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REVIEW ARTICLE

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VAN INWAGEN ON FICTION, EXISTENCE, PROPERTIES, PARTICULARS, AND METHOD

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Peter van Inwagen’s recent book *Existence: Essays in Ontology*¹ collects twelve of van Inwagen’s recent essays in ontology and meta-ontology, all of them previously published except one, “Alston on Ontological Commitment”. It also includes an introduction, “Inside and Outside the Ontology Room”. It goes without saying that anyone who works in ontology should study this collection of rigorous, brilliant, and creative articles. One route into the heart of van Inwagen’s philosophical position is via the theory of fictional entities he develops in chapter 4, “Existence, ontological commitment, and fictional entities”.

1. FICTIONAL ENTITIES

One might reasonably take it to be a datum that a purely fictional item such as Sherlock Holmes does not exist. After all, most of us know that Holmes is a purely fictional character, and it seems analytic that what is purely fictional does not exist. Van Inwagen, however, demurs:

¹Peter van Inwagen, *Existence: Essays in Ontology* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), viii + 261 pages.

The lesson I mean to convey by these examples is that the nonexistence of [Sherlock] Holmes is not an ontological datum; the ontological datum is that we can use the sentence ‘Sherlock Holmes does not exist’ to say something true. (105)

So, while many of us are inclined to say that the nonexistence of Holmes is an ontological datum in virtue of his being a purely fictional entity, one wholly made up by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, van Inwagen maintains that Holmes exists and that his existence is consistent with his being purely fictional. One man’s datum is another man’s (false) theory! To sort this out, we need to understand van Inwagen’s approach to *ficta*.

We first note that van Inwagen holds to the univocity of ‘exists’ and ‘is’. The ontological counterpart of this semantic thesis is that there are no modes of being/existence. To be is to exist (58) and there are no different ways or modes or levels or degrees of existing. Van Inwagen also has no truck with Meinongian *Außersein*. Bear in mind that the doctrine of *Außersein* is not the same as, and goes far beyond, the thesis that there is a weak mode of being had by Holmes and Co. The thesis of *Außersein* is that

M. Some items are such that they have no being whatsoever.

For van Inwagen, (M) is self-contradictory. He thinks that it entails that something is not identical with itself. If so, (M) reduces to absurdity. (95) Now I have argued elsewhere that van Inwagen is wrong to find (M) self-contradictory.² But let’s assume that he is right. Then it would follow, in conjunction with the univocity thesis, that everything exists and indeed in the same sense of ‘exists’. And what sense is that? It is the sense supplied by the existential quantifier of standard modern predicate logic. (71 ff.) Van Inwagen is thoroughly and resolutely Quinean about existence. There is nothing more to existence than what existential quantification expresses. I consider this to be a dogma along with the dogma that there are no modes

²See my blog, *Maverick Philosopher*, URL = http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2009/11/is-meinongs-theory-of-objects-obviously-self-contradictory-van-inwagen-says-yes.html).

of existence. For an attempt at refutation of both dogmas, see my “Existence: Two Dogmas of Analysis”.³

Now consider the sentence

1. Tom Sawyer is a character in a novel by Mark Twain.

By van Inwagen’s lights, when (1) is translated into the quantifier-variable idiom it can be seen to imply that Tom Sawyer exists. I won’t repeat van Inwagen’s tedious rigmarole, but the idea is simple enough: (1) is plainly true; (1) cannot be supplied with an ontologically noncommittal paraphrase; (1) ontologically commits us to the existence of the fictional character, Tom Sawyer. This is plausible and let’s assume for present purposes that it is right: we accept (1) as true, and this acceptance commits us to the existence of a referent for ‘Tom Sawyer’. Tom Sawyer exists! The same goes for all pure ficta. They all exist! There is no Meinongian way out. Given the rejection of the doctrine of *Außersein*, they must exist. And given the univocity of ‘exists’, they exist no differently than you and I do. Indeed, they *actually* exist: they are not mere *possibilia*.

But now we have a problem, or at least van Inwagen does. Suppose we are ontologically committed to the actual existence of purely fictional characters by our use and acceptance of true sentences such as (1). Must we not also somehow accommodate everyone’s firm conviction that purely fictional characters do not exist? Yes, but how? When we say that Sherlock Holmes does not exist, we can be taken to express the proposition that “No one has all the properties the fictional character Sherlock Holmes holds”. (105) There are properties that fictional characters *have* and those that they *hold*. Among the properties that fictional characters *have* are such logical properties as existence and self-identity, and such literary properties as being a character in a novel, being introduced in chapter 6, being modelled on Sancho Panza, etc. Among the properties fictional characters *hold* are properties like being human, being fat, having high blood pressure, being a resident of Hannibal, Missouri, and being a pipe-smoking detective.

³In *Neo-Aristotelian Perspectives in Metaphysics*, ed. D. D. Novotný and L. Novák (Routledge, 2014), 45–75.

What van Inwagen is doing is making a distinction between two modes of property-possession. A fictional item can possess a property by having it, i.e., exemplifying it, in which case the corresponding sentence expresses an actual predication. For example, a use of ‘Tom Sawyer was created by Mark Twain’ is an actual predication. A fictional item can also possess a property by holding it. For example, ‘Tom Sawyer was a boy who grew up along the banks of Mississippi River in the 1840s’ is not an actual predication but a sentence that expresses the relation of holding that obtains between the fictional entity and the property expressed by ‘was a boy who grew up, etc.’. With this distinction, van Inwagen can defuse the apparent contradiction: ‘Tom Sawyer exists and Tom Sawyer does not exist’. The second limb can be taken to express the proposition that no one exemplifies or *has* the properties *held* by the existing item, Tom Sawyer.

