things of reason that it is prepared to sink in to the Serbonian bog of enforced simplification. Obviously one does not lose, but gain, by noting all the iridescent variety which confronts one even at the categorial level, and which is indefeasibly part of the world as we deal with it through word and thought” (5).

1 kinds *meant*.⁶ What we have, in short, is a view on which the role of
 2 philosophy is quite *separate* from the role of the empirical sciences, with
 3 philosophy doing the work of understanding meanings, concepts, and the
 4 essences ‘meant’ and the relations among them, while the sciences engage
 5 in empirical work.

6 There are of course important differences across and within these tradi-
 7 tions as well—particularly in whether one concerns oneself first and
 8 foremost with language, or with concepts or meanings, as well as with how
 9 one understands concepts or meanings. As Crowell aptly puts it,

10 Husserl’s breakthrough to transcendental phenomenology,
 11 to a truly universal theory of meaning, came with the
 12 recognition that the notion of signification (*Bedeutung*),
 13 which “originally . . . concerned only the linguistic sphere,”
 14 can “find application of a certain kind to . . . all acts, be
 15 they now combined with expressive acts or not.” (2001, 5)

16 Husserl’s approach to meaning, famously, is transcendental:⁷ aiming to
 17 elucidate what those meaning-structures are that enable us to be presented
 18 with a world, and entities of various kinds, at all. Husserl’s conception
 19 of the meanings embedded in the ways in which we consciously come to
 20 be presented with a world is far removed from a view on which we might
 21 practice linguistic or conceptual analysis that aims to identify analytic
 22 truths or find necessary and sufficient conditions for application of a key
 23 concept. This is particularly important to note, **because** only by noting
 24 these differences can it become clear that this approach is not undermined
 25 by the oft-noted criticisms of attempts to engage in a form of ‘conceptual
 26 analysis’ that seeks necessary and sufficient conditions, nor by Quinean
 27 (1953 [1951]) criticisms of notion of ‘analyticity’ and the like (more on this
 28 below).

29 By contrast, on the neo-Quinean view, the roles of philosophy and
 30 science are not distinguished. Metaphysicians eagerly seized on Quine’s
 31 remarks that “Ontological questions . . . end up on a par with the
 32 questions of natural science” (1953 [1951], 134),⁸ thinking of ontology as
 33 gaining the respectability of a science and borrowing its methodology. As
 34 we have seen, on this model metaphysicians think of themselves as (like
 35 scientists) in the business of devising competing ‘theories,’ which could
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 39 ⁶ Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere (2017b), while Husserl tends to present his work in
 40 the guise of the ‘science of essences,’ he is not aptly rejected (or differentiated from ordinary
 41 language philosophers) for being a ‘Platonizing realist’ about essences.

42 ⁷ Crowell argues persuasively that the early Heidegger’s project, too, is best understood
 43 in transcendental terms—that Heidegger’s ‘decisive contribution’ lies within transcendental
 44 phenomenology (2001, 4).

45 ⁸ See Huw Price (2009, 326) for a **discussion** of why this is such a misinterpretation of the
 46 historical Quine.

1 be evaluated by appeal to the theoretic virtues, including, prominently,
2 ontological simplicity.⁹

3 One important motivation for the neo-Quinean approach over views
4 that took the role of philosophy to lie in analysis of *meanings*, of course,
5 came from the doubts Quine raised about whether or not there is an ana-
6 lytic/synthetic distinction, and indeed whether we can make sense of *mean-*
7 *ings* at all.¹⁰ There is not space to enter into those debates here, although I
8 have done so elsewhere.¹¹ Please cite page numbers, not chapter for Thom-
9 *son 2007b*. But it is worth noting that Quine’s most famous arguments
10 against analyticity—built as they were around criticisms of attempts to
11 define ‘analyticity’ in terms of synonymy or in terms of definition—have
12 no direct bearing on the phenomenological approach to investigating rela-
13 tions among ideas, meanings, and the essences they concern, as Husserl’s
14 approach in no way appeals to synonymies or definitions.

