On the Substantive Nature of Disagreements in Ontology

§1. Introduction

When philosophers are engaged in what appears to be a genuine dispute in ontology, it is difficult to know whether such disagreements are substantive or trivial. Consider, for example, Hilary Putnam's well-known example of a dispute of this kind involving Carnap and the Polish Logician.[1] We are to imagine a world (call it 'W') which contains three individuals, X_1, X_2, and X_3. (Individuals, otherwise known as 'simples' or 'mereological atoms', are meant to be objects with no proper parts.) How many *objects* are there in W? Carnap says "exactly *three*": X_1, X_2, and X_3. For Carnap, the number of objects in W *just is* the number of individuals in W. The Polish Logician says "exactly *seven*" (excluding the null-object, if there is such a thing): X_1, X_2, X_3; X_1+X_2, X_1+X_3, X_2+X_3; and $X_1+X_2+X_3$ (where '+' denotes the operation of mereological composition). For the Polish Logician, the number of objects in W is not exhausted by the number of individuals; for any combination of individuals, the Polish logician believes that W also includes their sum.

When faced with a dispute of this kind, it is natural to have the reaction that, whatever exactly is going on between Carnap and the Polish Logician, their quarrel is not really worth taking very seriously. After all, as far as the phenomena are concerned that we care about in ordinary or scientific discourse, it seems to make no difference whether we adopt Carnap's position or that of the Polish Logician. In *some* sense (though it is difficult to be precise about exactly what this sense is), the two systems *describe the world equally well.* Viewed in this light, the apparent dispute

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[1] See for example Putnam (1987a), pp.18-19.

between Carnap and the Polish Logician seems to take on the air of a "mere word-game", the kind of apparently futile philosophical hair-splitting for which analytic metaphysics is sometimes ridiculed. For what, one might wonder, could possibly settle a dispute of this kind? And what could possibly hang on its resolution? On the other hand, since the quarrel between Carnap and the Polish Logician looks to be as "genuine" and "serious" as any ontological dispute, those who find this skeptical attitude congenial will presumably want to say that disagreements in ontology *in general* are really not terribly interesting. I call this position *'Skepticism in ontology'*:

> Skepticism in Ontology:
> There are many possible, equally good, ways of characterizing what there is; in cases of apparently genuine and interesting disputes in ontology, there is *no fact of the matter* as to which of the disagreeing parties is correct.[2]

Skepticism in ontology comes in various guises, for example those put forward by Carnap (1956), Goodman (1978), Putnam (1978), (1981), (1987a) and (1987b), as well as Quine (1948); more recent incarnations of Skepticism in ontology include, for example, Hirsch (2002), Horgan & Timmons (2002), as well as Sidelle (2002).[3]

There is, however, also the philosopher who feels very strongly that either Carnap or the Polish Logician (or some other theory about the nature of mereological composition) is right and the other is wrong, and that there is something philosophically important at stake in the disagreement

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[2] I am about to say more about what it takes for a dispute in ontology to be apparently genuine and interesting.

[3] There are other versions of what might be called Skepticism in ontology, e.g., those offered in Yablo (1998) and Azzouni (1998) and (2004), which would not be adequately characterized by the description just given; nothing I say in this paper is explicitly directed towards these alternative positions.

between the two. I will call this attitude that of the *'Foundational Ontologist'*:

> Foundational Ontology:
> There is only one correct way of characterizing what there is; in cases of apparently genuine and interesting disputes in ontology, there is always *a fact of the matter* as to which of the disagreeing parties is correct.

This describes the more common attitude taken by ontologists such as David Lewis, Peter van Inwagen, David Wiggins, and the like, who are recommending a particular theory in ontology, not merely as one among a plurality of equally good candidates, but as, in some sense, the best, or the one correct, theory (see, for example, Lewis (1986), van Inwagen (1990), Wiggins (1980) and (2001)).

When faced with these opposing attitudes in ontology, that of the Skeptic and that of the Foundational Ontologist, many of us feel the force of the following two questions in particular:

(I)   How are we to understand the position of the Skeptic with respect to disagreements in ontology?

(II)   How can we make progress beyond the apparent stand-off between the Skeptic and the Foundational Ontologist?

We feel the force of the second question, precisely because, as mentioned earlier, it is difficult to see both what could settle and what could hang on such disputes as that between Carnap and the Polish Logician. The first question arises because the Skeptic's position is more difficult to wrap one's mind around than that of the Foundational Ontologist, since it requires the abandonment of certain traditional dichotomies that are very deeply ingrained in our ways of thinking about the world. For example, using the vocabulary of Putnam's particular version of the Skeptical position (Putnam,

ibid.), this position asks us to reject both of the extremes of *'metaphysical realism'* or *'Realism'* (with a capital 'R') as well as the full-fledged, "anything goes" kind of *relativism* of someone like Richard Rorty (see, for example, Rorty (1979)): the former comes with an *absolute* conception of truth and ontology; the latter embraces a purely *conventionalist* attitude towards matters of truth and ontology. Putnam's *internal realism*, instead, offers to make room for an intermediary third position, which discerns a more moderate kind of relativity than that embraced by Rorty, viz., *relativity to conceptual schemes*. Although there is no doubt that the Skeptical position has its attractions, many of us wonder whether in the end it is a coherent option.[4]

In his recent paper, "What We Disagree About When We Disagree About Ontology", Cian Dorr promises to help us resolve the two questions just cited (Dorr (2005)).[5] In outline, Dorr's answer to Question (I) is that we ought to understand the Skeptic's position in terms of a *counterfactual semantics*; his answer to Question (II) is that there is in fact a way of converting the Skeptic to a position within Foundational Ontology, that of *Nihilism* (viz., the position according to which nothing composes anything and the world consists of mereological simples). My aim in what follows is to show that both components of Dorr's analysis are in fact unsuccessful. I take the failure of Dorr's counterfactual semantics to provide indirect evidence for the Foundational Ontologist, who now has further reason to believe that the Skeptic's position cannot be coherently maintained. Dorr's failure to convert the Skeptic to Nihilism, on the other hand, takes away one of the supposed

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[4] For illuminating discussion of Putnam's internal realism and his main arguments for this position, see for example Sosa (1993).

