

On Some Recent Criticisms of the ‘Linguistic’ Approach to Ontology

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I. INTRODUCTION

Some philosophers (e.g. John Heil (2003) and Heather Dyke (2007)) have recently argued against the methodology of doing ontology via studying language. (Letting the linguistic tail wag the ontological dog, as Heil puts it at one place (2003, p. 189).) I will here argue that they fail to characterize a genuine (non-strawman) target. Later I turn to what a genuinely linguistic approach to ontology might be; and what’s really at issue between those who favor a linguistic approach and those who are against it.

II. HEIL ON PROPERTIES AND THE PICTURE THEORY

Let me start by focusing on Heil’s critical discussion. It may be important to remember, as I go through Heil’s remarks on how to approach ontology, that his main project is to defend a particular thesis in the metaphysics of mind. That thesis is that although we are sometimes in pain, or think, or are sad, there is no reason to believe in higher-level mental properties in addition to physical properties, not because the mental properties are identical to physical properties but because there just are no such separate entities as mental properties. Heil opposes a hierarchical conception of reality on which there are properties of different levels. It may be important to keep in mind that Heil’s metaphysics of mind does not necessarily stand and fall with the cogency of Heil’s remarks on the linguistic approach to ontology. Even if these remarks are not cogent, that only immediately affects how he argues for his metaphysics of mind. The metaontological remarks, which I will be concerned with, are of independent interest.

Heil says that many philosophers are implicitly committed to what he calls the ‘Picture Theory’. He explains as follows what this theory amounts to:

As I conceive of it, the Picture Theory is not a single, unified doctrine, but a family of loosely related doctrines. The core idea is that the character of reality can be ‘read off’ linguistic representations of reality. A corollary of the Picture Theory is the idea that to every meaningful predicate there corresponds a property. If, like me, you think that properties (if they exist) must

be mind independent, if, that is, you are ontologically serious about properties, you will find unappealing the idea that we can discover the properties by scrutinizing features of our language. (2003, p. 6)

and continues,

The Picture Theory encompasses the idea that elements of the way we represent the world linguistically ‘line up’ with elements of the world.¹

(Heil adds that few theorists would think this goes for ‘the ways we ordinarily talk’, but says that it goes for the language of basic physics. This is odd, for his main discussion of the ‘Picture Theory’ concerns its supposed application to *mental* predicates like ‘pain’. But let this pass.)

What Heil describes as a ‘corollary’ of the ‘Picture theory’, that

(P1) To every meaningful predicate there corresponds a property,

does not seem to be a corollary: its relation to the other claims Heil associates with the Picture Theory is rather tenuous. One can certainly agree on the Picture Theory’s claim that “the character of reality can be ‘read off’ linguistic representations of reality” while denying that predicates have any worldly correlates. Compare: one can agree with the Picture Theory’s claim while denying that, say, *logical connectives* have worldly correlates (on, say, the ground that it is only if we mistake their linguistic role that we would take them to have worldly correlates). There may be better reason to think that predicates have worldly correlates than that the logical connectives do, but such reason is not provided by the Picture Theory alone.

Relatedly, consider *names*. Consider the following claim, analogous to what Heil calls a ‘corollary’ of the Picture Theory:

(N1) To every *meaningful name* there corresponds an *object*.

This claim can certainly be doubted. But many theorists today are favorably disposed to the idea that the meaning of a name is its reference, and for those theorists the claim is hard to resist. Moreover, I doubt many theorists would hold that the claim about names is somehow accepted only because of a

¹ Ibid. Neither Heil or Dyke do much by way of indicating exactly which philosophers are their targets. A justification offered is that what they set out to criticize is something they regard as an underlying tendency rather than an explicit doctrine. As discussed later, Quine is mentioned by Heil as someone relying on the Picture Theory. Dyke also mentions Quine as a friend of the SLT (see p. 98).

misguided Picture Theory. Rather, they would appeal to rather more specific points regarding the function of names. They might emphasize how the semantic role of names is to name; they might emphasize what they take to be the lessons of, for example, Kripke's (1980) arguments. Given this and the previous point one may suspect that the alleged corollary concerning predicates and properties derives whatever support it may have from certain seeming similarities between predicates and names rather than from some overarching vision like that of the 'Picture Theory'.