15 But thinking of ontology and science as ‘on a par’ in this way, and
16 thinking of the methodology for doing metaphysics in neo-Quinean terms,
17 has led to a morass of problems. Although some scientific theories can
18 generally be favored over others on grounds of empirical adequacy, this
19 is generally not the case for ‘metaphysical’ theories—so the grounds for
20 choice are left to other theoretic virtues. But it is unclear that appeals to
21 the theoretic virtues other than empirical adequacy are truth-conducive in
22 *any* case, and far more doubtful that (even if they are for scientific theories)
23 appeals to the theoretic virtues are legitimate for metaphysical ‘theories’ at
24 all (see Shalkowski 2010, Saatsi 2016, Huemer 2009). Certainly in practice,
25 appealing to theoretic virtues to choose among rival metaphysical theories
26 has generally yielded no clear winner—just the trading of virtues from one
27 metaphysical theory to another (Kriegel 2013, Bennett 2009).

28 As it has come to be practiced, the neo-Quinean *method* for addressing
29 the question ‘What is there?’ has been a disaster. It has led us into a
30 situation in which we have an increasing proliferation of diverse views,
31 which are often extremely counterintuitive and revisionary—with some
32 denying the existence of numbers, of tables, or of people. Worse still, we
33 have no clear method for deciding among the ever-proliferating views. The
34 result has been an increasing skepticism about the usefulness of metaphysics
35 more particularly, and of philosophy more broadly.

36 In sum, then, I think the right way of thinking about the disconnect be-
37 tween phenomenology and neo-Quinean analytic philosophy, on the matter
38 of ontology, is not that they are simply talking past each other. Rather,
39 underlying their uses of the term ‘ontology’ there is a deeper practical dis-
40 agreement about what we can and should do in philosophy. The attractions

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42 ⁹ For recent prominent articulations of this position and methodology for metaphysics, see
43 Laurie Paul (2012) “The Handmaiden’s Tale,” and Theodore Sider (2011).

44 ¹⁰ This of course is not the only factor. The rise of semantic externalism and direct reference
45 theories also played a key role.

46 ¹¹ See my 2007b, Chapter 2.

1 of a phenomenological approach to ontology lie in its ability to provide a
 2 clear answer to the question of what philosophy can do that does not lead
 3 to the quagmires and epistemological mysteries in which the neo-Quinean
 4 approach has left us.

6 2 What Would a Phenomenological Approach to the Question ‘What 7 Is There?’ Look Like?

9 Suppose we follow Quine (and stick with the standard analytic understand-
 10 ing) and treat the ontological question as the question ‘What is there?’
 11 What would a phenomenological approach to the question ‘What is there?’
 12 look like? Let us go back to Ingarden’s contrast between an ontological
 13 approach that involves investigating ‘contents of the ideas’ of the object **X**
 14 (1964 [1960], 23) and the metaphysical approach, which involves asking
 15 factual questions regarding the existence or nature of **X**. Taking this ap-
 16 proach, roughly, if you want to know whether **X**’s exist, you should first
 17 engage in some conceptual work—what is involved in the very idea of an
 18 **X**? What would it take for **X**’s to exist? (This is the approach I take to
 19 arguing for fictional characters in my 1999). Once you know that, you
 20 can better answer the question. I will argue that approaching existence
 21 questions in that way can make that project ‘easy’ and not mysterious,
 22 giving an alternative to the problem-riddled neo-Quinean approach.

23 Suppose you want to answer a traditional existence question: Do prop-
 24 erties exist? Do essences exist? Do tables exist? Do works of literature
 25 exist? The first stage of the investigation, if we make use of the methods
 26 and insights of phenomenology, is to investigate the relevant concepts—
 27 elucidating the meaning-rules that govern them. In the case of essences, for
 28 example, we can begin with ordinary sensory observation of some concrete
 29 thing, say a red house. Beginning by observing this concrete thing, with
 30 “the same sense-contents” given (*LI* Investigation II, §1, p. 339), we may go
 31 on to think of the species, the type, in which case, “we mean not this aspect
 32 of red in the house, but Red as such” (*LI*, Investigation II, §1, p. 340). This
 33 second kind of act is derivative, (‘founded’)—“a new mode of apprehension
 34 has been built on the intuition of the individual house or of its red aspect, a
 35 mode of apprehension constitutive of the intuitive presence of the Idea of
 36 Red” (*LI*, Investigation II, §1, p. 340). Once we have acquired the idea of
 37 Red through such founded acts, we can go on to say true things about it.
 38 As Husserl puts it,

39 [A]s the character of this mode of apprehension sets the
 40 Species before us as a universal object, so too there develop,
 41 in intimate connection with such an object, formations like
 42 ‘red thing’ (thing containing an instance of red) ‘this case
 43 of red’ (*LI*, Investigation II, §1, p. 340)

