

Peter van Inwagen. *Existence: Essays in Ontology*. Cambridge University Press 2014. 267 pp. \$89.99 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781107047129); \$29.99 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781107625266).

Most of Peter van Inwagen's work is devoted to Christian apologetics, but it is only analytic metaphysics that manages to 'engage the full resources of [his] mind'. His prodigious output—a dozen books and over a hundred articles—is partly explained by the fact that he finds thinking and writing about metaphysics, as he puts it, 'addictive' and so cannot help but 'continue indulging [his] addiction' (18). The latest effect of van Inwagen's addiction is *Existence: Essays in Ontology*, a collection of twelve essays defending what he calls the 'anti-Meinongian... Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine tradition' (201). Apart from the introduction and the chapter 'Alston on ontological commitment', each of the essays were previously published in journals or books (some in notable anthologies—for instance, chapter four, 'Existence, ontological commitment, and fictional entities', is from the 2003 *Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics*.)

The essays touch on many ideas in metaphysics and the philosophy of language, but the main topics discussed are: the meaning of 'existence' and its correlates; fictional entities; nominalism; relational vs. constituent ontologies; mereology; and mental causation. The essays contain generous references to van Inwagen's other works, but a familiarity with these is generally not required to understand his views, and the interested reader will know where to seek further answers.

In the introductory essay, 'Introduction: inside and outside the ontology room', van Inwagen sets out his guiding principles for metaphysics. We are told that 'discussants' in the metaphorical 'ontology room' 'are always *prepared* to... translate any of their natural-language assertions into Tarskian (2); that 'there is no out-of-context answer' for whether an existential question is true or false (4); and that what might be true 'outside' the ontology room, say, 'Chairs exist', might not be true 'inside' the ontology room (5). With regard to this last point, he acknowledges that '[f]ew philosophers if any agree' with his contention that some utterances are true only 'inside' the ontology room. However, he argues for a strong theory-practice distinction. In his estimation, ontology is reserved for the experts since 'only metaphysicians... have ever considered—ever entertained, ever grasped, ever held before their minds' the 'inside meaning' of 'Chairs exist' (6).

Van Inwagen tells us more about his basic views in the autobiographical first chapter 'Five questions'. He describes how he first became interested in metaphysics via particular problems, such as freedom of the will; why clarifying the free will debate and delineating the 'problem of material constitution' are his most important philosophical contributions; his belief that metaphysics adds very little to natural science; his agreement with William James' (vague) assertion that metaphysics is 'an unusually obstinate attempt to think clearly and consistently' (22); the metaphysical implications of ordinary beliefs (27); and what he believes is one of the most neglected topics in philosophy, namely, 'the relative merits of constituent and relational ontologies' (29). He is candid and to the point in this essay, though he does not always inspire confidence. Keeping in mind the reams of philosophy van Inwagen has written (including the entry 'Metaphysics' for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*) it is a little deflating to read that he is of late *less* sure what metaphysics is; 'and what, if anything, do I mean by "metaphysics" now?', he asks? 'I have no interesting answer to this question' (17).

Not having an interesting answer to this question does not prevent van Inwagen from fending off those who claim metaphysics is nonsense. In chapter two, 'The new antimetaphysicians', he

replies to objections from van Fraassen and Putnam. Van Fraassen finds a paradigmatic fault with Kant's definition of a 'world' as 'a whole that is not a part' (33). This definition leads to pejoratively 'metaphysical' questions such as 'Is a chair a whole or only part of a whole?' Van Fraassen objects that Kant's question equivocates on the meaning of the ordinary word 'part' and makes it spuriously 'technical'. Putnam's criticism of ontology is in line with van Fraassen's, yet less restrained. He calls ontology a 'disease' and a 'stinking corpse' riddled with semantic confusion (37). One major confusion is the notion that 'existence' and its correlates are univocal. Putnam argues for 'conceptual relativity' with regard to the term 'existence'. For him, there is no single meaning to 'existence' and typical ontological problems that assume otherwise, such as those about mereological sums, are nonsensical (38). Contrary to van Fraassen, van Inwagen sees no equivocation on the meaning of 'part' in Kant's example (35) and he rejects Putnam's thesis and defends the counter-thesis that 'existence' and its correlates are univocal. In defending this last claim, he appeals to Frege's views about the univocity of numbers. He argues that "'There are Fs" and "Fs exist" are... equivalent to "The number of Fs is not zero"' (40). And since the word 'number' does not change its meaning when applied to things in supposedly different ontological realms, he concludes that neither does the word 'existence'.

