Review of "Ontology and the ambitions of metaphysics", by Thomas Hofweber

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This book presents a unique, systematic approach to the methods of ontology and metaphysics in general; along the way, it offers interesting insights into the philosophy of arithmetic, the metaphysics of properties, propositions and ordinary objects, and the ideology of grounding, structure, and fundamentality. In the past fifteen years or so, Hofweber defended many parts of the overall view in a series of articles. But a significant amount of novel material makes its first appearance here, and the more familiar parts, too, have been thoroughly reworked and integrated into an impressive, unified picture.

The book's first chapter introduces a puzzle about the practice of ontology: what if the answers to many of the central questions of ontology are already known from the sciences? For example, metaphysicians often worry about whether there are numbers. But (one might naïvely think) we obviously know that there are numbers, since we know that the Jupiter has four moons, which implies that there is a number that is the number of the moons of Jupiter. Similar "easy arguments" are available for the existence of properties, propositions and ordinary objects. The straightforwardness of these arguments is in sharp contrast with the intricacy of the kind of reasoning philosophers typically use to address these questions, and threatens to show that many ontological questions are neither ultimately the philosopher's job to address nor particularly hard to answer.

In the chapters that follow, Hofweber argues that contrary to these initial appearances, ontological questions are neither easy nor immediately answered by the sciences. The books' foundations are laid down in chapters 2–4. The "easy arguments" reach their conclusions in two steps. First, with some seemingly uncontroversial transformations, we get from an "innocent statement" to its "loaded counterpart". For example:

a. Jupiter has four moons

b. So, the number of moons of Jupiter is four

The second step is to get from this loaded statement to a quantified claim:

b. The number of moons of Jupiter is four

c. So, there is a number that is the number of moons of Jupiter

d. So, there are numbers

Chapter 2 spells out more carefully the first half of this reasoning (a-b). Here, Hofweber argues that although expressions like 'the number of moons of Jupiter' are syntactically singular terms, they don't have the semantic function to refer; instead, their communicative role is to achieve a focus effect, i.e. to emphasize certain aspects of the information conveyed rather than others. In Chapter 3, Hofweber takes up the second step (b-d) of easy arguments. Here, he argues that natural language quantifiers are polysemous: they can express two related notions with different functions. The role of "external" quantifiers is to make claims about the objects "out there" in the world, where 'object' is understood in the broadest, most category-neutral sense possible (as in "Something fell on my head"). By contrast, "internal" quantifiers serve no such purpose; instead, their function is to play a certain inferential role in contexts where we reason under partial ignorance. For example, if Fred is searching for the Fountain of Eternal Life, but we forgot what he was searching for, we can say: "There is something Fred is searching for that a lot of people wish they could find" (even though a full inventory of what there is doesn't contain the Fountain of Eternal Life).

The distinction between internal and external quantifiers doesn't by itself solve the puzzle we started with, but in Chapter 4, Hofweber argues that it already shows that the research program of trying to find out more about the nature of properties, numbers, and other philosophically controversial entities cannot be motivated with easy arguments. This is because the move from b. to c. is valid only when the quantifiers are read internally, but on that reading c. and d. aren't ontological conclusions; they don't make claims about what's out there in reality.

Given the distinction between internal and external quantifiers, which quantifiers a given discourse uses turns out to be an empirical question that should be answered on a case-by-case basis. Hofweber undertakes this task in Chapters 5–11, but first, on the last few pages of Chapter 4 he takes up the issue of how the answer to ontological questions hangs on the choice between internalism and externalism (i.e., whether a discourse uses external or internal quantifiers). If externalism is true about a discourse, then the quantified statements in that discourse answer ontological questions. More surprisingly, Hofweber thinks that internalism about a discourse, too, would settle the ontological questions we could ask within that discourse – negatively. If internalism is true about our talk of Fs, then our F-terms don't have the semantic function to refer to anything. But if that is true, then no objects are such that they fall into the domain of our external quantifiers and our F-terms refer to them. For example, for all we know there are all kinds of abstract objects, but given the way we use number terms, none of them count as *numbers* – our number terms don't refer to numbers, since they weren't supposed to refer to anything in the first place.

It might be thought that this cannot be the last word on the issue, though. Hofweber individuates types of hypothetical philosophical entities by the sorts of terms that would refer to them if those terms were referential. Once we combine these characterizations with internalism about a discourse, we quickly get the negative ontological theses: properties, propositions and numbers don't exist, since there is nothing that our predicates, that-clauses and number words refer to. But this line of reasoning might be resisted. It's not uncommon to characterize philosophical entities in terms of the theoretical roles they are supposed to play (Hofweber gestures at this approach in a few places, but without exploring it in much detail). For example, on a conception

largely inspired by David Armstrong's work, properties are whichever things account for objective similarity in nature (and perhaps carve out causal powers, etc.). Internalism about property-talk in ordinary discourse at best shows that our everyday use of predicates confers no ontological commitment to properties. This leaves open the question of whether we need a certain kind of philosophical entity to explain similarity in nature. If 'property' is reserved for the things our predicates would refer to if they referred to anything, we could call these hypothetical entities schmoperties, but internalism doesn't immediately rule out that there are such things. Similar concerns apply to role-based conceptions of propositions, numbers, and other philosophically controversial entities.