1 That is, by this route we can come to take essences as the ‘objects’ of our
 2 thought. Once we do, we can go on to have propositional thoughts about
 3 them, **such as** ‘this Red is the same as that,’ or ‘red is a color’ or ‘to be red is
 4 different than to be green.’ Expressing the contents of these judgments “will
 5 require new expressions” for essences (*LI*, Investigation II, §2, p. 341) **that**
 6 can figure in the subject position of true affirmative judgments, **and that is**
 7 all that it takes to treat these as ‘objects’ in the ‘*necessarily extended sense*
 8 *proper to Formal Logic*’ (*Ideas*, §3, p. 49). We can also arrive at judgments
 9 that treat essences as objects by beginning from judgments of a *general*
 10 *form*, such as “a colour in general is different from a sound in general”
 11 (where these are also taken as indifferent to the real existence of instances
 12 of color or sound) and transforming them, in accord with essential rules of
 13 meaning, to claims that objectify essences—**for example**, “The essence (the
 14 ‘genus’) Colour is other than the essence (the ‘genus’) Sound” (*Ideas*, §5, p.
 15 53).

16 In short, then, if you were to ask Husserl whether there are essences (a
 17 question that has the form of an ‘ontological’ question in Quine’s sense),
 18 he would say ‘yes, of course.’ But his response has nothing to do with
 19 accepting a best ‘total theory’ and seeing what it ‘must’ quantify over, nor
 20 does he feel any need to consider whether we might be able to offer a more
 21 ‘parsimonious’ theory that ‘makes do’ without quantifying over essences.
 22 Instead, the very meaning rules that introduce talk and thought of essences
 23 entitle us to conclude that there are essences—in the only sense the term
 24 has. For we can transform first-order judgments about particulars into
 25 judgments in which essences (or essence terms) take the objectual (or noun)
 26 role, so that we are entitled to think or say things ‘about essences’ and
 27 other abstracta. As Husserl puts it, he keeps “to the straight sense of
 28 the meaning-forms in questions” and avoids an “erroneous side-slip into
 29 . . . metaphysical trains of thought” (*LI*, Investigation II, §16(c), p. 373).
 30 Interestingly, this answer to the question ‘are there essences?’ is one we can
 31 derive even while making no assumptions about the real existence or nature
 32 of the whole fact-world. **Even** if we come upon the idea of Red by observing
 33 particular real red houses, tomatoes, and so on, all of our judgments about
 34 the *essence* Red could stand, even if our individual experiences turned out
 35 to be illusory—or even if we ‘bracket’ the question of their veridicality.
 36 Essential intuition “does not, to be sure, presuppose any apprehension of
 37 the individual or any recognition of its reality,” and so can be considered
 38 equally well in imagination:

39 [W]ith the aim of grasping an essence itself in its *primor-*
 40 *dial* form, we can set out from corresponding empirical
 41 intuitions, *but we can also set out just as well from non-*
 42 *empirical intuitions, intuitions that do not apprehend sen-*
 43 *sory existence, intuitions rather ‘of a merely imaginative*
 44 *order.’* (*Ideas*, §4, p. 50–51)

Italics in block quote original?

1 Husserl seemed to think the same way about meanings, numbers, prop-
 2 erties, propositions, geometrical forms, and other ‘universal objects’ (*LI*,
 3 Investigation I, §31, p. 330). Responding to objections about ‘metaphysical
 4 hypostatizations’ of such objects, Husserl writes:

5 If one has accustomed oneself to understand by ‘being’
 6 only real being, and by ‘objects’ only real objects, then
 7 talk of universal objects and of their being, may well seem
 8 basically wrong; no offence will, however, be given to one
 9 who has first used such talk merely to assert the validity
 10 of certain judgments, such in fact as concern numbers,
 11 propositions, geometrical forms, etc., and who now asks
 12 whether he is or is not evidently obliged, here as elsewhere,
 13 to affix the label ‘genuinely existent object’ to the correlate
 14 of his judgment’s validity, to what it judges about. (*LI*,
 15 Investigation 1, §31, p. 330)

16 In my view, we can indeed use a similar approach to answer (affirma-
 17 tively) questions about the existence of properties, propositions, numbers,
 18 and other contested abstract (or ‘ideal’) entities. If we can identify meaning-
 19 rules that entitle us to transform first-order judgments into judgments that
 20 introduce talk of properties, propositions, numbers, etc., where these may
 21 take the subject position in a true affirmative statement, then we can be-
 22 come entitled to answer the ‘ontological’ question in a positive way. If
 23 we can do so even while bracketing the truth of the original first-order
 24 judgment, then we can reach *these* conclusions about what there is in a way
 25 that is independent of all empirical assumptions.