To put it in my own way, what van Inwagen is maintaining is that there really is an entity named by ‘Tom Sawyer’ and that it possesses (my word) properties. It exemplifies some of these properties, the logical properties such as existence and self-identity and the literary properties such as being a character in a novel, but contains (my word) the others without being qualified (my word) by them. Thus Mrs Gamp contains the property of being fat, but she does not exemplify this property. Analogy (mine): The set {fatness} is not fat: it holds (contains) the property but does not have (exemplify) it.

For van Inwagen, creatures of fiction exist and obey the laws of logic, including the Law of Excluded Middle. So they are not incomplete objects. On a Meinongian approach, Tom Sawyer is an incomplete nonexistent object. For van Inwagen, he is a complete existent object. Now although I am not aware of a passage where van Inwagen explicitly states that purely fictional entities are abstract objects, this seems clearly to be entailed by what he does say. For Tom Sawyer exists, and indeed actually exists—he is not a merely possible being—but he does not interact causally with anything else in the actual world. He does not exist here below in the land of *concreta*, but up yonder in Plato’s heaven. So if abstract entities are those that are causally inert, Tom Sawyer is an abstract object. This is consistent with what

van Inwagen does explicitly say, namely, that “creatures of fiction” are “theoretical entities of [literary] criticism”.⁴ Indeed, that pure ficta are abstract objects is required by what he says in Chapter 8, “A theory of properties” of the 2014 collection. There he says that everything is either abstract or concrete and that nothing is both and nothing is neither. (156) Pure ficta cannot be concrete and are therefore abstract objects. But all abstract objects are necessary beings. So Tom Sawyer and Frodo and Hamlet are necessary beings. This does not comport well with the seemingly self-evident proposition that pure ficta are contingent creations that came into existence when their authors excogitated them. Would it not be better to say that pure ficta are contingent abstract artifacts? But this van Inwagen cannot say because of his commitment to the proposition that abstracta are necessary beings. Van Inwagen appears to have arrived at a solution to the problem of ficta no more appetizing than the Meinongian and modes-of-being solutions.

2. THE UNIVOCITY OF ‘EXISTS’

One of the pillars of van Inwagen’s theory of fictional entities is the univocity of ‘exists’. Reasons for holding this thesis are supplied in chapter 3, “Being, Existence, and Ontological Commitment”. To maintain that ‘exists’ is univocal is to maintain that it does not have “different meanings when applied to objects in different categories”. (61) We now examine one of his arguments for the univocity thesis, an argument found on p. 61.

Van Inwagen begins by noting that number words such as ‘six’ or ‘forty-three’ do not “mean different things when they are used to count objects of different sorts”. Surely he is correct: “If you have written thirteen epics and I own thirteen cats, the number of your epics is the number of my cats”. So the first premise of the argument is the indisputable:

1. Number-words are univocal in sense: they mean the same regardless of the sorts of object they are used to count.

⁴See Peter van Inwagen, *Ontology, Identity, and Modality* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 53.

Van Inwagen takes his second premise straight from Frege:

2. "But existence is closely allied to number."

What Frege actually says is that "existence is analogous to number".⁵ How so? Well, to say that unicorns do not exist is equivalent to saying that the number of unicorns is zero, and to say that horses exist is equivalent to saying that the number of horses is one or more. Surely that is true for both affirmative and negative general existentials. Whether it is true for singular existentials is a further question. Van Inwagen proceeds: "The univocacy [univocity] of number and the intimate connection between number and existence should convince us that existence is univocal." (61) The conclusion of the argument, then, is:

3. Existence is univocal.

The first thing to notice about this argument is that it is not even valid. Trouble is caused by the fudge-phrase 'closely allied to' and van Inwagen's shift from 'exists' to existence. But repairs are easily made, and charity demands that we make them. Here is a valid argument that van Inwagen could have given:

1. Number-words are univocal.
- 2*. 'Exist(s)' is a number-word.

Therefore

- 3*. 'Exist(s)' is univocal.

The latter argument is plainly valid in point of logical form: the conclusion follows from the premises. Unfortunately the argument is unsound. Although (1) is indisputably true, (2*) is false. Consider my cat Max Black. I joyously exclaim, 'Max exists!'. My exclamation expresses a truth. Compare 'Cats exist'. Now I agree with van Inwagen that the general 'Cats exist' is equivalent to 'The number of cats is one or more'. But it is perfectly plain

⁵G. Frege, *Foundations of Arithmetic*, trans. J. L. Austin (Basil Blackwell, 1959), 65.

that the singular ‘Max exists’ is not equivalent to ‘The number of Max is one or more’. For the right-hand-side of the equivalence is nonsense, hence necessarily neither true nor false. This question makes sense: ‘How many cats are there in BV’s house?’ But this question makes no sense: ‘How many Max are there in BV’s house?’ Why not? Well, ‘Max’ is a proper name (*Eigenname* in Frege’s terminology) not a concept-word (*Begriffswort* in Frege’s terminology). Of course, I could sensibly ask how many Maxes there are hereabouts, but then ‘Max’ is not a proper name, but a stand-in for ‘person/cat named “Max”’. The latter phrase is obviously not a proper name.

Van Inwagen’s argument strikes me as very bad, and I am puzzled why he is seduced by it. Here is my counterargument:

4. ‘Exists’ sometimes functions as a first-level predicate, a predicate of specific (named) individuals.
5. Number-words never function as predicates of specific (named) individuals.

Therefore

6. ‘Exists’ when used as a first-level predicate is not a number-word.

Therefore

7. The (obvious) univocity of number-words is not a good reason to think that ‘exists’ is univocal across its first- and second-level uses.

