

NOTHING, EVERYTHING, SOMETHING!

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At one extreme, we find everything; at the other—nothing. The large territory in between is a prerogative of the remainder, conveniently labeled under the generic heading of ‘something’. To be sure, from a logical viewpoint ‘something’ may be said to encompass ‘everything’ as a special case (though not ‘nothing’, which is strictly out). But even so, the friend of something is typically happy to stop halfway. Ask a question, they will generally go for a moderate answer. Draw a map, they will generally focus on the details in the middle. The polar extremes—they think—are too far-fetched to be taken seriously.

Because of this, the friend of something tends to enjoy all the comfort that a central seat can provide. Yet this comfort comes with a heavy burden. It’s not enough to say something; you have to draw a line. It’s not enough to dismiss the extremes; you have to say exactly *where* in the middle you are going to settle. And that is far from easy. Think of the sort of questions that have been driving so many a debate in contemporary philosophy. Under what conditions do certain facts depend on others? Under what conditions are we responsible for our deeds? Under what conditions does a plurality of things compose a whole? Under what conditions is it permissible to limit individual freedom? When it comes to questions such as these, and many others indeed, universalist and nihilist answers may be extreme, but they are clear enough: under every condition whatsoever, or else under no condition at all. Aliquidist answers, by contrast, are always caught between the Scylla of vagueness and indeterminacy and the Charybdis of ungroundedness and arbitrariness, if not parochialism, and steering a proper middle course—specifying and justifying the relevant conditions—demands exceptional navigating powers.

I myself have generally been favoring extreme answers precisely for this reason. Here I am not going not elaborate, though. On the contrary, I want to report a conversation I heard recently that made me think perhaps there is a sense in which aliquidism is superior to its extreme alternatives. I am not sure it would be enough to rescue its friends from the treacherous waters

that surround them. Given the context, however, it seems appropriate to share it. I have transcribed it in full, adding just a few personal comments in the form of endnotes to clarify my own understanding of the basic terms.

A dialogue

Nothing. Happy to see you, dear friends. You know what? I pondered the matter for a long time and I think I have finally cleared my mind. The nihilists are right. Nothing exists!¹

Something. I knew one day you'd say that. But allow me to point out that you just contradicted yourself. And the very fact that you contradicted yourself proves my point: something exists! But only something, of course, not everything.

Everything. And so you've just contradicted yourself, too. Come on, where have you two been all these years?² Just as you cannot say that nothing exists, which is indeed self-defeating, you cannot say that something does not exist.

Something. Serious? Surely you don't think ghosts exist?

Everything. Of course not. But I have told you before and I'll repeat it: saying that ghosts do not exist does not amount to saying of some things—the ghosts—that they do not exist. Simply, we are saying of the things that exist that none of *them*—the existing things—is a ghost.³

Nothing. Nothing ghosts! You see? Without me you can't get by!

Everything. Yes, nothing ghosts. But that doesn't mean *you* are ghosting.⁴ Otherwise something would be ghosting.

Something. Huh? I have no intention of ghosting. Not even dead!

Nothing. Indeed. I am the one who is supposed to ghost. But I understand this spells trouble. So forget it. I'm not going to do it, just as I'm not going to chimerize, humanize, or debishopconstantinoplize myself. I will continue to noth, and that'll be all.⁵

Something. Lazybones...

Everything. Lazybones my foot! How can you not understand? *He* cannot do a thing, not even noth. I'm the one doing everything.

Something. Yes, but only thanks to me! Without me, you, too, would be nothing.

Everything. That is what you think. I would be here even without you. This is precisely the point. Even if nothing existed, everything would exist.

Nothing. Now get this. How dare you?

Everything. Prove me otherwise.

Nothing. Gladly! Suppose nothing existed, as in an empty world. In that case, it's pretty obvious that everything would fail to exist. QED

Everything. You call that a proof? And what gives you the right in the first place to suppose an empty world is possible?