26 This approach is the basis for the idea that questions about the existence
 27 of such entities may often be answered by way of ‘easy’ inferences from
 28 uncontroversial premises—an approach that has been defended by neo-
 29 Fregeans (prominently, Bob Hale and Crispin Wright [2001]) in philosophy
 30 of mathematics, by Stephen Schiffer (2003) for propositions, properties,
 31 events, and states, and by myself (2015). So, for example, as Schiffer argues,
 32 we can proceed from

33 (1) Snow is white

34 to

35 (2) The proposition <that snow is white> is true,

36 to conclude

37 (3) There are propositions.

38 That is, we might say, there are ‘essential meaning rules’ that entitle us to
 39 introduce true talk of propositions in this way. This inference can hold even
 40 if we bracket the question of whether (1) is true (or even whether there
 41 is such a thing as snow)—for we could equally proceed from the logical
 42 truth “Snow is white or it is not the case that snow is white” to infer that
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1 the proposition is or is not true, to entitle us to conclude that there are
2 propositions.

3 If these approaches (which I defend at length elsewhere [2015]) are on
4 the right track, then phenomenology does provide us with an approach—
5 indeed an ‘easy’ approach—to answering many questions about what there
6 is. We can follow the Quinean *meaning of ‘ontology’* without adopting
7 the neo-Quinean method *for answering ontological questions*. Instead, in
8 many cases these questions can be answered even while we bracket the
9 question of the real existence and nature of the world, by undertaking
10 trivial inferences from a premise (where we can bracket the question of
11 whether the premise was true or false).

12 “But surely,” one might say, “not all existence questions can be answered
13 this way!” For many existence questions are about empirical realities—
14 recent work on ontology has raised questions about the existence of tables,
15 the existence of organisms, and many more things besides. So, what can
16 phenomenology contribute to addressing existence questions, where these
17 concern (what would be) empirical realities, rather than ideal abstracta?

18 Here again, I think phenomenology provides the basis for a nice non-
19 mysterious approach that is entirely in line with the so-called **easy approach**
20 **to ontology**. That is a view on which ontological questions that are answer-
21 able can be addressed through nothing more mysterious than conceptual
22 and straightforward empirical means, leaving no room for the mysteries
23 and entangled conflicts of neo-Quinean metaphysical disputes.

24 As Husserl characteristically insists, (purported) objects of different
25 material categories may place different demands on how we are to know
26 them, how we are to evaluate existence claims about them (*Ideas*, §19,
27 pp. 74–76). For the concepts of entities of different kinds come with
28 different meaning-rules regarding what would count as a situation in which
29 the original experience would be ‘verified,’ and what would count on the
30 contrary as a situation in which the original content would ‘explode’ in
31 ways that would ‘defeat’ the original judgment and force us to revise it
32 (*Ideas*, §138, p. 356).

33 True to the phenomenological approach, if one asks the question ‘is
34 there a house here (which is ‘real,’ ‘has being’ or ‘actually exists’)?’ Husserl
35 would begin by investigating the sense of these predicates such as ‘house,’
36 ‘real,’ and ‘actually existing.’ What is it for an object of the relevant type
37 (a house) to be presented to me as ‘real’ ‘actually existing’ or the like, and
38 what would ‘cancel’ these attributions, leading me to say that the house
39 I thought I saw was not ‘real’ or ‘actually existing’? These investigations
40 go on in the third of the *Cartesian Meditations*. For a house to be given
41 to me as **real** is (*inter alia*) for me to experience it as given “with an
42 essentially necessary *one-sidedness*” (*CM*, §28, p. 61). For something
43 to be presented as part of a real, external world is for it to be presented
44 as forever outrunning any given set of actual experiences of it, as having
45 “a multiform horizon of unfulfilled anticipations (which, however, are in
46

1 need of fulfilment) and, accordingly, contents of a mere meaning, which
 2 refer us to corresponding potential evidences” (CM, §28, p. 61). Indeed,
 3 for each type of object, there is prescribed a horizon of further motivated
 4 experiences. (And these will differ for objects of different types: what it
 5 takes to verify ‘real house’ will be different than what it takes to verify
 6 ‘real façade’ or ‘real hologram of a house’ or ‘real picture of a house.’)
 7 If further experiences presented as ‘of the same object’ are ‘harmonious’
 8 and in accord with the anticipations prefigured in the horizon, then they
 9 can ‘verify’ the initial sense (<presentation of a real house>). These are
 10 “syntheses of verification” (CM, §24, p. 58).