3. A WAY OUT VIA HAECCEITIES?

Among the properties, van Inwagen counts haecceities. They are of course abstract objects like all properties on his view. But they are not universals because, while they are instantiable, they are not multiply instantiable. The property of being identical with Alvin Plantinga is an example van Inwagen gives. (180) This property, if instantiated, is instantiated by

Plantinga alone in the actual world and by nothing distinct from Plantinga in any possible world. *Plantingitas*—to give it a name—somehow involves Plantinga himself, that very concrete object. For this property is supposed to capture the nonqualitative thisness of Plantinga. If there is the property of being identical with Plantinga, then the univocity of ‘exists’ can be upheld across general and singular existential sentences. For then we can say that ‘exists’ means ‘is instantiated’. This is equivalent to saying that ‘exists’ is a number-word. For if a property or concept is instantiated, then it has one or more instances. And it won’t matter whether the property is multiply instantiable or an haecceity property. Plantinga cannot be instantiated but his haecceity property can be. The price for univocity across general and singular existentials must be paid in the coin of haecceities. Or so say I. The ‘way out’ just proposed is my way out of a difficulty that appears obvious to me but is probably not recognized by van Inwagen at all.

I submit that these haecceity properties are metaphysical monstrosities. For given that they are properties, they are necessary beings. A necessary being exists at all times in all possible worlds that have time, and in all worlds, period. Plantinga, however, does not exist in all worlds since he is a contingent being; and he doesn’t exist at all times in all worlds in which he exists, subject as he is to birth and death, generation and corruption. I conclude that before Plantinga came into being there could not have been any such property as the property of being identical to Plantinga. I conclude also that in worlds in which he does not exist there is no such haecceity property. For at pre-Plantingian times and non-Plantingian worlds, there is simply nothing to give content to the unsaturated assertible expressed by ‘that it is Alvin Plantinga’. Alvin Plantingas (plural) existed at those times and in those worlds, but not ‘our’ Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga himself enters essentially into the very content of his haecceity property. But this is impossible because properties as van Inwagen construes them are merely intensional entities. No such entity can have a concrete, flesh and blood man as a constituent. Just as a van Inwagen-property cannot be a constituent of a concretum such as Plantinga, Plantinga cannot be a constituent in any sense of ‘constituent’ of a van Inwagen-property. But if Plantinga

hadn't existed, might it nonetheless have been true that he might have existed? (180) Van Inwagen says yes and introduces haecceities. *Plantingitas* exists in every world; it is just that it is instantiated only in some. I say no, precisely because I take haecceities to be metaphysical monstrosities. They are posits just as dubious as Meinongian nonentities and Bergmannian bare particulars. We now turn to van Inwagen's general theory of properties in Chapter 8, "A theory of properties."

4. PROPERTIES PLATONISTICALLY CONSTRUED

4.1 The Abstract and the Concrete

Platonism is "the thesis that there are abstract objects". (153) Van Inwagen uses 'object' synonymously with 'thing', 'item', and 'entity'. (156) Everything is an object, which is to say: everything exists. Thus there are no nonexistent objects, *pace* Meinong. There are two categories of object, the abstract and the concrete. These categories are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. Thus for any x , x is either abstract or concrete, but not both, and not neither. Van Inwagen is a bit coy when it comes to telling us what 'abstract' and 'concrete' mean; he prefers a roundabout way of introducing these terms. He stipulates that the terms and predicates of ordinary, scientific, and philosophical discourse can be divided into two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive classes. The denotata of the members of these two classes of terms and predicates, if they have denotata, are concrete and abstract objects. Thus 'table', 'God', and 'intelligent Martian', if they pick out anything, pick out concreta, while 'number', 'the lion', (as in "The lion is of the genus *Felis*") and 'sentence' (as in "The same sentence can express different propositions in different contexts"), pick out abstracta. (154)

At this point I have a question. If sentences (sentence types, not tokens) are abstract objects, and abstract objects are necessary beings as van Inwagen holds (242), then sentences are necessary beings. But sentences are tied to contingently existing languages and cannot exist apart from them. Thus sentence types would appear to be as contingent as the languages to which

they belong. 'I am hungry' is a sentence of English while 'Ich habe Hunger' is a sentence of German, and neither sentence type can exist with the meaning it has apart from its respective language. A natural language, however, would seem to be a contingent being: German came into existence, but it might never have come into existence. Given all this, a contradiction appears to follow: Sentences are and are not necessary beings.

The problem here is similar to the one noted above with respect to purely fictional objects. Just as Sherlock Holmes cannot be plausibly viewed as a necessary being given that he came into existence in the mind of a story teller, so also languages are not plausibly viewed as necessary beings given their origin. If ficta and languages are abstracta, then they are contingent abstracta. Van Inwagen's theory of abstracta, however, disallows this solution. So as it seems he must bite the bullet and hold that languages are necessary beings. My point is that this implausible, not that it is impossible.

Van Inwagen holds that platonism is to be avoided if at all possible. On platonism, there are abstract objects. This characteristic thesis does not entail, but it is consistent with, the proposition that there are also concrete objects. Van Inwagen is a platonist who accepts both abstract and concrete objects but who thinks we would be better off if we could avoid commitment to abstract objects. Why? Well, apart from considerations of parsimony, the difference between members of the two categories is abysmal (my word):

the differences between God and this pen pale into insignificance when they are compared with the differences between this pen and the number 4. (156)

Such a radical difference is puzzling. So it would be preferable if the category of abstracta were empty. That the category of concreta cannot be empty is obvious: we know ourselves to be concreta. (157) Van Inwagen goes on to belabor the point that the things we can say about concrete things are practically endless, while little can be said about abstracta.