Nothing. I can certainly give you an argument for that, too. Here goes.⁶ We agree that a world with a finite number of objects is possible, right?

Everything. Yes.

Nothing. And we agree, in particular, that there is a possible world with a finite number n of objects each of which might not exist, and whose non-existence does not necessitate the existence of any other object.

Everything. Those are *two* more assumptions, but yes, I'll grant them both.

Nothing. Good. Let us call the world in question W_1 . Now pick any object in W_1 , say x_1 , and consider a second world, W_2 , that is just like W_1 except that it lacks x_1 . Surely it is possible for there to be such a world. And since the non-existence of x_1 does not necessitate the existence of any other object, it's clear that W_2 is smaller than W_1 , i.e., it contains one fewer object. Now consider a third possible world, W_3 , which is exactly like W_2 except that it lacks a certain object x_2 ...

Everything. Okay, you can stop, I get the picture. By progressive subtraction, after $n-1$ steps we are going to end up with a world that contains just one object, and when we finally get rid of that last object... puff! We are left with a perfectly empty, objectless world.

Nothing. Quite right! So now you can see the point of my original proof. In this empty world, nothing exists, and so it's clear that everything fails to exist. QED

Everything. I'm sure one could object to the last step of this "subtraction argument", if not to its premises.⁷ But never mind. I granted the premises and I am happy to accept the argument, last step included. We still don't have a proof that I was wrong.

Nothing. How not? You must agree that our empty world would make "Everything exists" false.

Everything. No. I agree that everything would fail to exist, as you said earlier, i.e., that the empty world would make "Everything does not exist" true. But that doesn't mean that "Everything exists" would be false. This, too, is a universal claim, and a universal claim is false if and only if there is something that fails to satisfy it. Thus, the only way to establish that the empty world would make "Everything exists" false is to show that it would contain a counterexample, something that does not exist—and we saw that this is impossible. I'm sorry, I win even in the empty world.⁸

Nothing. But wait... But I...

Something. You better keep silent, since every time you open your mouth you contradict yourself. You are nothing and should say nothing. But let

me say something. For I am quite happy with this result we just heard. If it is impossible to say that something does not exist, it follows that something necessarily exists. Long live me!

Everything. One fallacy after another... Don't you see? From the fact that "Something does not exist" is a contradiction you can't infer that something necessarily exists. It doesn't even follow that necessarily something exists.⁹ All that follows is that, no matter what the circumstances, "Something doesn't exist" must be false. And this is just another way of stating my point: necessarily, everything exists (though not everything exists necessarily, and maybe nothing does).

Nothing. I do!

Something. So, in the empty world, it is true *both* that everything exists *and* that everything does not exist?

Everything. Exactly. In an empty world, everything is anything.¹⁰ Long live me!

Something. Wait, there is still something I don't understand (obviously). Let's go back to the fact that ghosts don't exist. Suppose you are right that when we assert this, we are not saying of them—the ghosts—that they do not exist; we are only saying that no existing thing is a ghost. It's clear that the trick rests on the fact that the word 'ghost' is a common noun, hence a predicate, and predicates can have an empty extension. But what are we going to make of, say, the White Lady? The White Lady is a famous ghost. Surely she does not exist. But 'the White Lady' is not a predicate; it is a definite description. It doesn't pick out the class of all ghosts; it picks out a specific ghost.

Everything. It *aims* to pick out a specific ghost. But since there are no ghosts—since nothing ghosts—it fails. Surely you are not assuming that just because you can come up with a description, there is something you are describing. The truth of "The White Lady does not exist" comes from the falsity of "The White Lady exists", and this falsity, in turn, does not amount to the fact that the White Lady fails to exist; it amounts to the fact that 'the White Lady' fails to refer.

Something. You expect me to understand this?

Everything. If 'the White Lady' is a definite description, as you said, then it doesn't have a meaning by itself. The meaning of a description is to be understood contextually, by analyzing the logical form of the statements wherein it occurs.¹¹ When you say "The White Lady exists", you are not attributing existence to an individual called 'the White Lady'; you are saying that there is one and only one individual that falls under the predicate 'White Lady'. Since this is not the case, "The White Lady exists" is false, which means that 'the White Lady' picks out nothing.