Third – again related – even if (N1) is too strong, the slightly weakened claim,

(N2) For every meaningful name that occurs in true atomic sentences there corresponds an object,

is very much orthodoxy. Would Heil want to dispute this weaker claim in the case of names? As we shall see, Heil's discussion of objects later in the book complicates matters here. But *prima facie*, it would be odd to resist this weaker claim. But Heil seems to be committed to denying the analogue in the case of predicates,

(P2) For every meaningful predicate that occurs in true atomic sentences there corresponds a property.

For to stress, he wants to say that ordinary sentences containing mental predicates are true, while still there are no mental properties.

When it comes to (N2), the reason this claim seems plausible is that it appears that to deny it one would have to either deny that from "*a* is F", "there is something which is F" follows, or deny that the latter claim is committing to something which is F, this latter denial seeming absurd: what more does it take to commit oneself to there being something which is F than to say that there is something which is F?

These remarks may remind us of Quine on ontological commitment. While Quine's work receives no mention in Heil (2003) book, Heil says in his (2007) article – a reply to a commentary on the book – that Quine's criterion of ontological commitment is a "stunning example of the Picture Theory at work" (2007, p. 73). I will later return to Quine and ontological commitment. For now, just note a peculiarity. Quine (1948), one of the classic texts where Quine defends his criterion of ontological commitment, also centrally discusses properties and predication, and Quine argues forcefully that to take predicates to stand for properties is to illegitimately assimilate the semantic function of predicates to that of names. If (P1) really is a "corollary" of the Picture Theory, Quine (1948) is then glaringly inconsistent.

Similar reasoning applies in the case of (P2), as applies in the case of (N2). This claim derives some of what plausibility it has from the fact that it appears that from “*a* is F”, “there is something which *a* is” follows, and this latter claim seems to be ontologically committing to the relevant property.

Heil says, to repeat, “If, like me, you think that properties (if they exist) must be mind independent, if, that is, you are ontologically serious about properties, you will find unappealing the idea that we can discover the properties by scrutinizing features of our language.” As I have stressed, Heil has not provided any reason to think that what he says holds for predicates/properties should not hold also for names/objects. So Heil is committed to holding that if one thinks that *objects* are mind independent – if one is ‘ontologically serious’ about objects – one will find unappealing the idea that we can discover what objects there are by scrutinizing features of our language. Of course this *is* unappealing, if what we are supposed to consider is the possibility that we can discover what objects there are *solely* by scrutinizing features of our language. But it is not in the same way intuitively unappealing to think that if a name which purports to refer to an F is found in *true* sentences of the right kind, then there are Fs. And it is this latter thesis which is the analogue of what Heil wants to say about properties: Heil wants to say that ‘pain’ occurs in true atomic sentences, and yet there is no property of pain.

In general, a distinction between drawing substantive conclusions about reality from what linguistic representations we happen to employ and drawing conclusions about reality from what linguistic representations are true is crucial: the former strategy seems absurd, but the latter eminently reasonable. Heil says that according to the Picture Theory, “the character of reality can be ‘read off’ linguistic representations of reality” and “elements of the way we represent the world linguistically ‘line up’ with elements of the world”. What does this mean? The above remarks point to a dilemma: these remarks either mean something implausible which no one has ever believed, or they mean something which for all that is said is quite unobjectionable.

III. DYKE ON THE ‘STRONG LINGUISTIC THESIS’

In her recent (2007), Heather Dyke criticizes the linguistic approach to ontology, in a way she acknowledges owes much to Heil’s discussion.² Let me briefly discuss how Dyke too fails to characterize a genuine target.

Dyke’s book concerns what she calls the “representational fallacy”:

² I have discussed Dyke at some more length in Eklund (2008). Heil’s (2003) has also been positively discussed in the essays contained in Esfeld (2007) and Romano (2007), as well as for example in the reviews Varzi (2006) and Lowe (2006).