[5] I follow Dorr (2005) in labeling the two opposing sides of the debate, 'Skepticism' and 'Foundational Ontology'. Questions (I) and (II) are my reconstruction of the main issues to which Dorr's proposal is addressed.

attractions of the Nihilist position, leaving those Foundational Ontologists who lack Nihilist sympathies confirmed in their doubts towards the Nihilist outlook.

Despite the fact that, as I argue in what follows, both components of Dorr's proposal fail to establish their intended target, a detailed examination of his difficult position nevertheless serves an important role in advancing us beyond the seemingly intractable dispute between the Foundational Ontologist and the ontological Skeptic. For the number of available options by means of which the Skeptic's position may be fleshed out is quite limited and the *modal* strategy pursued by Dorr certainly ranks high among those construals that enjoy initial plausibility; in our attempts to test the coherence of the Skeptic's position, it is thus of great importance to investigate how far this strategy can take us. Moreover, if, as is promised by the second component of Dorr's proposal, there is in fact a way of converting the Skeptic to Nihilism, such a conversion would of course constitute a sure way of ending the dispute between the Skeptic and the Foundational Ontologist: by transforming Skepticism into a species of Foundational Ontology, Dorr's strategy would in effect eliminate Skepticism as a distinct alternative to Foundational Ontology. In sum, our examination of Dorr's proposal leaves us in a better position to make progress beyond the apparent stand-off between the Skeptic and Foundational Ontologist; for reasons that will become apparent in the course of this paper, I take the upshot of this examination to be an indirect advancement in the direction of a non-Nihilist position within Foundational Ontology.

§2. The Marks of a Genuine Disagreement in Ontology

Before we proceed to evaluate Dorr's answers to (I) and (II), I want to be more explicit about what makes a disagreement in ontology a good candidate for being both genuine and philosophically

interesting. It seems that such a dispute must satisfy the following features, at least on a preliminary

basis, i.e., before lengthy philosophical arguments have been offered to the contrary:

(i)   Same Target:
        The feuding theories are, in some sense, theories *about the same phenomenon*.

(ii)   Incompatibility:
        The feuding theories are, in some sense, *incompatible*; one cannot at a single time
        hold more than one of the theories consistently.

(iii)   Serious Contenders:
        The feuding theories satisfy some *standard of excellence* according to which they
        may be classified by the Skeptic as "equally good".

Criterion (i) is intended to capture what I alluded to earlier by saying that the competing

theories in question seem to manage equally well in capturing a particular range of phenomena in

ordinary or scientific discourse to which the theory is directed. To illustrate, consider for example

disputes over the nature of geometry, in which two competing theories may agree in all their

statements concerning the presence of lines and points, but disagree over whether points or lines are

to be taken as the basic, irreducible entities in the theory. (We will return to this kind of case again

below.) Secondly, Criterion (ii) is to be understood as entailing specifically an *ontological*

incompatibility, in the sense that the competing theories in question yield mutually inconsistent

characterizations of *what there is*. Thus, the "line-theory", for example, may hold that,

fundamentally, there are no such things as points; while the "point-theory" asserts that,

fundamentally, there are no such things as lines. Finally, examples of the sort of standard of

excellence referred to in Criterion (iii), by which the Skeptic would classify competing theories as

"equally good" might include methodological principles such as Ockham's Razor as well as the

kinds of epistemic virtues by which we evaluate entire theories, e.g., simplicity, economy, efficiency, applicability, fruitfulness, and the like. The Foundational Ontologist, of course, believes that ultimately the only real standard of evaluation is absolute truth, but he may nevertheless grant that the ontological disagreement at issue is both genuine and interesting, because, at least at first sight, the different competing theories have some claim to satisfying the Skeptic's standards of excellence equally well, and it takes a good bit of philosophical argument to show why one of the competing theories should be preferred over the other.

Unless all three of these features are present, a dispute between quarreling factions can be easily resolved and therefore does not presents us with an interesting case of an apparent stand-off between the Skeptic and the Foundational Ontologist. For unless (i) is the case, the dispute can be settled by demonstrating to the disagreeing parties that their apparent conflict is not even directed at the same subject matter. Unless (ii) is the case, the dispute can be settled by showing that the apparently incompatible theories can in fact be consistently held together and that the conflict between them therefore is only apparent. Finally, unless (iii) is the case, the dispute can be settled by showing that one among the competing theories is clearly preferable to the other, because it does better in satisfying some agreed-upon standard of excellence.