In chapter three, 'Being, existence, and ontological commitment', van Inwagen criticizes ontologies that recognize a distinction between existence and other types of being. Although he states that he 'continue[s] to respect Meinong's attempt to distinguish between two modes of being, existence and subsistence' (94-5), he is agitated by the fact that some philosophers recognize this distinction. When he considers rival ontologies, they are used mainly as foils. He unrepentantly admits that he finds Heidegger's philosophy 'so transparently confused that no profound knowledge of his writings is requisite' for rejecting them (53). Similarly, Meinong's appeal to 'psychological data' is dismissed out of hand (87). He argues that philosophers who draw a distinction between 'being' and 'existence' have simply never explained what the distinction amounts to and so concludes that the alleged distinction is 'meaningless' (173).

The thesis that existence is univocal is part of what van Inwagen prefers to call his 'meta-ontology', as are the theses that being is 'not an activity' (54) and that the existential quantifier adequately captures the singular meaning of 'existence' (71). Of course, 'meta-ontology' is a part of 'ontology' and his meta-ontological theses bear directly on which ontological questions, for him, remain to be answered and in what manner.

If ontology is an inquiry into 'what there is' and 'existence' is univocal, it would seem to follow that it is a branch of natural science. However, van Inwagen recognizes that 'there are interminable philosophical disputes about the existence of things of various kinds, disputes that cannot be resolved by the relatively straightforward methods of theoretical biology and quantum-gravity physics' (79). Instead, these disputes must be settled in a manner that is consistent with his meta-ontology. If the "'rules" are not followed', he warns, 'it is almost certain that many untoward consequences of the disputed positions will be obscured by imprecision and wishful thinking' (86).

Setting aside the wishful thinking of many past and present philosophers, we can ask what are the positive results of van Inwagen's approach to ontology. It is not evident that he achieves the sort of precision to which he aspires. For example, with regard to fictional entities, he is drawn to the conclusion that 'fictional entities exist' (100). In explaining this assertion, he appeals to a theory of predication for fictional entities that relies on an admittedly murky idea of these entities

'holding' rather than 'having' properties (115). Similarly, in chapter eight, 'A theory of properties', he finds that although it would certainly be better to be nominalist for an "'Occam's razor" sort of reason' (156), he laments that this is not possible and so must admit the existence of entities called 'unsaturated assertibles' which are both 'things' and 'things that can be said *of* things' (176). Natural classes also exist since '[o]ne of the [necessary] assumptions on which... ontology rests is that natural classes are real' (185). However, stating what this assertion means—for example, explaining how to recognize the boundaries between existing classes—turns out to be rather difficult (189).

A final example of the uncertainty stemming from van Inwagen's meta-ontology is found in the last chapter, 'Causation and the mental'. After objecting that much of the contemporary literature on philosophy of mind is incomprehensible (21), he tries in this essay to make room for a theory which allows that 'the correctness of explanations of mental vocabulary can supervene' on physical explanations (258). In support of this idea and his 'extreme ideas about ontology', he states: 'The world, I say, divides into abstract and concrete objects'. These we know must both 'exist' in the singular sense of that word. What, then, is the difference between 'abstract' and 'concrete' objects? He immediately follows his assertion with the admission 'I must concede at the outset that I don't know how to define either of these terms' (239). Van Inwagen is certain that his meta-ontology is the correct basis for ontological inquiries, but in these essays, the fruits of his approach are not always easy to see.

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