Much recent and contemporary work in metaphysics takes itself to be investigating the fundamental nature and structure of reality. One of the most widely used methodologies in pursuing that aim involves taking language about the world, either ordinary language, or some modified version of it, as our starting point and asking what we can learn about the world by examining that language....I call that methodology into question, arguing that it is a fallacy to argue from facts about language to conclusions about the fundamental nature of reality, one that is widely committed. I call it “the representational fallacy”. (2007, p. 1)

As Dyke herself says, her characterization of the “representational fallacy” is vague. When she tries to be more careful, she discusses the “strong linguistic thesis”:

(SLT) There is a privileged true description of reality, the sentences of which (a) stand in a one-one correspondence with facts in the world, and (b) are structurally isomorphic to the facts with which they correspond. (2007, p. 7)

But – setting whatever other worries one might have concerning the formulation of SLT aside – *how is the SLT related to the “representational fallacy”?* Surely one can believe in the SLT while not thinking that one can read off language what the privileged true description is. The SLT does not address the issue of how one arrives at the privileged true description. Since Dyke focuses on the SLT, much of her discussion ends up being off target.

Dyke moreover argues that, guilty of the representational fallacy, philosophers discussing the existence of objects of some particular kind, Fs, assume there to be only four theoretical options: (i) non-reductive realism about Fs, (ii) the view that paraphrase of F-talk reveals that F-discourse is not committed to Fs, (iii) error theory about Fs, according to which committing F-sentences are false, (iv) the view that F-discourse lacks a descriptive function. Dyke claims that there is a distinct, all too often overlooked option. It is that while F-sentences are objectively true, have a descriptive function, and are non-paraphrasable, the truth of F-sentences does not imply the existence of Fs, for the truthmaker need not “involve the existence of the entities apparently referred to by terms in the sentence” (2007, p. 4). Dyke holds that it is commitment to SLT which leads philosophers to overlook this strategy. (2007, p. 7) But of course one can adopt the supposedly overlooked strategy while enthralled with the SLT. For one might hold that the privileged description of reality postulated by the SLT contains only sentences which perspicuously describe the ultimate truthmakers, and add that F-sentences do not belong to this description.

Neither Heil nor Dyke manages to characterize a genuine target. Their failure to do so highlights a substantive question. Surely, one may think, there are differences between approaching

ontology linguistically and doing it with the attitude of the serious metaphysician. But what might this difference consist in? I will return to this question later, and make some suggestions of my own.

IV. HEIL ON OBJECTS

When discussing what Heil says about predicates and properties, I compared corresponding claims about names and objects. Now, Heil does actually explicitly address the case of objects.³ With respect to that case too he objects to a hierarchical conception of reality. He considers the familiar puzzle of the statue and the lump of clay, and notes that the puzzle seems to present us with three unpalatable options: reductionism (saying that the statue is identical with the lump, despite the seemingly powerful modal arguments against this), eliminativism (saying that there are no statues), and embracing the idea of coincident objects. Then he announces that there is a “more attractive option”, and to see what it is, we must consider what “realism about statues” really requires. The main point of the ensuing discussion is that we should focus on the *truthmakers* for the relevant sentences: perhaps the truthmaker for “Goliath exists”, where ‘Goliath’ is a name of a statue, just consists of microscopic entities arranged appropriately. Along with this we get a healthy dose of anti-Picture Theory rhetoric. For example, Heil says, “Many philosophers....are....beguiled by a Picture Theory according to which features of reality are mirrored in our styles of representation: if ‘statue’ is a sortal, then either statues are distinct objects or there are no statues. This is the linguistic tail wagging the ontological dog”.⁴