11 But even with many verifying experiences in place, there always remains
 12 the risk that future experiences will not fit with what is prescribed, will
 13 fail to fulfill it, will annul it, or require a revision into a different sense
 14 (<presentation of a hologram>).

15 During the process of verification, verification can turn
 16 into its negative; instead of the meant itself, a ‘different’
 17 can come to the fore, and do so in the mode ‘it itself’—
 18 a different that wrecks the positing of what was meant,
 19 so that the previously meant, for its part, assumes the
 20 character: nullity. (CM, §24, p. 58)

21 For example, it is, as Husserl makes clear, *built into the concept of*
 22 *a house*, that an apparent experience of a house may be ‘cancelled’ or
 23 ‘nullified’ on the basis of further experiences (I walk around it and see no
 24 side walls; I attempt to go inside and find it solid concrete; I attempt to
 25 touch it and my hands go straight through; I wake up . . .).

26 So the existence of empirical objects is never certain, but can only be
 27 verified (or falsified) by experience:

28 [A]s a matter of essential necessity, external experience
 29 alone can verify objects of external experience, though, to
 30 be sure, it does so only as long as the . . . continuing
 31 experience has the form of a *harmonious synthesis*. (CM,
 32 §28, p. 62)

33 And the very ideas of ‘actuality’ and ‘truth’ have sense only as so given.
 34 There is a “universal conformity to laws of structure on the part of con-
 35 scious life, a regularity by virtue of which alone truth and actuality have,
 36 and are able to have, sense for us” (CM, §26, p. 59). In short, what counts
 37 as a genuine object of a given type, and what as merely an illusion of there
 38 being an object of that type, is determined by the way our experiences hang
 39 (or fail to hang) together—and includes commitment to how they would
 40 continue to hang together in various other and future circumstances.

41 So how can we address questions about whether a given house or dog is
 42 ‘real’? In the case of these questions about empirical entities:

1 [N]o such positing in its particularity is equivalent to the
 2 downright assertion that ‘the Thing is real’, but only to the
 3 assertion ‘it is real’ on the supposition that the advance
 4 of experience does not bring with it in its train ‘stronger
 5 rational motives’ which exhibit the original positing as one
 6 that must be ‘cancelled’ in the further connexion. (*Ideas*,
 7 §138, p. 355)

8 So, to come back to the original question, how can we answer exist-
 9 ence questions about particular empirical objects? Given the Husserlian
 10 position, we can never answer an individual such question *definitively* or
 11 with absolute certainty—there is always room for the judgment that the
 12 object is real, or a real X, to be overturned, revised as a result of further
 13 ‘unharmonious’ experience. Nonetheless, we can have a pretty good idea.
 14 Based on the ways in which our experiences hang together, in line with
 15 the syntheses prescribed as part of the very meaning of what it is to see
 16 (for example) a real house, we can make rather confident judgments of
 17 existence based on experience. This, for Husserl, is how we do and can
 18 answer existence questions about (would-be) empirical objects, in the only
 19 sense that has sense. And this, again, relies on nothing like evaluating
 20 metaphysical arguments, or weighing up competing metaphysical ‘theories’
 21 according to their ‘theoretic virtues.’