Nothing. She picks me up?

Everything. Not she—*it*. We are talking about the description. And the description doesn't pick *you* up. It picks out nothing in the sense that there's not one thing 'the White Lady' picks out.¹²

Something. Fair enough. I see how the story goes with a description such as 'the White Lady'. That is because definite descriptions involve predicates after all. But I could have used a name instead, I mean, a proper name. I could have said 'Augusta'.

Everything. Some philosophers think names *are* predicates. We say such things as "The Michaels in my building both lost their keys" or "I know one incredibly sharp Cecil and one that's incredibly dull".¹³

Something. I am glad *some* philosophers think so. But I don't. Names do not connote; they denote.¹⁴ Names name.

Everything. But then it follows that 'Augusta' is *not* a name. It *sounds* like a name. Perhaps we *use* it as if it were a name. Yet the very fact that it names nothing shows it isn't.

Nothing. Wait a moment—my name is not 'Augusta'.

Everything. You are unbelievable. Please stop it.

Something. Yes, stop it, you keep confusing everything.

Everything. I am not confused at all. The point is that 'Augusta' is not and cannot be a proper name. It's just your old definite description disguised as a name.¹⁵ Just as nothing is a White Lady, nothing is Augusta. Just as nothing ghosts, nothing augustizes.

Something. You are really fixated on this verb-ing business! In any case, this time you're plain wrong. I can assure you I have more than one friend whose name is 'Augusta'. And I mean real people in the flesh, not ghosts. I mean existing Augustas.

Everything. I thought you thought names are not predicates. Why are you pluralizing?

Something. Sorry. I meant existing people each of whom is called 'Augusta'.

Everything. They may all be called 'Augusta', but if names are not predicates, then your friends do *not* have the same name. Strictly speaking, each of these persons has a different name, say, 'Augusta₁', 'Augusta₂', etc. When we use names, we systematically drop the subscripts and so those names may sound identical. Strictly speaking they are not. And in some cases, what sounds identical to a name is not even a name. You said it yourself: names name, and 'Augusta'—the 'Augusta_i' you had in mind as an alternative to 'the White Lady'—doesn't.

Something. You really can't let it go, can you?

Nothing. She has a point! You always want to be right about everything!

Everything. That is my specialty, you know.

Something. I must admit, I find this whole discussion highly frustrating...

(*Ponders.*) Wait, let me tell you something.

Nothing. Which is *your* specialty...

Something. Seriously, I think I still have something to say, something important. Suppose I agree with everything you (everything) said. In particular, I agree that everything exists, and not only as a matter of contingent fact; “Everything exists” is necessarily true. You seem to think this makes you a winner. But does it really? I almost fell for it. However, the more I think of it, the clearer it is that it doesn’t. What it does is make you a trivial tautology. Precisely because it cannot possibly be false, to say that everything exists is to say nothing. It’s like saying that there is what there is.¹⁶ True, but uninformative. Like answering the question “Where are you?” with the words “I’m here”: true, obviously, but so what? We are not saying anything interesting.

Everything. Hold on, there is a difference. “Everything exists” expresses a necessary truth. “I’m here” does not, though I agree that it necessarily expresses a truth.¹⁷

Nothing. I am not even sure I would agree with that. Take my answering machine: “I am not here now; please leave a message.” I assure you the first part is not meant to express a falsity.¹⁸

Something. All right, forget the analogy. My point is really about “Everything exists”. We are agreeing that this statement expresses a necessary truth, since its negation is a contradiction. That’s why I am saying it is a tautology. And if it is a tautology, then it is completely uninformative.