What is puzzling is that – if we set aside the rhetorical remarks – Heil’s account seems virtually indistinguishable from one that simply *embraces* coincident objects. Compare Heil’s emphasis on the nature of the truthmaker for sentences that entail “statues exist” with someone who emphasizes that this – Heil’s truthmaker – metaphysically ensures *that there are statues*. The latter philosopher will say that coincident objects seem like a problem only for someone who doesn’t see what in fact is sufficient for the existence of the supervening objects. Thus, for example, Karen Bennett (forthcoming), characterizing in general terms the views of those who believe in complex objects in addition to metaphysical simples, puts the following speech in the mouth of the believer in complex objects: “Look, for there to be a table, nothing more is or could be required than that there are some simples arranged tablewise. That is, for there to be some simples arranged tablewise just is for there to be a table. There is no extra step, and no room for any wedge between the two. You nihilists seem to think that there is, and you’re making a mistake” (forthcoming, p. 47). And she puts

³ See Heil (2003), chs. 15 and 16.

⁴ Heil (2003), p. 189. One thing one may puzzle over is what the view under attack is. What does “statues are distinct objects” mean other than that there are statues? But if so, then what those ‘beguiled’ by the Picture Theory of are guilty of thinking is that either there are statues or there are no statues.

a similar speech in the mouth of the believer in coincident objects. (forthcoming, p. 48) I am myself quite happy with this ontologically liberal view, and would conceive of it the way Bennett describes.

Of course, the locution “for there to be....just is for there to be” is potentially problematic, as Bennett notes. What is meant cannot simply be that necessarily, if there are simples arranged tablewise then there is a table. But typically the claim is not conceived of as analytically true. But what, in between, can be meant? It is possible, in principle, that a serious theory of truthmaking could help clarify this. But be that as it may. Heil, far from presenting an *alternative* to how philosophers believing in complex and coincident objects conceive of things, at most presents a useful *sharpening* of the view. (The usefulness will depend on the extent to which the theory of truthmaking is helpful.)

As Heil himself stresses, having laid out his view on the matter,

Does this mean that macroscopic objects do not exist (or do not *really* exist)? Only a philosopher would want to say this. My suggestion is that, were things to turn out in the way described, we would be in possession of the deep story about trees, mountains, and human beings. The truthmakers for claims about such things would be modes: ways the ultimate bits of the world are organized. (2003, p. 190)⁵

The friend of the coincidence view can simply agree.

Notice that there is a curious difference between what Heil says about statues and what he says about pain. When he discusses pain, he is concerned to emphasize that someone assuming the Picture Theory would assume that to every meaningful predicate there corresponds a property, and argues that the Picture Theory should be rejected. A reader naturally assumes that Heil means to deny that there is a property such as that of being in pain. But when discussing statues, Heil does not deny that there are statues but only argues that the truth-makers for statements about statues need not, so to speak, involve statues.

Given what Heil says about statues, maybe his considered view on the property of being in pain and other properties is analogous. Maybe Heil only wants to emphasize that instantiations of physical properties can serve as truthmakers for sentences of the form “a is in pain”, without denying that there is such a property as being in pain. If so, however, then he need not in fact take issue with the claim which he describes as an objectionable correlate of the Picture Theory: that to every meaningful predicate there corresponds a property. For his complaints about the Picture Theory to

⁵ Heil is here alluding to a particular hypothesis about the fundamental constituents of the world which he has just sketched. The details of this hypothesis are irrelevant to the point I am concerned to make.

be relevant, he must take it that there really is no such property as that of being in pain.⁶ It is difficult to see how the different parts of Heil's discussion are supposed to fit together.

It may be worth setting aside interpretation of Heil for a moment, and simply make the substantive point as clearly as possible. On one truthmaker view, sentences like "there are statues" can be true without there being statues, on the supposed ground that statues need not be among the truthmakers for sentences like these. On another truthmaker view, "there are statues" is, fundamentally, made true by something that somehow which is not statue-involving, but this point about what makes it true is not in conflict with there being statues. If anything, the story about truthmaking promises to explain how there can be statues.

The former seems plainly incoherent. How can "there are statues" be true without there being statues? A friend of the former view can of course insist that in some privileged philosophical sense of being – let me use capitals for it – there ARE no statues, even if "there are statues" is true. Maybe so, but then is a different view than what we started out considering, one which doesn't involve denying that there are statues; only denying that there ARE statues.