Suppose, for the sake of the argument, that our example above, which illustrates a dispute over the nature of mereological composition, in fact qualifies as a case of a genuine and interesting ontological disagreement, in the sense that it satisfies criteria (i)-(iii): the feuding theories of composition really are, in some sense, talking about the same thing; after all, they seem to provide responses to questions like "Is it true that nothing is a proper part of anything?" and "Under what circumstances, if ever, does mereological composition take place?". The theories appear to entail

incompatible commitments about what there is, in the sense that no single philosopher, in the same breath, could consistently endorse more than one of them; after all, Carnap's theory says that there are exactly three objects in W, while the Polish Logician holds there are exactly seven; and, at least in the absence of complex theorizing, these two claims seem straightforwardly to contradict each other. Finally, the two theories seem to do equally well in satisfying whatever standards of excellence the Skeptic chooses to invoke for the case at hand: for example, despite the fact that, according to Carnap, strictly speaking there are no such things as chairs, this theory does not of course predict that I should long have crashed to the ground, or (speaking more strictly) that the objects that are arranged in this person-wise fashion should long have moved into closer vicinity to the objects that are commonly referred to as "the ground". Most Foundational Ontologists whose theories strictly speaking conflict with commonsense and ordinary judgment are nevertheless happy to admit that we can continue to talk of persons and chairs and act in accordance with our ordinary beliefs in mereologically complex objects, as long as we (the philosophers) are mindful of the real content to which such statements amount in the final analysis.

§3. Understanding the Skeptic

With this characterization of what constitutes a genuine and philosophically interesting dispute in ontology in place, we can now turn to Dorr's answer to Question (I), the question of how properly to understand the Skeptic's position. Why exactly is the Skeptic's position problematic from the point of view of the Foundational Ontologist? Consider, again, the apparently conflicting claims endorsed by Carnap and the Polish Logician, respectively:

(1)   There are exactly three objects in world W.
(2)   There are exactly seven objects in world W.

According to the Skeptic, the theory which asserts (1) and the theory which asserts (2), in some sense, describe world W "equally well", and *there is no fact of the matter* to decide between them. In this way, so the Skeptic argues, adopting Carnap's frame of mind, it is *true* to say that there are exactly three objects in world W; but, adopting the Polish Logician's frame of mind, we can *also truly* say that there are exactly seven objects in W. We cannot consistently maintain, in the same breath, that there are *both* three *and* seven objects in W; but we *can* consistently embrace each of these claims separately, as long as we are willing to induce the requisite shifts elsewhere in our theory about what there is.

The Foundational Ontologist, on the other hand, wonders how it is possible to say coherently what the Skeptic has just put forward, when it seems that the Polish Logician's ontology contains *more objects* than Carnap's. In the mind of the Foundational Ontologist, either the world contains enough objects to make the Polish Logician's claim true or it doesn't: if it does, then Carnap's account simply has not succeeded in telling us the whole story about what there is; if it doesn't, then the Polish Logician is asking us to believe in objects which in fact do not exist and therefore has similarly presented us with an incorrect theory about what there is. Either way, so the Foundational Ontologist argues, it is simply nonsense to maintain that (1) and (2) are both *true* in the scenario imagined, no matter what qualifications are added (see, for example, van Inwagen (2002), for a representative formulation of the Foundational Ontologist's perspective). I shall call this *"The Challenge"*: the burden, it seems, is on the Skeptic to show us how it can be met.

One of the innovative proposals advanced in Dorr (2005) is precisely directed at helping the

Skeptic meet The Challenge, since it promises to offer a coherent formulation of the Skeptic's pluralistic attitude towards apparently conflicting theories.[6] The core idea behind Dorr's approach is to construe the Skeptic's position in terms of a *counterfactual semantics*. Intuitively, according to this line of thought, the reason why both (1) and (2) can come out true in the scenario imagined, even from within the perspective of the opposing theory, is because, from the point of view of the Polish Logician, we can still truly speak about what *would be* the case if Carnap's theory *were* correct; and, similarly, from Carnap's point of view, we can truly speak about what *would be* the case if the Polish Logician's theory *were* correct. Very roughly, Dorr's proposed recipe by means of which we are to understand apparently conflicting ontological theories can therefore be stated as follows: a sentence, S, that belongs to theory, T, is to be expressed in an apparently conflicting theory, T', as 'If theory T *were* true, then S *would be* true'. Dorr's rule is advertized as having as one its main selling-points that it provides us with a way of *translating*, *salva veritate*, between two conflicting theories in ontology; in fact, if everything works out as intended, we are told that Dorr's semantics will yield a *universal* translation-procedure which preserves truth-value across conflicting theories (and, as it turns out later, analyticity as well).

Before we consider Dorr's counterfactual translation-procedure in more detail, I want to bring out just how surprising it is to recommend *universal intertranslatability* (while preserving truth-value) between apparently conflicting theories as a desideratum for acceptable answers to Question (I) that remain agreeable to the Skeptic. Whatever exactly the details of the different versions of

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6 In this way, Dorr's counterfactual semantics can be read as a more detailed development of some remarks made in Hirsch (2002), who suggests that, from the point of view of one theory, one can truly speak *as if* the world was the way the apparently conflicting theory says it is; though, given his terminology of "similes", Hirsch might have in mind more something along the lines of the *literal/non-literal* distinction utilized in Yablo (1998) (see Hirsch (2002), pp.55ff).

Skepticism, presumably philosophers are attracted to this position because they have become convinced that there are several equally viable but incompatible theories about what there is. If, however, Dorr's procedure succeeded in procuring universal intertranslatability (*salva veritate*) between these apparently conflicting theories, then it seems the Skeptical outlook has been undermined: for if the claims of all the competing theories can be truly expressed in all the other theories, then how will the Skeptic prevent us from concluding that these different theories are at bottom really just a single theory? No wonder, then, that Dorr's Skeptic in the end turns out to be committed to a version of Foundational Ontology, if universal intertranslatability is built into his endeavor right from the start.