In short, reality, unlike ancient Gaul, "is divided into *two* parts". (158, emphasis added). The two parts of reality are radically disjoint. Everything is either abstract or concrete, nothing is both, and nothing is neither. Among

the abstracta are instantiated properties. Instantiation or ‘having’ would seem to forge a connection between the disjoint realms. But the instantiation relation is “abstract and external”. (206, 242) So it too resides in the realm of abstracta and hence (as it seems to me) does nothing to mitigate the radical dualism or span the abyss that yawns between reality’s two parts. So if we could eke by without abstracta, that would be preferable. But we cannot manage without them, says van Inwagen. (158)

4.2 Why We Need Abstract Objects

The short reason is that we need them because we need properties, and properties are one sort of abstract object, along with propositions and “proper relations”. (240) A proper relation is a relation whose ‘adicity’ is two or more; van Inwagen thinks of properties as one-place relations and propositions as zero-place relations. Every abstract object is a relation (a relation-in-intension) in the broad or improper sense, and everything else is a substance, a concrete object. (239) As we read in Chapter 9, “What is an ontological category?” on “the Favored Ontology, there are two primary categories, substance and relation.” (198) The Favored Ontology, of course, is van Inwagen’s.

But why do we need properties? We need properties because things have common features. The class of humans, for example, has something in common. This appears to be an existential claim: there is something, humanity, that the members of this class share. Platonists take the appearance at face value while nominalists maintain that the appearance is a mere appearance such that in reality there are no properties. How do we decide the issue that divides the platonists and the nominalists? Here van Inwagen is referring to what he calls “austere” nominalists, the nominalists more standardly called extreme: those who deny that there are properties at all. There are also the nominalists van Inwagen calls “luxuriant” nominalists, the ones more standardly called moderate: those who admit the existence of tropes or individual accidents or particularized properties. (203; 203, fn 5) The extreme nominalists deny that there are properties at all—a lunatic

view if I may inject my opinion—while the moderate nominalists admit properties but deny that they are universals. Because they accept properties, platonists are not austere nominalists; because they accept universals, they are not luxuriant nominalists.

4.3 Van Inwagen's Method

The method derives from Quine. We start with the beliefs we already have, couched in the sentences we already accept. We then see if these sentences commit us to properties. We do this by translating these sentences into “the canonical language of quantification”. (160) If we need to quantify over properties for the sentences we accept as true to count as true, then we are ontologically committed to the existence of properties. If, on the other hand, we can ‘paraphrase away’ the apparent reference to properties in the sentences we accept that appear to refer to properties, then the ontological commitment is merely apparent.

Van Inwagen's main idea here is that our discourse commits us to quantification over properties, and thus to the existence of properties. We deduce the existence of properties from certain sentences we accept. The argument is not epistemological: it does not seek to provide evidence for the existence of properties. Neither is it transcendental, nor an inference to the best explanation. (167) The operative methodological principle, if there is one, is only this: “if one does not believe that things of a certain sort exist, one shouldn't say anything that demonstrably implies that things of that sort exist”. (167) For example, we accept ‘Spiders share some of the anatomical features of insects’. (159) This says nothing different from ‘There are anatomical features that insects have and spiders also have’. This then is translated into canonical English. I will spare you the rigmarole. The upshot is that there are anatomical features. Hence there are properties.

The most promising way of rebutting platonism so derived is by finding a paraphrase of the original sentence that says the same thing but does not even seem to commit its acceptor to properties. (The nominalists would of course have to do this for every sentence proposed by platonists that supposedly commits its users to abstracta.) Van Inwagen, predictably, argues

against the paraphrastic way out. Nominalist paraphrases are not to be had. (164–167)

4.4 The Properties of Properties

Given that there are properties, what are they like? What are the properties of properties? To specify them is the task of a theory of properties. What follows is my list, not van Inwagen's, but gleaned from what he writes. Properties are:

- a. Abstract objects, as we have already seen. As abstract, properties are non-spatiotemporal and causally inert. (207) Better: abstract objects are categorially such as to be neither causally active nor causally passive.
- b. Universals, as we have already gleaned, with the exception of haecceities such as the property of being identical to Plantinga. (180) Van Inwagen has no truck with tropes. (241)
- c. The entities that play the property role. And what role would that be? This is the role "thing that can be said of something". It is a special case of the role "thing that can be said". (175) Properties are things that can be said of or about something. Propositions are things that can be said, period, or full stop.
- d. Unsaturated assertibles. Things that can be said are assertibles. They are either unsaturated, in which case they are properties, or saturated, in which case they are propositions.
- e. Necessary beings. (207)
- f. Not necessarily instantiated. Many properties exist uninstantiated.
- g. Not all of them instantiable. Some unsaturated assertibles are necessarily uninstantiated, e.g., what is said of x if one says 'x is both round and square'.
- h. Such that the usual logical operations apply to them. (176) Given any two assertibles, whether saturated or unsaturated, there is 'automatically' their conjunction and their disjunction. Given any one assertible, there is 'automatically' its negation.