The latter view is better in this respect, but is problematic too. In what sense is the truthmaker not statue-involving? Even if the truthmaker in some sense can be fully described in terms which are not 'statue'-involving, the things in the world which make the sentence true are statues (even if they also can be described in other terms.)

V. TRUTHMAKING

The critical parts of Heil's and Dyke's discussions are unsatisfactory, for reasons discussed. Perhaps we get a better sense of the methodological differences between Heil and Dyke and those on the other side of the fence by looking at what Heil and Dyke do in the positive parts of their works.

As indicated, both Heil and Dyke prominently discuss *truthmaking*. They think there can be true sentences such that their truth-makers are quite different from what one might have imagined. Compare here again what Heil says about statues. Maybe what underlies their critical remarks on drawing conclusions about reality based on claims about language, is really some sort of thesis about truth-makers. More specifically, their charge can be that their opponents think that for a claim about Ks to be true, Ks must be part of the truthmaker, for a claim to the effect that something is F to be true, F must be part of the truthmaker, and so on: but language need not thus transparently reveal the nature of the truthmakers.

⁶ Moreover, a whole slew of Heil's remarks about pain are then extremely misleading. Here are just some examples. On pp. 6-7, as well as later, p. 28, he takes the picture theory to be behind our assumption that if the predicate 'pain' truly applies to some creatures, that is because they have a property in common. On p. 40, he describes himself as rejecting "the idea that higher-level predicates like 'is in pain' must designate properties shared by objects to which they are applicable".

Matters can be problematized here too. As already emphasized, there is no reason the opponent need believe in properties at all. And if, as Heil, allows, there are statues, how can “there are statues” fail to be made true by there being statues? But waive concerns about commitment to properties. And even if there is a sense that “there are statues” is made true by there being statues, Heil can say that there is a sense in which “there are statues” is *fundamentally* made true by something else.

Even setting these matters aside, it is still not clear that the opponent of Heil and Dyke should be understood to have a view on truthmaking which conflicts with theirs: their opponent can rather simply want to eschew the ideology of ‘truthmaking’ or want to operate with only a deflated notion of truthmaking, on which it is *trivial* that, e.g., “a is in pain” is made true by a’s being in pain. They are not explicit about who their opponents are. But Quine is as I said mentioned as an opponent, and a negative attitude toward truthmaking would certainly fit Quine’s outlook.

Compare here again the mention of Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment as an example of the Picture Theory at work. Offhand this should sound *odd*: for one may think Quine’s criterion amounts to little more than the claim that existential quantification expresses existence, and whether this claim is right or wrong it would seem independent of an overarching Picture Theory. But if one operates with a substantive notion of truthmaking, one may be inclined to read Quine’s criterion as saying that quantification over Ks always requires Ks among the truthmakers: and one would thus take Quine to assume that language transparently reveals the nature of the truthmakers. This also helps make sense of what Ross Cameron and Elizabeth Barnes say about Quine in their positive discussion of Heil (2003):

The Quinean program has blinded us to the possibility of ‘there are Xs’ being true without us needing to admit Xs into our ontology; but once we accept that our representations of reality needn’t perspicuously mirror what they represent, this becomes a serious option. (2007, p. 27)

Talk about what to “admit into our ontology” is jargon. If to admit Xs into our ontology is just to accept that there are Xs, the possibility to which the Quinean program is supposed to have blinded us seems rather elusive. It is the possibility that ‘there are Xs’ is true without accepting that there are Xs. But if Cameron and Barnes are really talking about truthmaking – and take the “Quinean program” to be about truthmaking – then what they say makes more sense. Xs need not be among what fundamentally makes true “there are Xs”. But it is at best doubtful that a true Quinean employs a non-trivial notion of truthmaking.

VI. WHAT IS REALLY AT ISSUE?

To stress, again: There can seem to be a real difference between those who do ontology linguistically and those who do, so to speak, serious metaphysics. But what is the difference? What is it to do ontology linguistically? The above discussion suggests that it is not obvious what this is.