Everything. Sorry to interrupt again. Who says tautologies cannot be informative? War is war. Business is business. If you can’t, you can’t. You either agree or you don’t. *Que sera, sera...* I just uttered a bunch of tautologies; yet each one of them may be perfectly informative in its own way, at least in some contexts.¹⁹

Nothing. My favorite: It ain’t over till it’s over.²⁰

Something. I agree tautologies may be informative at the level of what is implicated, but surely not at the level of what is said.²¹ At any rate, “Everything exists” is not even informative in the first sense. It is utterly uninformative at every level. And that is my point. Perhaps everything is better than nothing (utterly contradictory), but that’s easy. I’m *way* better than that. I’m better than both of you together!

Everything. And why so, if I may ask?

Nothing. I was about to ask the same!

Something. Because what I say *is* informative. I say something exists—and that is neither contradictory nor trivial. Indeed, it is immensely informative. You may still wonder, why something rather than nothing...²²

Nothing. I was just about to ask!

Something. ... and you may insist that the something, whatever it is, is still everything.

Everything. Right!

Something. But the fact remains: it *is* something rather than nothing, and it is something *even though*, inasmuch as it is, it is everything. People are going to listen to me much more than to you. They are going to wonder about me. Coming to think of it, they have been wondering about me all the time. Me, not you. And the reason is in front of us. You are completely wonder-less. You are sheer logic. I'm ontology!

Nothing. Wow, that sounds big!

Something. Sorry, I got a little carried away... But I mean it, and it should be obvious. In ontology, nothing is better than something.

Nothing. You mean, *I* win?

Something. I mean, when it comes to ontology, there is nothing more important than something—certainly not you, I am sorry, and apparently not even everything.

Everything. I must admit, I never thought of it this way. Sounds like you may have a good point after all.

Nothing. She does! With all due respect, I'm relieved you don't get to win everything.

Everything. I do win everything. I'm just missing something. Are we to take ontology to be only about whether something is, as opposed to *what* it is?

Something. Of course. One must first of all figure out whether something exists (or might exist). That's ontology. Once we answered that question, one can attend to the additional question of determining, of those things that exist, what they are, i.e., what features make each thing that is the thing it is. But that's metaphysics, and it comes later.²³

Everything. I am not sure I'd buy the distinction. How can one answer the *an sit* question without at the same time addressing the *quid sit* question just the same?²⁴ But never mind. You are not even answering the first question. You are not telling us what there is; you are just telling us that something is.

Something. Fine. I still have some work to do. But that is precisely why people wonder and speculate about me. They find it wondrous that there is something in the first place; and they all proceed to speculate about those further details you are asking.

Everything. And so the question has stayed alive down the centuries.²⁵

Something. It has.

Nothing. Writing up the inventory of the universe!²⁶ You see? If they listened to me, they'd be done in a second.

Everything and Something (in one voice). If they listened to you, they'd be gone in a second!

Nothing. Never mind. But, hey, listen, I probably learned nothing, but I still want to thank you. This has been fun. How about a nice toast?

Everything. A toast to what?

Nothing. I dunno. Let's just toast to something.

Something (slightly embarrassed). You mean—me?

Nothing. I mean anything. Let's toast to anything!

Everything and Something. Okay, to anything!

Anything (finally waking up). Yawn... Hello there... You were saying?

Comments

Who on earth is anything? Perhaps an *arbitrary* something, in the sense of Fine (1983)? An object whose properties are just those properties that are common to the individual objects in its “range”? I have no idea. As much as I'd like to find out, however, here the main point seems to be about something as such. We are supposed to see that when it comes to the fundamental concerns of ontology, something is better than nothing and also better than everything. I'll leave it to the reader to decide what to make of this claim, and whether the friends of aliquidism should feel vindicated despite the treacherous waters that surround them. For my part, I will simply add a few comments on matters of detail. They are just footnotes to the dialogue, or rather endnotes, numbered progressively according to the numbers inserted in the text.