This is not to say, of course, that one would not expect to find a *limited* amount of intertranslatability between the feuding theories; otherwise, it is difficult to see how criterion (i) would be satisfied and the parties involved in the dispute, in some sense, can all be said to be talking about *the same phenomenon*. To illustrate the *limited* intertranslatability one would expect to find, consider the following unrelated example. (Geometrical examples of this kind are commonly found in the works of Nelson Goodman and Hilary Putnam; the current formulation comes from McMichael (1988), but see also Tarski (1956), Whitehead (1919), (1920), and Nicod (1924).) According to Theory One, points are basic, irreducible individuals; according to Theory Two, points are classes of nesting volumes. With respect to very many statements involving points, intertranslatability between Theory One and Theory Two will be quite straightforward: it seems that whatever Theory One expresses in terms of point-individuals can be expressed equally well in Theory Two in terms of classes of nesting volumes, just as Carnap and the Polish Logician both have their requisite ways of capturing our ordinary statements, actions and beliefs involving composite

objects. (This of course is precisely why criterion (i) and (iii) are satisfied in these two cases, i.e.,

why the two theories seem to be, in some sense, equally good contenders which describe the same

range of phenomena.) But there will be *some* statements, such as those in (3) and (4), which state

the core doctrines of Theory One and Theory Two, respectively, with respect to which one would

not expect there to be intertranslatability, while preserving truth-value; it is statements of this kind

that account for the appearance of incompatibility between the two theories (criterion (ii)):

      (3)   There are no extensionless geometrical individuals.
      (4)   There are extensionless geometrical individuals.

Theory One (the "point-theory"), for example, will endorse (4) but has to reject (3); Theory Two (the

"nesting-volumes" theory) will presumably endorse (3), but must reject (4). Thus, if Theories One

and Two present us with a case of an ontological disagreement that is both genuine and

philosophically interesting, i.e., the kind of case the Skeptic hopes will lead us to a pluralistic attitude

towards geometry, then one would expect each theory to contain certain statements which cannot be

translated, *salva veritate*, into the competing theory; otherwise, there would be no conflict between

the two theories (and hence no motivation to go in for relativity to conceptual schemes or whatever

other measure, in the absence of absolute truth, the particular version of Skepticism recommends).

     Let's now apply this insight to the example considered above, involving Carnap and the

Polish Logician. In this case, again, much of what the Polish Logician's theory would express in

terms of composite objects can be stated straightforwardly in the Carnapian theory in terms of

individuals arranged in a certain way. But it is precisely statements like (1) and (2) with respect to

which the incompatibility between the two theories surfaces. To appreciate why, from the point of

view of the Skeptic, one would not expect these sorts of statements to be intertranslatable between the conflicting theories, consider once again Putnam's particular version of the Skeptic's position. It is a crucial component of Putnam's view that even the basic vocabulary of a theory, including logical primitives like 'exists' or 'object', have different uses depending on which conceptual scheme is operative in a given context; this is the underlying reason for why conflicting theories can give different answers to a question like 'How many objects are there in world W?':

> "And it is no accident that metaphysical realism cannot really recognize the phenomenon of conceptual relativity –for that phenomenon turns on the fact that *the logical primitives themselves, and in particular the notion of object and existence, have a multitude of different uses rather than one absolute 'meaning'.*" (Putnam (1987a), p.19)

Thus, when Carnap says "There are exactly three objects in W" and the Polish Logician says "There are exactly seven objects in W", they are, in Putnam's view, using the term 'object' in different ways. If Carnap wanted to express truly what the Polish Logician says about world W, using the term 'object' in the Polish Logician's way, Carnap would have to switch over to the Polish Logician's way of looking at the world, and vice versa. For the particular use of the term 'object' that is employed by the Polish Logician is intimately tied up with the other central assumptions operative in the Polish Logician's conceptual scheme (e.g., that mereological composition occurs whenever there is a plurality of objects); the Polish Logician's use of the term 'object' in isolation cannot be transferred into Carnap's conceptual scheme, without effecting additional changes in this conceptual scheme that are incompatible with Carnap's other deeply held theoretical commitments. Thus, Carnap cannot remain within his perspective *and* truly say, from within this perspective, what the Polish Logician says about world W. Exactly this point surfaces again when we examine in more

detail the actual translation-mechanism Dorr proposes.

Here is how Dorr's counterfactual semantics proposes to translate the crucial statements with respect to which the conflict between the two theories comes to the fore. According to Dorr's approach, the statements in (1)-(2) are to be analyzed as follows:

(1')   If composition never occurred, then there would be exactly three objects in W.
(2')   If composition always occurred, then there would be exactly seven objects in W.

In order to evaluate these difficult statements, let's concentrate for the moment on the Polish Logician's commitment to the *unrestricted* nature of composition (ignoring the other important component of this view, viz., the *uniqueness* of composition); thus, the antecedents of the conditionals may be unpacked as follows:

(1")   If it were not the case that whenever there are **some objects** then **there exists** a fusion of **these objects**, then there would be exactly three **objects** in W.