- i. Abundant, not sparse. There is a property corresponding to almost every one-place open sentence with a precise meaning. ‘Almost’ to avoid a variant of Russell’s paradox. (243) Whereas David Armstrong takes it to be the task of “total science” to determine what properties there are, van Inwagen holds that for every one-place predicate with a definite sense, there is a property. But since properties are necessary beings, there are all the properties there might have been; hence there are more properties than there are actual one-place predicates.
- j. Not parts or constituents in any sense of the concrete things that have them. Indeed, it makes no sense to say that an assertible is a part of a concrete object. And although properties or unsaturated assertibles are universals, it makes no sense that such an item is ‘wholly present’ in concrete objects. (178) Concrete things are ‘blobs’ in David Armstrong’s sense. They lack ontological structure. “Their only constituents are their parts, their parts in the strict and mereological sense.” (243)
- k. Not more basic ontologically than the things whose properties they are. A concrete thing is not a bundle or cluster of properties. The very suggestion is senseless on van Inwagen’s scheme. A property is an unsaturated assertible. It is very much like a Fregean (objective) concept or *Begriff*, even though van Inwagen does not say this in so many words. (But his talk of unsaturatedness points us back to Frege.) Clearly it would be senseless to think of a dog as a bundle of Fregean concepts. That which can be truly said of a thing like a dog, that it is furry, for example, is no part of the critter. (178–179) I should point out, however, that while talk of saturated and unsaturated assertibles conjures the shade of Frege, van Inwagen has no truck with Frege’s concept-object dichotomy according to which no concept is an object, no object is a concept, and the concept *horse* is not a concept. “I do not understand the concept-object distinction. The objects I call properties are just that: objects.” (206, fn 11)
- l. Are not objects of sensation. (179) To put it paradoxically, and this is my formulation, not van Inwagen’s, such perceptual properties as being blue and being oval in shape are not perceptible properties. One can see that

a coffee cup is blue, but one cannot literally see the blueness of the coffee cup. This follows given that properties are abstract objects in Plato's heaven.

5. VAN INWAGEN'S OSTRICH REALISM AND COMMITMENT TO BARE PARTICULARS

Van Inwagen rejects both extreme and moderate nominalism. So he can't possibly be an ostrich nominalist. He is, however, as he himself appreciates, an ostrich realist or ostrich platonist. (214–215)

Suppose Max is black. What explains the predicate's being true of Max? According to the ostrich nominalist, nothing does. It is just true of him. There is nothing in or about Max that serves as the ontological ground of the correctness of his satisfying the predicate. Now 'F' is true of *a* if and only if '*a* is F' is true. So we may also ask: what is the ontological ground of the truth of 'Max is black'? The ostrich reply will be: nothing. The sentence is just true. There is no need for a truth-maker.

The ostrich realist/platonist says something very similar except that in place of predicates he puts abstract properties, and in place of sentences he puts abstract propositions. In virtue of what does Max instantiate blackness? In virtue of nothing. He just instantiates it. Nothing explains why the unsaturated assertible expressed by '*x* is black' is instantiated by Max. Nothing explains it because there is nothing to explain. And nothing explains why the saturated assertible expressed by 'Max is black' is true. Thus there is nothing concrete here below that could be called a state of affairs in anything like Armstrong's sense. There is in the realm of *concreta* no such item as Max-instantiating-blackness, or the concrete fact of Max's being black. Here below there is just Max, and up yonder in a *topos ouranos* are 'his' properties (the abstract unsaturated assertibles that he, but not he alone, instantiates). But then Max is a bare particular in one sense of this phrase. In what sense, then?

5.1 Four Senses of 'Bare Particular'

1. A bare particular is an ordinary concrete particular that lacks properties. I mention this foolish view only to set it aside. No proponent of bare particulars that I am aware of ever intended the phrase in this way. And of course, van Inwagen is not committed to bare particulars in this sense. Indeed, he rejects an equivalent view. "A bare particular would be a thing of which nothing could be said truly, an obviously incoherent notion." (179)
2. A bare particular is an ontological constituent of an ordinary concrete particular, a constituent that has no properties. To my knowledge, no proponent of bare particulars ever intended the phrase in this way. In any case, the view is untenable and may be dismissed. Van Inwagen is of course not committed to this view. He is a 'relation' ontologist, not a 'constituent' ontologist.
3. A bare particular is an ontological constituent of an ordinary concrete particular, a constituent that does have properties, namely, the properties associated with the ordinary particular in question, and has them by instantiating (exemplifying) them. This view is held by Gustav Bergmann and by David Armstrong in his middle period. Armstrong, however, speaks of thin particulars rather than bare particulars, contrasting them with thick particulars (what I am calling ordinary concrete particulars). When he does use 'bare particular', he uses the phrase incorrectly and idiosyncratically to refer to something like (1) or (2). For example, in *Universals and Scientific Realism*⁶ he affirms something he calls the "Strong Principle of the Rejection of Bare Particulars":

For each particular, x , there exists at least one non-relational property, P , such that x is P .

This principle of Armstrong is plausibly read as a rejection of (1) and (2). It is also plainly consistent with (3). But of course I do not claim that

⁶David Armstrong, *Universals and Scientific Realism* (Cambridge UP, 1978), vol. I: 213.

van Inwagen is committed to bare or thin particulars in the sense of (3). For again, van Inwagen is not a constituent ontologist.

4. A bare particular is an ordinary concrete particular that has properties by instantiating them, where instantiation is a full-fledged external asymmetrical relation (not a non-relational tie whatever that might come to) that connects concrete objects to abstract objects, where abstract objects are objects that are not in space, not in time, and are neither causally active nor causally passive. What is common to (3) and (4) is the idea that bare particulars have properties all right, but they have them in a certain way, by being externally related to them. A bare particular, then, is nothing like an Aristotelian primary substance which has, or rather is, its essence or nature. The bareness of a bare particular, then, consists in its lacking an Aristotle-type nature, not in its lacking properties. My claim is that van Inwagen is committed to bare particulars in sense (4). Let me explain.