1. *Are there* nihilists of this sort, i.e., genuine ontological nihilists? One usually mentions Gorgias, based on Sextus Empiricus' account of his treatise *On Non-Existence*, or *On Nature*: “That there is nothing [...] he reckons in the following way. If there is anything, either there is what is or what is not, or there is both what is and what is not. But neither is there what is, as he will establish, nor what is not, as he will explain, nor what is and what is not, as he will also teach. Therefore there is not anything.” (*Against the Logicians*, I, 66; 2005, p. 15) However, this reading of Gorgias is notoriously controversial (Caston 2002). Similar remarks apply to other classical philosophers who are sometimes classified the same way, such as the Mādhyamikas, whom Asaṅga stigmatized as “the most extreme kind of nihilist” (*Bodhisattvabhūmi*, IV; Dutt 1966, p. 31, as translated—and rejected—in Westerhoff 2016, p. 347). It is also controversial what ontological nihilism really amounts to (see e.g. Hawthorne and Cortens 1995, Cameron 2006, and Turner 2011). And if we take it to

be the doctrine that there are no concrete objects, as seems plausible, it is controversial even whether it is *possibly* true (as discussed below).

2. That is, since the publication of Quine (1948).
3. This, too, is a Quinean point. Quine took it to be a solution to “the old Platonic riddle of non-being”, by which he presumably meant the challenge raised by the Visitor in the *Sophist*: “Try to say something correct about that which is not, without attaching either *being*, *one*, or numerical *plurality* to it” (239b; 1993, p. 28). What Quine did not mention is that the solution may already be found in the writings of medieval philosophers. Cf. e.g. John Buridan: “Any word that is a part of a proposition not taken materially signifies and gives rise to some concept in the person hearing it according to the signification conventionally given to it. But not every such word has supposition, for only such a term is apt to supposit that, when something is pointed out by the pronoun ‘this’, [...] can truly be affirmed of that pronoun. Therefore the term ‘chimera’ cannot supposit, for whatever is pointed out, it is false to say ‘This is a chimera’.” (*Summulae*, IV, §1.2; 2001, p. 222)
4. The confusion between ‘Nothing’ as a noun (a proper name) and ‘nothing’ as a quantificational idiom is of course a classic trope of Western philosophy, going all the way back to Odysseus’ ruse of renaming himself ‘Nobody’ in Homer’s *Odyssey*: “‘What sore distress is this, Polyphemus, that you cry out thus through the immortal night, and make us sleepless?’ [...] ‘My friends, it is Nobody that is slaying me by guile and not by force.’ [...] ‘If, then, nobody does violence to you all alone as you are, sickness which comes from Zeus there is no way you can escape; you must pray to our father the lord Poseidon’.” (IX, 403–412; 1995, pp. 345, 347) Another classic is the medieval treatment of “Nothing taught me to fly”, which Anselm of Canterbury analyses “either in this way, that nothing, as an entity in itself, which signifies not anything, has taught me actually to fly—which would be false; or in this way, that not anything has taught me to fly—which would be true.” (*Monologion*, XIX; 1903, p. 71). On the other hand, consider, for instance, Fridugisus of Tours: “[N]othing is a word that has signification. But every signification has reference to that which it signifies. [...] Likewise every signification is signification of what is. [...] Nothing, therefore, is the signification of what is, that is, something existing” (*De substantia nihili et tenebrarum*; 1969, p. 105). (Fridugisus was a pupil of Alcuin of York, author of several grammatical treatises, so presumably he felt comfortable enough with his linguistic competence.)
5. Perhaps a tribute to Heidegger’s “das Nichts nichtet” (1929, p. 18), which Carnap famously stigmatized as vitiated precisely by “the error of

using the word ‘Nothing’ [*Nichts*] as a noun” (1931/1959, p. 231/71). The common way of translating Heidegger’s verb *nichtet* into English is ‘nihilates’ (as in the referenced translations by Hull and Crick, p. 369, or by Krell, p. 103). I personally prefer Pap’s rendering of the verb as ‘nothings’ (in his translation of Carnap’s article, where Heidegger’s passage is cited repeatedly), but I agree that ‘noths’ (from the pen of Geach, 1957, p. 10) is even better.