(2")   If it were the case that whenever there are **some objects** then **there exists** a fusion of **these objects**, then there would be exactly seven **objects** in W.[7]

(1") is supposed to be agreeable to the Polish Logician, while (2") is supposed to be a statement Carnap could accept.   But in order for (1") to be a statement the Polish Logician could accept and for (2") to be a statement Carnap could accept, the primitive logical vocabulary operative in these sentences, viz., the term 'object' and the existential quantifier highlighted above, would have to be interpreted relative to the conceptual scheme of the relevant theory (I use subscripts to make explicit

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[7] I am highlighting here merely the most explicit occurrences of the existential quantifier; there are of course other quantificational elements in these statements, such as the numerical quantifiers 'three' and 'seven'. The point I am about to make extends to these other quantificational elements as well.

the relativity to conceptual schemes):

> (1''')   If it were not the case that whenever there are **some$_{PL}$ objects$_{PL}$** then **there exists$_{PL}$** a fusion of **these objects$_{PL}$**, then there would be exactly three **objects$_{PL}$** in W.

> (2''')   If it were the case that whenever there are **some$_C$ objects$_C$** then **there exists$_C$** a fusion of **these objects$_C$**, then there would be exactly seven **objects$_C$** in W.[8]

But now, given the explicit relativity to conceptual schemes, how are we to interpret the statements in (1''') and (2''')? The terms, 'object' and 'exists', as understood in the Carnapian way, range over individuals; the terms, 'object' and 'exists', as understood in the Polish Logician's way, range over mereological atoms and their arbitrary sums. The Polish Logician of course has the option of thinking of the Carnapian domain of quantification as an impoverished version of his own, though this wouldn't really be a faithful rendition of what Carnap means by these statements, since Carnap intends to be speaking about absolutely everything there is (and thus would gladly tack on to his statements additions like "... and there is absolutely nothing else in world W"). Carnap, on the other hand, would somehow have to give *his own terms*, 'object' and 'exists', a wider domain of quantification in order to capture correctly the truth-conditions of the Polish Logician's claim "There

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[8] The subscripts here are to be understood as relativizations to particular conceptual schemes, and not to particular possible worlds, because the central tenets of the two conflicting theories at issue (viz., the unrestricted nature of composition vs. the claim that composition never occurs) are taken to be *necessary truths* by those who advocate them; I follow Dorr in this assumption, which, as a matter of sociological fact, is an accurate representation of the modal beliefs held by those engaged in debates over mereological composition.

Moreover, the subscripts may, perhaps most plausibly, be understood as denoting differing *conditions* on what it takes to be an object, rather than different *concepts* of 'existence' and 'object'. For the Skeptic may well want to say that Carnap and the Polish Logician agree on *which logical function* is denoted by the existential quantifier, while disagreeing over what the variables of their respective systems *range over* (for more discussion of this point, though not specifically with the Skeptic in mind, see Koslicki (2003)).

are exactly seven objects in W". But one cannot continue to use the logical vocabulary, 'object' and 'exists', in the Carnapian way and simultaneously adopt a different conception of what the domain of quantification is like: it is basic to the Skeptic's outlook that one's conception of the domain of quantification and one's use of the basic logical vocabulary, 'object' and 'exists', are inseparable.

Thus, given what we have been told up to this point, (1''') and (2''') do not succeed in providing satisfactory translations of (1) and (2) into the competing theory, which preserve the truth-value of the original statement. According to the Polish Logician, composition is unrestricted in every possible world; Carnap, on the other hand, believes that composition never occurs in any possible world. Thus, the antecedents of (1''') and (2''') would seem to be *necessarily false* from the point of view of the philosopher to whom these statements were said to be acceptable (in fact, according to Dorr's Skeptic, they are *analytically false*); and, in the absence of a detailed theory to the contrary, we would therefore naturally conclude that the conditionals in question are *vacuously true*. Moreover, the same result would apply to such statements as (5), which should come out as *false* according to *both* Carnap's and the Polish Logician's theory:

(5)   There are exactly *fourteen* objects in world W.

Thus, for Dorr's rule to deliver universal intertranslability, as advertized, it would have to provide us, for one thing, with a counterfactual semantics according to which (1''') and (2''') do *not* come out as *vacuously true*, and which, furthermore, supplies us with appropriate truth-conditions for these statements that are sufficiently fine-grained to distinguish between (5), on the one hand, and (1) and (2), on the other. The existing domains of quantification endorsed by Carnap and the Polish Logician cannot do the trick.

At this point in the dialectic, Dorr suggests that we turn to a semantics which uses *impossible worlds* as semantic values, presumably with the idea that the antecedents of (1''') and (2''') could thereby be made to come out *true*. But since Dorr does not proceed to *give* an impossible-worlds semantics for counterfactual conditionals, we have no way of evaluating whether this proposal is feasible and whether it is a strategy with which the *Skeptic* in particular, with his preference for desert-landscapes, could still feel comfortable. For the Skeptic will want to be reassured that the talk of impossible worlds is an ontologically conservative move, which constitutes merely a benign addition to his language without inflating the ontology in any objectionable way. The fact that, as Dorr reminds us, a compositional semantics for natural languages faces difficult challenges in *other* areas (such as the analysis of propositional attitude contexts) does not in itself provide assurance that *this* particular task can be successfully carried out in a way that is agreeable to the Skeptic.

Dorr's position thus faces the following challenge: he must convince us that it is in fact possible to develop an impossible-worlds semantics for counterfactual conditionals which meets the following two constraints: (i) it must provide sufficiently fine-grained truth-conditions to distinguish, say, statements like (5) from statements like (1) and (2); and (ii) it must accomplish this task in an ontologically conservative manner. And while I am of course pessimistic that this task can in fact be accomplished, the important point for now is just that Dorr's general translation-scheme, together with the invocation of the *possibility* of a semantics for counterfactual conditionals which uses impossible worlds as semantic values, can only be understood to point in the direction of the difficult road that lies ahead for the defender of this position; but the work that must be accomplished in order to convince those who share my pessimism still remains to be done.