5.2 Van Inwagen's Bare Particulars

Consider my cat Max. Van Inwagen is committed to saying that Max is a bare particular in sense (4). For while Max has properties, these properties are in no sense constituents of him, but lie (stand?) outside him in a realm apart. These properties are in no sense at him or in him or on him, not even such properties as being black or being furry, properties that are plausibly held to be sense-perceivable. After all, one can see black where he is and feel furriness where he is. None of Max's properties, on van Inwagen's construal of properties, are where he is or when he is. None of them has anything to do with the concrete being of Max himself. As I made clear earlier, the realms of the concrete and the abstract are radically disjoint for van Inwagen. They are jointly exhaustive and mutually exclusive realms: for all x , x is either concrete or abstract, but not both and not neither. So Max is here below in the realm of space, time, change, and causality while his properties exist in splendid isolation up yonder in the realm of abstracta. They are far, far away, not spatially and not temporally, but ontologically.

Max and his properties are of course connected by instantiation which is a relation that is both external and abstract. In what sense is the relation external? X and y are externally related just in case there is nothing intrinsic about the relata that entails their being related. Max is two feet from me at the moment. This relation of being two feet from is external in that there are no intrinsic properties of me or Max or both that entail our being two feet from each other. Our intrinsic properties would be just the same if we were three feet from each other. But Max and his brother Manny are both black. In virtue of their both being intrinsically black, they stand in the same color as relation. Hence the latter relation is not external but internal. Internal relatedness is supervenient upon the intrinsic features of the relata; external relatedness is not.

Suppose I want to bring it about that two balls have the same color. I need do only two things: paint the one ball red, say, and then paint the other ball red. But if I want to bring it about that there are two balls having the same color ten feet from each other, I have to do three things: paint the one ball red, say; paint the other ball red; place them ten feet from each other. The external relatedness does not supervene upon the intrinsic properties of the relata. Given that concrete particulars are externally related to their properties, these particulars are bare particulars in the sense defined in #4 above.

5.3 And What is Wrong with That?

Suppose you agree with me that van Inwagen's concrete particulars are bare, not in any old sense, but in the precise sense I defined, a sense that comports well with what the actual proponents of bare/thin particulars had in mind. So what? What's wrong with being committed to bare particulars? Well, the consequences seem unpalatable if not absurd.

A. One consequence is that all properties are accidental and none are essential. For if Max is bare, then there is nothing in him or at him or about him that dictates the properties he must instantiate or limits the properties he can instantiate. He can have any old set of properties so

long as he has some set or other. Bare particulars are ‘promiscuous’ in their connection with properties. The connection between particular and property is then contingent and all properties are accidental. It is metaphysically (broadly logically) possible that Max combine with any property. He happens to be a cat, but he could have been a poached egg or a valve lifter. He could have had the shape of a cube. Or he might have been a dimensionless point. He might have been an act of thinking (temporal and causally efficacious, but not spatial).

- B. A second consequence is that all properties are relational and none are intrinsic. For if Max is black in virtue of standing in an external instantiation relation to the abstract object, blackness, then his being black is a relational property and not an intrinsic one.
- C. A third consequence is that none of Max’s properties are sense-perceivable. Van Inwagen-properties are abstract objects and none of them are perceivable. But if I cup my hands around a ball, don’t I literally feel its sphericalness or spheroidness? Or am I merely being appeared to spheroidally?
- D. Finally, given what van Inwagen himself says about the radical difference between the abstract and the concrete, a difference so abysmal (my word) that it would be better if we could avoid commitment to abstracta, it is highly counter-intuitive that there should be this abysmal difference between a cucumber, say, and its greenness. It is strange that the difference between God and a cucumber should “pale into insignificance” (156) compared to the difference between a cucumber and the property of being green. After all, the properties of a thing articulate its very being. How can they be so ontologically distant from the thing?

If you deny that concrete things as van Inwagen understands them are bare in the sense I have explained, then you seem to be committed to saying that there are two sorts of properties, van Inwagen properties in Plato’s heaven and ‘sublunary’ properties at the particulars here below. But then I will ask two questions. First, what is the point of introducing such properties if they merely duplicate at the abstract intensional level the ‘real’ properties in

the sublunary sphere? Second, what justifies calling such properties *properties* given that you still are going to need sublunary properties to avoid saying that van Inwagen's concreta are bare particulars?

6. PERCEIVABILITY OF PROPERTIES

Let us pursue point C above a bit further. "We never see properties, although we see that certain things have certain properties." (179) I honestly don't know what to make of the second clause of the quoted sentence. I am now, with a brain properly caffeinated, staring at my blue coffee cup in good light. Van Inwagen's claim is that I do not see the blueness of the cup, though I do see that the cup is blue. Here I balk. If I don't see blueness, or blue, when I look at the cup, how can I literally see that the cup is blue? 'That it is blue' is a thing that can be said of the cup, and said with truth. This thing that can be said is an unsaturated assertible, a property in van Inwagen's sense. Van Inwagen is telling us that it cannot be seen. 'That the cup is blue' is a thing that can be said, full stop. It is a saturated assertible, a proposition, and a true one at that. Both assertibles are abstract objects. Both are invisible, and not because of any limitation in my visual power or in human visual power in general, but because abstract objects cannot be terms of causal relations, and perception involves causation. Both types of assertible are categorially disbarred from visibility. But if both the property and the proposition are invisible, then how can van Inwagen say that "we see that certain things have certain properties"? If van Inwagen says that we don't see the proposition, then what do we see when we see that the cup is blue? A colorless cup? A cup that is blue but is blue in a way different from the way the cup is blue by instantiating the abstract unsaturated assertible expressed by 'that it is blue'? But then one has duplicated at the level of abstracta the property that one sees at the concrete cup. If there is blueness at the cup and abstract blueness in Plato's heaven, why do we need the latter? Just what is going on here?

To van Inwagen's view one could reasonably oppose the following view. I see the cup. I see blueness or blue at the cup. I don't see a colorless cup.