22 On both scores, then, whether we are evaluating questions about whether
 23 there are ideal abstract entities such as essences or numbers, or empirical
 24 entities such as houses or dogs, we can, using a phenomenological approach,
 25 answer these questions in an ‘easy’ way. That is, answering them relies on
 26 nothing more mysterious than conceptual and straightforward empirical
 27 work, and often such questions can even be answered *with* trivial arguments
 28 from uncontested premises. Phenomenologically pursued, ontology is easy.
 29

30 3 A Phenomenological Response to the Neo-Quinean Approach to 31 Ontology 32

33 Thus far, I have aimed to make clear how differently early phenomenol-
 34 ogists versus post-Quinean analytic metaphysicians understand the term
 35 ‘ontology,’ and how this superficial difference reflects a deeper difference in
 36 views about what philosophy can legitimately do, and how we can do it. I
 37 have also suggested what a phenomenological approach could contribute
 38 to answering questions about ontology, conceived as the question of what
 39 there is. On the one hand, the meaning-rules explicated by Husserl and
 40 others can give us reason to think that we may make easy arguments for
 41 the existence of essences, properties, propositions, and other pure (or ideal)
 42 abstracta. On the other hand, the meaning-rules governing presentations
 43 of empirical objects may leave us unable to give *definitive* verdicts about
 44 whether any particular object we are presented with is real. Nonetheless,
 45
 46

1 they may also ensure that we can have a pretty good **idea** and be entitled
 2 (on the basis of pedestrian evidence given in experience) to think that there
 3 is, say, a real house there, unless some future experience turns out to be
 4 **disharmonious** in a way that leads to an ‘explosion’ of the sense of the
 5 original experience.

6 But what about all the metaphysical arguments that have so occupied
 7 the attention of post-Quinean metaphysicians—arguments that we should
 8 reject numbers, since we can interpret discourse apparently about them as
 9 being in the context of a fictional operator, and thereby acquire a more
 10 parsimonious ontology that doesn’t ‘posit’ strange entities outside of space
 11 and time; arguments that we should deny the existence of tables, because
 12 no acceptable general principle of when some ‘things’ compose another
 13 ‘thing’ will give us an ontology of tables (van Inwagen 1990); arguments
 14 that we should deny the existence of baseballs, since any causal work
 15 that might be attributed to them can be better accounted for in terms of
 16 the work of particles arranged baseballwise (Merricks 2001); arguments
 17 that our best total theory is one that is so parsimonious that it doesn’t
 18 require us to quantify over (and so accept the existence of) any objects at
 19 all, as we may shift to speaking a nihilistically acceptable feature-placing
 20 language (Hawthorne and Cortens 1995); and so on? These are all typically
 21 presented as ways in which metaphysical arguments can ‘turn out to’
 22 defeat our standard common-sense assumptions about what exists—much
 23 as skeptical arguments threaten to defeat our common-sense claims to
 24 knowledge.

25 A powerful phenomenological response to these arguments **is that** they
 26 violate the senses of the very terms used in asking the questions. What
 27 it takes for there to be numbers, properties, essences, tables, or baseballs
 28 is established by the very sense of experiences in which we think of or
 29 seem to be presented with such things. For pure or ideal abstracta, the
 30 impossibility of reference failure is **built into** the meaning rules themselves—
 31 the way we can come, through founded experiences, to refer to numbers,
 32 essences or properties, in ways that rely on no empirical matters of fact
 33 that could ‘turn out to’ fail. And the worries that these are ‘strange’ entities
 34 ‘outside of space and time’ are simply based on confusions that arise from
 35 thinking of all objects on the model of empirical objects (*Ideas*, §22, pp.
 36 80–82). For empirical entities, certain possibilities for failure are built
 37 into the meaning rules—rules that sketch out a horizon of further possible
 38 experiences that would ‘harmonize’ with the original sense, and where
 39 violations would ‘cancel’ the original sense. These threats of failure may
 40 provide the basis for traditional skeptical worries. The skeptical threat
 41 (that all of my experience could turn out to be illusory) at least appears
 42 to make sense, and be a worrying possibility, because it builds on and
 43 extends the possibilities of defeat that are built into our empirical concepts
 44
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 46

1 themselves.¹² But there is *no* comparable risk of *metaphysical* defeat built
 2 into our concepts. This is a crucial disanalogy. For it suggests that we
 3 can't even make sense of the possibility of a defeat of our easy arguments
 4 by the kinds of 'metaphysical' arguments wielded by eliminativists. There
 5 *are* risks of empirical defeat built into the meaning-rules for our empirical
 6 concepts. It is part of the meaning of dog-presenting experiences that they
 7 can be 'annulled' by further experiences that reveal an internal battery pack
 8 and sets of gears. But possibilities of 'metaphysical' defeat (where this is
 9 contrasted with *empirical* defeat)—for example, by it 'turning out' that
 10 the best, most parsimonious metaphysical theory appeals not to dogs but
 11 only to it *dogging* here—are in no way built into our ordinary empirical
 12 concepts.¹³ It is contrary to the very sense of the concepts in question (*dog*,
 13 *real*, *exist*) to think that the original experience could be overturned or
 14 annulled in the latter, metaphysical way, and that such considerations could
 15 lead us to deny that there was a dog there to begin with.