§4. Converting the Skeptic to Nihilism

I turn now to the second component of Dorr's proposal, his answer to Question (II), viz., the question of how to resolve the apparent stand-off between the Skeptic and the Foundational Ontologist. Here, Dorr's proposal turns on two crucial components: a novel notion of *'metaphysical analyticity'* and a particular conception of what constitutes a *'semantically defective'* predicate.

I described the Skeptic earlier as someone who believes that *there is no fact of the matter* as to which of the theories involved in an apparently genuine ontological dispute is correct; by the Skeptic's lights, the conflicting theories constitute "equally good" ways of characterizing what there is, and the standard of excellence that is being invoked here is something other than absolute truth. But how are we to understand the crucial phrase, "there is no fact of the matter"? Dorr's take on the force of this phrase is as follows: the dispute between the Skeptic and the Foundational Ontologist, in his mind, is best conceived of as a dispute over the question of whether there is a body of *synthetic* truths of ontology. Thus, we are to understand the Skeptic as saying that there are no synthetic truths of ontology; and this is presumably what accounts for the Skeptic's inclination to believe that such disputes are "mere word-games". The Foundational Ontologist, on the other hand, is to be taken as believing that there is a body of synthetic truths of ontology; this, correspondingly, is what accounts for the Foundational Ontologist's inclination for thinking that there can be something philosophically important at stake in ontological disputes.

The notion of analyticity that is operative here, however, is not the traditional one, but one of Dorr's own creation, viz., that of *'metaphysical analyticity'*. According to this conception, a sentence is *metaphysically analytic* if it can be transformed into a logical truth by replacing names and predicates with their *metaphysical analyses*, where this notion is construed widely enough to let

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in such *necessary a posteriori* truths as 'Water is H_2O'. There is a sense, in Dorr's view, in which

a statement like 'Water is H_2O' is true in virtue of the meanings of its constituent expressions: for

since 'is water' and 'is H_2O' express *the same property*, the sentence 'Water is H_2O' expresses *the*

same fact as the logical truth 'H_2O is H_2O'. It is only because, given our limited epistemic

perspective, we (humans) lack a "fully transparent insight into the meaning of 'water'" that we

require empirical evidence to recognize this equivalence (Dorr (2005), Sect.14).

Given this unconventional notion of analyticity, how then do we convert the Skeptic to

Nihilism? Since the Skeptic denies that there is a body of metaphysically synthetic truths of

ontology, the Skeptic (so Dorr reasons) must therefore take these truths to be metaphysically

analytic. But now we can challenge the Skeptic to show us *how* the central truths endorsed by the

feuding ontological theories can be construed as metaphysically analytic. When we do so, we will

find that the only theory with respect to which the Skeptic can fulfil our demand is the theory of

Nihilism, the theory that holds that nothing is ever a proper part of anything. The truth of Nihilism

comes out to be metaphysically analytic (within the theory of Nihilism itself, and, via the translation-

procedure reviewed above, within competing ontological theories as well) because of a special

provision for *semantically defective* predicates. The notion of semantic defectiveness is explained

by Dorr as follows:

> "Besides false scientific theories ['Phlogiston'], such [semantically defective] predicates are
> to be met with in myth and legend ('unicorn'), fiction ('Snark'), and in false philosophical
> theories ('Form', 'substratum', 'emanates from'...). Since these predicates' relation to other
> predicates is similar in some ways to the relation of empty names to ordinary referring
> names, we might want to think of them as failing to express properties. Be that as it may,
> the semantic defectiveness of a predicate *F* leads just as directly to the truth of 'Nothing is
> *F*' as the emptiness of a name *a* leads to the truth of 'Nothing is identical to *a*'. And the facts
> about which predicates are semantically defective (unlike the facts about which predicates

simply happen not to apply to anything) are *semantic facts*: in the same sense in which a fully transparent grasp of the meaning of 'water' would reveal it to express the property of being H_2O, a fully transparent grasp of the meaning of 'phlogiston' would reveal it to be semantically defective. So if we can make sense of the idea that the truth of 'All water is H_2O' flows from its meaning, we should say the same thing about 'there is no phlogiston'." (Dorr (2005), Sect.16)

Applying this notion of semantic defectiveness to the theory of Nihilism, then, the result is said to be that the predicate, 'is a proper part of', is semantically defective, since Nihilism holds that nothing is ever part of anything. But a semantically defective predicate, according to Dorr, is replaceable by a logically contradictory one; thus, the central truth of Nihilism, 'Nothing is ever a proper part of anything', can be transformed into the logical truth, 'Nothing is ever non-self-identical'. Presumably, none of the other theories involved in the dispute over mereological composition can manage to show that its central dogma is metaphysically analytic. (Think, for example, of how contentful the notion of parthood is according to an ontologist like Peter van Inwagen, who believes that only living things have parts.) Thus, the only theory that meets the Skeptic's demand for the analyticity of its central tenets is the theory of Nihilism; the Skeptic therefore should confess to being a Nihilist.[9]

In the remainder of this section, I want to focus on two objections which, in my view, arise with respect to Dorr's proposed conversion of the Skeptic to Nihilism. The first objection concerns the dialectical appropriateness of construing the Skeptic's crucial phrase, "there is no fact of the matter", in terms of the notion of metaphysical analyticity. While this construal may be acceptable