One can of course use philosophy of language for *destructive* purposes in ontology. One can use philosophy of language to dissolve certain questions in ontology (e. g., if evaluative discourse is not genuinely fact-stating, then questions about the nature of evaluative facts rely on a confusion). Or one can use philosophy of language to criticize particular ontological views (e. g., it can be argued that belief in such entities as properties relies on a mistaken view on predication). But what Dyke and Heil set out to criticize is the use of philosophy of language to draw positive ontological conclusions. What might this amount to?

There are, to be sure, some examples of constructive use of philosophy of language to reach metaphysical conclusions. Michael Dummett has famously, or infamously, argued that the realism/antirealism issue hinges on the question of what form a theory of meaning should take. But Dummett's view on this is a minority view. And anyway, it is hard to generalize Dummett's stance on this to other issues: even if Dummett is right about realism/antirealism, what would be an application of Dummett's outlook to questions about the relation between physical and mental properties, or problems about coincident objects? So the example of Dummett does not really amount to an illustration of what Heil and Dyke have in mind when they criticize the linguistic approach.

Another way to use philosophy of language in support of positive ontological claims is to argue that some ontological claims are *analytically* true – to argue that it is analytically true that there are numbers, or that it is analytically true that if such-and-such objects, the xs, exist and have such-and-such properties, then there exists an object distinct from the xs which is composed of them. Some theorists make claims like that. But again this is a minority, which cannot be taken to represent the general tendency that Dyke and Heil see themselves as up against.

I think there is a real difference “in the vicinity”, so to speak, but it doesn't directly have to do with the question of how powerful purely linguistic considerations are when it comes to establishing positive ontological claims. The relevant, real distinction in the vicinity is rather between those who think that *all* that philosophy can do when it comes to ontology is linguistic analysis – e.g. arrive at conclusions regarding what specific theories are ontologically committed to – and those who think that philosophy can engage constructively and relatively autonomously with ontological issues. Those in the former camp – for example a certain kind of Quinean – tend to focus more on language not because they think there's a constructive ontological project there but because they think that linguistic clarification is all that philosophy can contribute with. Compare again what Dyke and Heil say about truthmaking. Here they engage in a kind of metaphysics which would be called ‘serious’ by

friends and ‘esoteric’ by opponents; it is this kind of metaphysics a traditional Quinean would deplore.

Let me here just quote, well, Heil:

The twentieth century was not kind to metaphysics.... Metaphysical talk was replaced by talk about metaphysical talk; concern with conceptual schemes and patterns of ontological commitment supplanted concern with ontology. Presumably, we have something like direct access to ways we think and talk about the world. The world itself remains at arm’s length, a subject for study by the empirical sciences. Metaphysics as traditionally conceived seems to pit philosophers against scientists in a way that is bound to favor the scientists and make the philosophers look ridiculous. (2003, p. 1)⁷

Heil deplores the tendency he describes. Here we do have a real difference, and one that in a way has to do with the role of language. But this difference is not over whether one can argue from facts about language to claims about reality in anything like the way Dyke and Heil set out to criticize, but over whether there is room for the kind of metaphysics Dyke and Heil engage in. Maybe they are right and there is room for this kind of metaphysics. At any rate, nothing I say here casts doubt on that claim. What I would like to emphasize, though, is that it is here the action is. Heil’s Picture Theorist is a straw man.*

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⁷ Heil discusses this a few pages before bringing up the Picture Theory. Especially since Heil doesn’t name names, a reader might easily be led to believe that the philosophers Heil implicitly attacks here are the philosophers he attacks when he attacks the Picture Theory. But it is one thing to say that substantive metaphysics is impossible; it is another to say, with the Picture Theory, that the way to address substantive metaphysical questions is through language. In fact, the claims are incompatible. (Heil’s characterization of the anti-metaphysical stance also seems a bit unfair. The anti-metaphysician seems to be conceived of as holding *both* that we cannot have knowledge of the world in itself but only of how we think and talk about it *and* to hold that it is empirical science, not philosophy, that provides knowledge of the world in itself. This is inconsistent.)

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