To deny the three foregoing sentences would be to deny what is phenomenologically given. What I don't literally see, however, is that the cup is blue. (Thus I don't literally see what van Inwagen says we literally see.) For to see that the cup is blue is to see the instantiation of blueness by the cup. And I don't see that. The correlate of the 'is' in 'The cup is blue' is not an object of sensation. If you think it is, tell me how I can single it out, how I can isolate it. Where in the visual field is it? The blueness is spread out over the visible surfaces of the cup. The cup is singled out as a particular thing on the desk, next to the cat, beneath the lamp, etc. Now where is the instantiation relation? Point it out to me! You won't be able to do it. I see the cup, and I see blue/blueness where the cup is. I don't see the cup's *being* blue.

It is also hard to understand how van Inwagen, on his own assumptions, can maintain that we see that certain things have certain properties. Suppose I see that Max, a cat of my acquaintance, is black. Do I see a proposition? Not on van Inwagen's understanding of 'proposition'. His propositions are Fregean, not Russellian: they are not resident in the physical world. Do I see a proposition-like entity such as an Armstrongian state of affairs? Again, no. What do I see? Van Inwagen claims that properties are not objects of sensation; no properties are, not even perceptual properties. I should think that some properties are objects of sensation, or better, of perception: I perceive blueness at the cup by sight; I perceive smoothness and hardness and heat at the cup by touch. If so, then (some) properties are not abstract objects residing in a domain unto themselves.

Van Inwagen's view appears to have the absurd consequence that things like coffee cups are colorless. For if colors are properties (179) and properties are abstract objects, and abstract objects are colorless (as they obviously are), then colors are colorless, and whiteness is not white and blueness is not blue. Van Inwagen bites the bullet and accepts the consequence. But we can easily run the argument in reverse: Blueness is blue; colors are properties; abstract objects are colorless; ergo, perceptual properties are not abstract objects. They are either tropes or else universals wholly present in the things that have them. Van Inwagen, a 'relation ontologist' cannot of course allow this move into 'constituent ontology'.

There is a long footnote on p. 242 that may amount to a response to something like my objection. In the main text, van Inwagen speaks of “such properties as are presented to our senses as belonging to the objects we sense”. How does this square with the claim on p. 179 that properties are not objects of sensation? Can a property such as blueness be presented to our senses without being an object of sensation? Apparently yes, “In a noncausal sense of ‘presented’”. (243, fn 3) How does this solve the problem? It is phenomenologically evident that (a definite shade of) blue appears to my senses when I stare at my blue coffee cup. Now if this blueness is an abstract object as van Inwagen claims then it cannot be presented to my senses any more than it can be something with which I causally interact.

7. BUT IS THIS ONTOLOGY?

Why does van Inwagen think he is doing ontology at all? It looks more like semantics or philosophical logic or philosophy of language. I say this because van Inwagen’s assertibles are very much like Fregean senses. They are intensional items. (As we noted, he reduces all his assertibles, both saturated and unsaturated, to relations-in-intension.) Taking his cue from Quine, he seeks an answer to the question, What is there? He wants an inventory, by category, of what there is. He wants to know, for example, whether in addition to concrete things there are also properties, as if properties could exist in sublime independence of concrete things in a separate sphere above this ‘sublunary’ sphere. That no property is an object of sensation is just logical fallout from van Inwagen’s decision to install them in Plato’s heaven; but then their connection to things here below in space and time become unintelligible. It does no good, in alleviation of this unintelligibility, to say that abstract blueness—the unsaturated assertible expressed by ‘that it is blue’—is instantiated by my blue cup. For instantiation is just another abstract object, a dyadic external relation, itself ensconced in Plato’s heaven.

But not only the formulation of the question but also the method of attack come from Quine. Van Inwagen thinks he can answer what he and Quine idiosyncratically call the ontological question by examining the

ontological commitments of our discourse. Starting with sentences we accept as true, he looks to see what these sentences entail as regards the types of entity there are when the sentences are properly regimented in accordance with the strictures of modern predicate logic with identity. The starting point is not things in their mind- and language-independent being, but beliefs we already have and sentences we already accept. The approach is oblique, not direct; subjective, not objective. Now to accept a sentence is to accept it as true; but a sentence accepted as true need not be true. Note also that if one sentence entails another, both can be false. So if sentences accepted as true entail the existence of properties in van Inwagen's sense, according to which properties are unsaturated assertibles, it is logically possible that there be no properties in reality. The following is not a contradiction: The sentences we accept as true entail that there are properties and there are no properties. For it may be—it is narrowly-logically possible that—the sentences we accept as true that entail that there are properties are all of them false. Not likely, of course, and there may be some retorsive argument against this possibility. But it cannot be ruled out by logic alone.

So there is something fishy about the whole method of 'ontological' commitment. One would have thought that ontology is concerned with the Being of beings, not with the presuppositions of sentences accepted as true by us. To put it vaguely, there is something 'transcendental' (in the Kantian sense) and 'subjective' and 'modern' about van Inwagen's Quinean method that unsuits it for something that deserves to be called ontology. This is connected with the point that van Inwagen's assertibles, saturated and unsaturated, are hard to distinguish from Fregean senses. They are denizens of Frege's Third World, not his First World, the realm of primary reference. To illustrate: Venus is an item in the First World, while the senses of 'Morning Star' and 'Evening Star' and the sense of the sentence 'The Morning Star is the Evening Star' are three items all in the Third World. Senses, however, are logico-semantic items: their job is to mediate reference. Van Inwagen is arguably just hypostatizing items that are needed for us to secure reference—whether thinking reference or linguistic reference—making of them things that truly exist extramentally and extralinguistically.