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[9] A Universalist of David Lewis' convictions may want to take issue with this characterization, since Lewis proclaims that mereology should be considered to be part of logic. However, the plausibility of this conception of mereology would of course have to be evaluated on its own terms. Dorr is certainly correct to point out that the *majority* of ontologists concerned with the nature of composition do not take parthood to be a logical notion.

to *some* Skeptics, a very prominent strand within the Skeptical tradition notoriously would not want to be associated with any position that involves commitment to an analytic/synthetic distinction that has real philosophical bite; the strand of Skepticism I have in mind is of course that associated with W.V.O. Quine and Hilary Putnam. Dorr's particular conception of the analytic/synthetic distinction does not escape this criticism, since his notion of analyticity merely widens the traditional notion of analyticity to include truths that are commonly taken to be *necessary a posteriori*; but someone who is suspicious of the traditional notion of analyticity would be equally displeased with Dorr's novel conception. While this first concern does not present a knock-down objection against Dorr's answer to Question (II), it does, I think, weaken the impact and plausibility of Dorr's account, since the scope of his proposal now turns out to be restricted to a very special kind of Skepticism, which may or may not have any subscribers. Certainly many Skeptics will simply refuse Dorr's challenge that it is up to them to show why the central tenets of competing ontological theories turn out to be analytic truths, according to any notion of analyticity.[10]

My second point concerns the notion of a semantically defective predicate. Dorr's highly condensed introduction of the term in the paragraph quoted above does not give us very much traction on this technical concept; we are, however, among other things, given a list of the examples which include the predicates, 'is phlogiston', 'is a Snark', 'is a unicorn' and 'is a Form'. But what are the principled grounds on which this list is to be continued? Certainly, it cannot be the case that every uninstantiated predicate counts as semantically defective, since the notion would then mark

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[10] In addition to this worry concerning the dialectical appropriateness of construing the Skeptical position in terms of analyticity, I also think that there are serious questions concerning the particular notion of analyticity that Dorr adopts; but I will not pursue these questions any further within the confines of the present discussion.

no distinction at all. But even if we restrict ourselves to predicates that are *necessarily* uninstantiated, e.g., 'is my actual brother' (as applied to me, an only child), the notion of semantic defectiveness must be restricted further, since it would otherwise generate some very bizarre analytic truths (e.g., 'Nothing is my actual brother').[11] Thus, only *some* among the necessarily uninstantiated predicates can turn out to be semantically defective. But which ones? Dorr's suggestion in the passage above is that the question of whether a particular necessarily uninstantiated predicate qualifies as semantically defective will turn on *semantic* facts, in the sense that a "fully transparent grasp of the meaning" of the expression in question would "reveal it" to be semantically defective; but this suggestion will not help those of us who have neither a solid antecedent grasp of the new technical concept of metaphysical analyticity nor a solid antecedent grasp of the new technical concept of semantic defectiveness, since Dorr's elucidation presupposes that we already understand which facts are *semantic* facts.

A second suggestion as to how to carry on the list of semantically defective predicates is hinted at briefly by Dorr in another passage: 'is a proper part of', Dorr suggests, is apparently thought to "carve reality at some very natural joint" (ibid., Sect.17).[12] But the phrase "carving reality at some very natural joint" is at least as difficult to understand as the phrase "there is no fact of the matter";

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[11] But why, in that case, does 'is phlogiston' belong on the list? It is not clear to me that this predicate is *necessarily* uninstantiated; it certainly seems odd to suggest that a "fully transparent grasp of the meaning" of 'is phlogiston' would "reveal" it to be necessarily uninstantiated or even actually uninstantiated.

[12] But thought by whom? Presumably neither by the Skeptic nor by the Nihilist. Thus, the unnamed philosophers in question must be non-Nihilist Foundational Ontologists. But neither the Skeptic nor the Nihilist will presumably want to hang the classification of predicates into semantically defective and non-defective ones on pronouncements made by philosophers who, from the point of view of the Skeptic and the Nihilist, are deeply confused.

perhaps it is intended here to make us think of *natural kind terms* or of the distinction between *natural* and *non-natural properties*. Either way, Dorr's suggestion is puzzling. For one thing, the *Skeptic*, of all people, presumably will not agree that the predicate 'is a proper part of' "carves reality at some very natural joint", especially if he is supposed to confess to being a Nihilist. If, on the other hand, the suggestion is that the term is *by other philosophers* to be taken as "carving reality at some very natural joint", then such predicates as 'is a Form' or 'emanates from' also do not belong on the list of semantically defective predicates, since they are, or at least have been, taken by some philosophers to "carve reality at some very natural joint".

Moreover, it strikes me as implausible, even from the point of view of non-Nihilist Foundational Ontologists, that 'is a proper part of' should be counted as either a natural kind predicate or as one which denotes a natural property. A paradigmatic example of a natural kind predicate is the predicate 'is water'; a paradigmatic example of a predicate which denotes a natural property is the predicate 'has mass'. But, in both cases, the predicate in question is thought to occupy this role, for example, because of its connections to certain *necessary a posteriori* truths discovered by natural science or because of the *causal powers* bestowed on objects by virtue of the fact that they instantiate the property in question (see, for example, Armstrong (1989) and Putnam (1975) for relevant discussion). But it is difficult to see how the predicate 'is a proper part of' could be compared to predicates like 'is water' and 'has mass' in these respects.[13] And whatever the particular theory of natural kind predicates or of the natural/non-natural distinction for properties Dorr has in mind, it seems again open to the Skeptic either to reject this theory or to argue that the

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[13] A similar, and to my mind equally puzzling, suggestion in made for the notion of *existence* in Sider (2003).