Hofweber discusses a similar line of reasoning in Chapter 11, although here he focuses on the explanatory role of properties in explaining our *judgments* of similarity, rather than the fact of similarity itself (285–286). His response is surprising: instead of using objective similarity as a criterion of which properties exist, he suggests that we follow David Lewis in using it as a criterion of which properties are sparse or natural. "The internalist", he writes, "can hold just as well that there is a primitive difference between properties: some are natural and some are not. One doesn't need to believe in an ontology of properties to accept such a distinction, all one has to believe is that some properties are different from others, and an internalist has no problem holding this" (286). This raises some interesting questions. How far can the internalist go in borrowing the kind of talk that has usually been associated with externalist views? Elsewhere, Hofweber stresses that although the easy arguments do show that there are properties, this is true only on the internal reading of the quantifier. On this reading, the mere fact that (say) Fifi and Fido share the property of being a dog doesn't motivate the traditional project of trying to find out whether this property is abstract or concrete, spatially located or not, etc. (95). Why not, though? If the internalist can agree with the externalist that some properties are natural while others aren't, why can't she also ask further questions about properties – including the kinds of questions that Hofweber thinks aren't motivated by the easy arguments? And if she can't ask such questions, how should we draw the line in a principled way between those first-order issues that the internalist inherits from the externalist and those that she doesn't?

The chapters that follow take up the question of whether internalism or externalism is true about various discourses. Hofweber argues for internalist interpretations of talk about numbers in ordinary discourse (Chapter 5) and arithmetic (Chapter 6), propositions and properties (Chapter 8), and for externalism about talk of ordinary objects (Chapter 7). These chapters are supplemented with a criticism of traditional ways of motivating metaphysical theorizing about properties (Chapter 11), and relatively self-contained arguments against inexpressible properties and propositions (Chapter 9) and ineffable, i.e. in principle unknowable, facts (Chapter 10). The upshot of this interesting discussion is a defense of what Hofweber calls "conceptual idealism", which he distinguishes from more traditional ("ontological") forms of idealism. According to the latter, the world is in some sense dependent on (our or someone else's, e.g. God's) mind. By contrast, according to conceptual idealism, what propositions there are depends on our minds, but whether these propositions are true normally doesn't (keep in mind that the quantifiers of the previous sentence should be read internally).

The final two chapters (Chapters 12 and 13) explores the prospects and ambitions of ontology in light of the preceding discussion. First, Hofweber proposes a general methodology according to which we should first decide whether internalism or externalism is true about a discourse. When doing this, we will mostly have to use tools from semantics and psychology, rather than distinctively metaphysical methods. When internalism is true, the questions (when asked with external quantifiers) are par excellence metaphysical, although for the reasons mentioned above their answer is always negative. When externalism is true, we need to see if there is a more mature discipline that settles the question at issue. Often there is (as in the case of ordinary objects, whose existence Hofweber thinks is secured by the empirical sciences), but sometimes there may not be (e.g. for all we know the existence of God is a properly philosophical question not settled by other disciplines). Next, Chapter 13 criticizes the practice of what Hofweber calls "esoteric metaphysics": various recent attempts to rephrase ontological questions in vocabulary ("real", "ground", "fundamental", etc.) that, according to Hofweber, isn't used outside metaphysics, or at least not with the same meaning. (For the sake of readability, I will keep using the word 'esoteric', but without any intended pejorative overtones.)

The attraction to many of esoteric metaphysics is obvious: if metaphysical theories should be understood as answering questions whose very formulation uses concepts not used in other disciplines, then even those who have been going along with Hofweber thus far can keep viewing metaphysics as an autonomous discipline whose central questions have not already been answered elsewhere. Yet Hofweber objects to esoteric metaphysics on two grounds: (i) esoteric metaphysics has little value; since its results are inferentially isolated from those of other disciplines, it holds little promise of informing them. Moreover, (ii) esoteric metaphysics is not sufficiently contentful. Since its conceptual building blocks cannot be spelled out in more accessible terms, it's unclear how they are supposed to get their meanings.

Some readers might get off the boat at this particular part of the book (many of them, I suspect, already gave up on understanding ontological questions as being plainly about what there is). Both (i) and (ii) appear to presuppose a very strong construal of inferential isolation that few actual practitioners of esoteric metaphysics are likely to endorse. For example, Ted Sider introduces his notion of structure as a category-neutral generalization of Lewis's notion of a natural property. Hofweber deems the former (and only the former) notion esoteric, but it's not very clear why: although Sider doesn't define structure, he ties it to theoretical roles similar to the ones Lewis assigns to naturalness. For example, structural notions correspond to objective patterns of similarity, behave as "reference magnets", etc. Likewise, grounding is usually thought to have consequences for the extent of modal space (if A fully grounds B, then necessarily, if A then B) and various issues in applied metaphysics (e.g., if there is an ungrounded mental fact, then physicalism is false). Esoteric notions may be inferentially isolated enough to prevent other areas of inquiry from immediately answering metaphysical questions, but not so isolated as to render metaphysics irrelevant to these areas. One might also question Hofweber's insistence that metaphysical concepts be spelled out in more familiar terms. Where is this special status of ordinary language coming from? Why can't we learn the meanings of esoteric metaphysical vocabulary "natively", that is, the same way we become competent with most ordinary language expressions? As a skeptic about 'grounding'-talk myself, I'm

sympathetic to the methodological rule of thumb that our default attitude to esoteric notions should be suspicion. But a complete and principled ban on them might strike some as an overreaction.

My criticisms notwithstanding, this is a fantastic book, and its arguments (including the ones I criticized) are full of subtleties for which this short review couldn't do justice. It's also highly original, packed with interesting ideas, impressive in its scope, and strikes a great balance between rigor and accessibility. Although I suspect that the conclusions Hofweber reaches won't be very popular, his arguments will require close engagement by anyone who wishes to resist them. This is one of the past few years' more important books in meta-metaphysics, and it deserves to have a lasting impact on the field. Risking a cliché: the book is a must-read for everyone interested in ontology and the methodology of metaphysics. (Thanks to Matti Eklund for comments on an earlier version of this review.)