8. EXISTENCE

One can say of a thing that it might not have existed. For example, I can say this of myself. If so, it must be possible to say of a thing that it exists. For example, it must be possible for me to say of myself that I exist. As van Inwagen remarks, “it is hard to see how there could be such an assertible as ‘that it might not have existed’ if there were no such assertible as ‘that it exists.’” (180) Existence, then, is a property, says van Inwagen, for properties are unsaturated assertibles, and ‘that it exists’ is an assertible.

There are many problems with the notion that existence is a first-level property on a van Inwagen-type construal of properties. Here is one. Instantiation for van Inwagen is a full-fledged dyadic relation. (It is not a non-relational tie or Bergmannian nexus). He further characterizes it as abstract and external as we have seen. Now it is perfectly obvious to me that the very existence of Socrates cannot consist in his instantiation of any van Inwagen property, let alone the putative property, existence. For given the externality of the instantiation relation, both Socrates and the putative property must ‘already’ (logically speaking) exist for said relation to hold between them. So one moves in an explanatory circle of embarrassingly short diameter if one tries to account for existence in this way. This circularity objection which I have developed in painful detail elsewhere will, I expect, leave van Inwagen stone cold. One reason is that he sees no role for explanation in metaphysics whereas I think that metaphysics without explanation is not metaphysics at all in any serious sense. This is a large topic that cannot be addressed here.

I’ll mention one other problem for van Inwagen. I’ll put it very briefly since this article is already too long. Van Inwagen is a Fregean about existence; but on a Fregean view existence cannot be a first-level property. For Frege, ‘x exists’ where ‘x’ ranges over individuals is a senseless open sentence or predicate. There is no unsaturated assertible corresponding to it.⁷

⁷See my “Existence: Two Dogmas of Analysis”, 45–75.

9. TROPES

Concerning tropes, in Chapter 10, “Relational vs. constituent ontologies”, van Inwagen says, “I don’t understand what people can be talking about when they talk about those alleged items.” (211) He continues on the same page:

Consider two tennis balls that are perfect duplicates of each other. Among their other features, each is 6.7 centimeters in diameter, and the color of each is a certain rather distressing greenish yellow called “optical yellow”. Apparently, some people understand what it means to say that each of the balls has its own color—albeit the color of one is a perfect duplicate of the color of the other. I wonder whether anyone would understand me if I said that each ball had its own diameter—albeit the diameter of one was a perfect duplicate of the diameter of the other. I doubt it. But one statement makes about as much sense to me as the other—for just as the diameter of one of the balls is the diameter of the other (6.7 centimeters), the color of one of the balls is the color of the other (optical yellow).

Although van Inwagen couches the argument in terms of what does and does not make sense to him, the argument is of little interest if he is offering a merely autobiographical comment about the limits of his ability to understand. And it does seem that he intends more when he says that he doubts whether anyone would understand the claim that each ball has its own diameter. So I’ll take the argument to be an argument for the objective meaninglessness of trope talk, not just the van Inwagen-meaninglessness of such talk:

1. It is meaningful to state that each ball has its own color if and only if it is meaningful to state that each ball has its own diameter.
2. It is not meaningful to state that each ball has its own diameter.

Therefore

3. It is not meaningful to state that each ball has its own color.

Therefore

4. Talk of tropes is meaningless.

The argument is valid, and (1) is true. But I don't see why we should accept (2). So I say the argument is unsound.

I am not defending the truth of trope theory, only its meaningfulness. I am maintaining that trope theory is a meaningful ontological proposal and that van Inwagen is wrong to think otherwise.

It is given that the two tennis balls have the same diameter. But all that means is that the diameter of ball A and the diameter of ball B have the same measurement, 6.7 cm. This fact is consistent with there being two numerically distinct particular diameters, the diameter of A and the diameter of B.

What's more, the diameters have to be numerically distinct. If I didn't know that the two balls were of the same diameter, I could measure them to find out. Now what would I be measuring? Not each ball, but each ball's diameter. And indeed each ball's own diameter, not some common diameter. I would measure the diameter of A, and then the diameter of B. If each turns out to be 6.7 cm in length, then we could say that they have the 'same diameter' where this phrase means that A's diameter has the same length as B's diameter. But again, this is consistent with the diameters' being numerically distinct.

There are two diameters of the same length just as there are two colored expanses of the same color: two yellownesses of the same shade of yellow. So I suggest we run van Inwagen's argument in reverse. Just as it is meaningful to maintain that the yellowness of A is numerically distinct from the yellowness of B, it is meaningful to maintain that the diameter of A is numerically distinct from the diameter of B. Looking at the two balls we see two yellownesses, one here, the other there. Similarly, measuring the balls' diameter, we measure two diameters, one here, the other there. Again, this does not show that trope theory is true, but only that it makes sense. It makes as much sense if not more sense than van Inwagen's proposal according to which optical yellow is an abstract property exemplified by the two balls, and therefore *not* yellow.

10. CONCLUSION

Nothing I have said strictly refutes any of van Inwagen's contentions. Philosophical theories, except for some sophomoric ones, cannot be refuted. The considerations I have adduced tend only to neutralize van Inwagen's theory, or rather his type of theory. They show why it is not rationally compelling and how it is open to powerful objections, only some of which I have adduced in this entry. And of course I do not claim to have a better theory. I incline toward constituent ontology myself, but it too is bristling with difficulties, a fact that I have no desire to hide. As I see it, the problems of philosophy are most of them genuine, some of them humanly important, but all of them insoluble. And so I read van Inwagen's outstanding collection of articles as an important contribution to our understanding of just how difficult these genuine problems are.



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