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notion of parthood does not satisfy the features singled out by the account in question; for both of these commitments are certainly highly substantive and controversial.

In short, then, there are good reasons for thinking that the Skeptic can resist the conversion to Nihilism. Skeptics and Foundational Ontologists alike, in my view, would be well-advised to be suspicious of Dorr's notion of metaphysical analyticity. The notion of meaning which underlies it is reminiscent of a Leibnizian conception, according to which total access to the meanings of expressions would entail immediate knowledge of the complete distribution of qualitative features in the world. One wonders how the expressions of *our* language can acquire these supernatural powers. Moreover, it is unlikely that an analytic/synthetic distinction which counts 'There is no phlogiston' as analytic really marks much of a distinction at all.

§5. Conclusion

In the preceding sections, my aim has been to examine a particular conception of the Skeptical position in ontology recently proposed in Dorr (2005). I take the two most important components of Dorr's account to be (i) its construal of the Skeptical position in terms of a *counterfactual semantics* and (ii) its novel notion of *metaphysical analyticity*, with the help of which Dorr promises to convert the Skeptic to a particular position within Foundational Ontology, viz., that of Nihilism (viz., the position according to which nothing composes anything and the world consists of mereological simples).

I have provided reasons for thinking that both components of Dorr's proposal fail to deliver on their promises in central ways. Unless the details of a counterfactual semantics using impossible worlds as semantic values can be developed in such a way as (i) to yield relatively fine-grained truth-

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conditions and (ii) to satisfy the Skeptic's demands for ontological conservativity, Dorr's proposed translation-procedure cannot claim to have accomplished its intended target. However, the very goal of universal intertranslatability between apparently conflicting theories in effect already asks the Skeptic to give up his Skepticism (long before we get to the supposed conversion to Nihilism): for the Skeptic is motivated to hold this position precisely because he believes that there are different, "equally good" but incompatible, theories about what there is.

Dorr's proposed conversion of the Skeptic to Nihilism suffers from the puzzling nature of his unconventional notion of metaphysical analyticity. I have suggested, first, that it is dialectically inappropriate to construe the Skeptic's position in terms of any notion of analyticity that has philosophical bite, since Skepticism in ontology often comes as a package-deal with the rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction. Secondly, the conversion of the Skeptic to Nihilism depends on a near-mystical conception of meaning and an underdeveloped notion of semantic defectiveness whose application to the relevant case of parthood is highly doubtful. Given the combined force of these considerations, the Skeptic therefore has more than enough ammunition to retain his Skeptical outlook in ontology according to which no particular ontological theory, from among the serious contenders, is privileged over the others.

We are thus back to the Foundational Ontologist's Challenge that he cannot see how the Skeptical position can be coherently maintained in the first place. If the world contains enough objects to make the Polish Logician's claim that there are *seven* objects in W true, then (so the Foundational Ontologist reasons) how can it be simultaneously correct to describe the same scenario as containing only *three* objects? The Foundational Ontologist will continue to pressure the Skeptic to take a stand on the question "How many objects are there really in world W?". The Foundational

Ontologist himself, of course, has no trouble describing what goes on between Carnap and the Polish Logician: there is, according to him, a single use of basic logical terms like 'object' and 'exists', and a single correct conception of the domain of quantification; at most one of the two disputants gets it right, and no translation-procedure is required to account for successful communication between apparently conflicting theories. It is thus up to the Skeptic to tell us how he can coherently maintain that in some sense both sides of this dispute are right.

The Skeptic, it seems, has only a limited number of maneuvers available to him by means of which he can respond to The Challenge. One promising option, the *modal* strategy, was explored by Cian Dorr, and we have seen why at least Dorr's particular version of this strategy is highly problematic. Another option, the *contextualist* strategy, is pursued, for example, in Horgan & Timmons (2002): according to this approach, terms like 'object' and 'exists' are viewed as carrying a *contextually sensitive "mereology-parameter"*, which is filled in differently for example by different theories of composition; although I cannot argue for this claim here, it strikes me as equally doubtful that terms like 'object' and 'exists' are context-sensitive in the way suggested here (see Richard (2004) for a recent discussion of the relation between contextualism and relativism).

What other options are there for the Skeptic? A remaining possibility open to the Skeptic would be to attempt to *undermine the question* posed by The Challenge. For example, the Skeptic could take the approach that we should separate, contra Quine, the question of what really exists from the question of what ontological commitments are carried by the language. According to this conception, the question "How many objects are there really in world W?", as it stands, might be viewed as under-described: in its misleading simplicity, it hides the fact that language always "drags" extra mathematics into the picture (in this case, the applied mathematics of mereology); since,

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however, the formal theory itself is not a reliable indicator of what really exists, the Skeptic need not feel any obligation to take up The Challenge in its currently under-described form (see Azzouni (2004) for a development of this position).

Thus, our present discussion certainly cannot claim to have established that all avenues are closed off to the ontological Skeptic. I do, however, take it to have shown that a prominent strand of Skepticism cannot prove its coherence in the face of what I have called The Challenge by means of a particular, initially promising, version of the modal strategy defended by Dorr (2005); to that extent, we can rest assured in our Foundationalism. The Skeptic, on the other hand, once he has successfully responded to The Challenge, need not feel any particular affinity to the Nihilist position within Foundational Ontology.[14]

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