16 We can now come to answer a central question: "What can the phe-
 17 nomenological tradition bring to contemporary debates in, or about, ontol-
 18 ogy?" It can bring a way of putting them to rest, by making questions of
 19 existence 'easy' to answer, whether through trivial inferences (in the case
 20 of ideal abstracta) or (always tentatively, of course) by ordinary empirical
 21 means—seeing how our observations hang together. It can also give us
 22 good reason to be suspicious of the pretensions of metaphysical arguments
 23 to be able to 'defeat' common sense assumptions about what exists, and
 24 to think that these claims have nothing like the plausibility of traditional
 25 skeptical arguments

26 As a result, it can get us away from the obscurities, epistemological
 27 mysteries, and skepticism that the neo-Quinean approach to ontology
 28 has left us in, and enable us to turn our attention to more useful tasks.
 29 Such tasks may include the central phenomenological task of clarifying
 30 the meanings in terms of which alone existence questions can be asked.
 31 But they may also go beyond that. For other tasks remain—tasks we
 32 also see addressed in the work of phenomenologists. Those include not
 33 only aiming to clarify the meanings in terms of which we *do*, and only in
 34 terms of which we *can*, come to think of, experience, or intend entities
 35 of different types; but also of working to enhance, develop, or revise our
 36 system of meaning-categories in various ways. Thus we see Husserl, for
 37 example, not merely elucidate what meaning-rules enable us to think of or
 38 be presented with material objects, essences, or numbers; beyond that he is
 39 concerned to *introduce* a range of new concepts, with new rules, enabling
 40 us to discuss 'a new region of being': consciousness and its structures,
 41

42 ¹² Though one could nonetheless go on to ask whether the *total generalization* of the possibility
 43 of defeat (which the skeptic appeals to) retains sense.

44 ¹³ Or perhaps we should say: either no such possibility for metaphysical defeat is built in to
 45 our concepts, or ordinary people do not competently possess such concepts as <house> and
 46 <table>.

1 meaning, content, and so on, in part by introducing terms such as ‘noema’
 2 and ‘noesis,’ and ‘hyletic data.’ We see Heidegger reject a range of old
 3 (and perhaps overworked or problematic) philosophically central terms
 4 such as ‘consciousness,’ ‘person,’ ‘subject,’ and ‘object,’ and replace them
 5 with terms (like ‘Dasein’ and ‘World’) that will better do the work of
 6 providing the basis for understanding how our World becomes endowed
 7 with significance at all. We see Foucault critique some of our concepts like
 8 ‘madness’ by showing that their function in constituting the world we live
 9 in is not what it pretends to be—which can in turn form the basis for a plea
 10 to re-evaluate them.

11 This is work allied to what is elsewhere labeled ‘conceptual engineering’
 12 or ‘conceptual ethics.’ Even if ontology is accepted as ‘easy,’ this deeply
 13 interesting work, of determining not only how our meanings or conceptual
 14 scheme enable us to encounter a meaningful world, but also of assessing,
 15 negotiating, reshaping what that scheme *ought to be*, remains a significant
 16 project for philosophy (see my 2017a)—and one we can readily see both
 17 phenomenological, and many analytic, philosophers as engaged in. Such
 18 a project is indeed valuable, but it involves a fundamentally different
 19 way of thinking of the rich work of philosophy than thinking of it in the
 20 scientific mode Husserl rejected (and neo-Quinean metaphysicians tried to
 21 revive)—that is, thinking it is in the business of ‘discovering’ what ‘really
 22 exists’ (perhaps against all our common-sense expectations) or forming a
 23 quasi-scientific best ‘total theory.’

24
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Note: Woodruff-Smith 1979 and van Inwagen 1998 were in bibliography of original paper, but do not appear in the bib here, as they were not cited.

Please provide issue number for Hawthorne and Cortens 1995 and Paul 2012. Please also provide page numbers for Quine 1953 [1948], Quine 1953 [1951], Saatsi 2016, Shalkowski 2010, and Thomasson 2007a. Please also provide editors for Saatsi 2016.

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