6. This is essentially a version of the “subtraction argument” originally put forward by Baldwin (1996), refined versions of which may be found in Rodriguez-Pereyra (1997), Efid and Stoneham (2005), and Lee (2016).
7. Objections to Baldwin’s original version of the subtraction argument came from Paseau (2002) and Lowe (2002), with a response in Rodriguez-Pereyra (2002). For more discussion, see the criticisms by Paseau (2006), Cameron (2007), Coggins (2010), and Hoffmann (2011) and the responses by Efid and Stoneham (2009) and Rodriguez-Pereyra (2013).
8. It is perhaps contentious whether a *vacuous* universal quantification should be true in the empty world. If p is false, one could argue that $\forall xp$ should also be false on the ground that vacuous quantification is redundant and, hence, omissible (Mostowski, 1951), just as one could argue that it should be true on the ground that its negation is equivalent to an existential quantification and, hence, false (Hailperin, 1953). Such was the controversy in the early days of inclusive logics. Even so, I agree that all *non-vacuous* quantification ought to count as true, and the statement at issue, ‘Everything exists’, is of this sort. It has the form ‘ $\forall xEx$ ’. And we need not treat ‘exists’ as a predicate to see this. If we agree with Quine that “to be is to be the value of a bound variable” (1939, p. 708), we can regard ‘ Ex ’ as a mere abbreviation for ‘ $\exists yx=y$ ’.
9. To be sure, this depends on the modal framework one assumes. The latter claim, which expresses a *de dicto* necessity ($\Box \exists x \exists y x=y$), would certainly be valid if one required all worlds to have a non-empty domain, and if one required all worlds to have the *same* non-empty domain, then the former and stronger claim, which expresses a *de re* necessity ($\exists x \Box \exists y x=y$), would be valid as well. However, such assumptions are optional (Kripke 1963), and in the present context they would obviously beg the question.
10. Precisely because all non-vacuous universal quantifications are (vacuously) true.
11. At least according to the standard theory of descriptions due to Russell (1905). There are of course alternatives. Some alternatives, broadly inspired by Meinong’s theory of intentionality (1902), would insist that all descriptions refer, albeit to entities that need not exist. See e.g. Jacqueline

- (1994). In the present context, such theories are evidently not an option. But there are also theories that depart from Russell in treating definite descriptions as *bona fide*, independently meaningful singular terms regardless of whether they refer at all—and that is certainly an option. See Lambert (1987).
12. Again the Quine-Buridan view, albeit applied to singular non-existence claims.
 13. The examples are from Fara (2015), though the general idea that ordinary proper names are common nouns, hence predicates, is older and goes back at least to Sloat (1969): “The syntactic proper nouns are a subclass of the countable nouns of English. Proper nouns permit the selection of essentially the same set of determiners as other countable nouns, differing materially only in that they require a zero allomorph of unstressed *the* when singular and when not preceded by a restrictive adjective or followed by a restrictive relative clause. Proper nouns, like other countable nouns, are freely pluralizable.” (p. 26) In fact, as Fara points out, in some languages proper names may even come with an overt definite article (e.g. Italian, French, Spanish, and even German). See Matushansky (2006) for relevant cross-linguistic data.
 14. As per the standard, Millian view: “Proper names are not connotative. They denote the individuals who are called by them; but they do not indicate or imply any attributes as belonging to those individuals.” (Mill 1843, vol. 1, p. 40)
 15. Russell thought this might be true of *all* ordinary names: “The name ‘Romulus’ is not really a name but a sort of truncated description [...] if you like, it is short for ‘the person who was called ‘Romulus’’. If it were really a name, the question of existence could not arise, because a name has got to name something or it is not a name” (1919a, p. 208). See also Russell (1919b), p. 174 and, of course, Quine (1948), esp. p. 27 (with further explanations in Quine 1950, pp. 218–219). On the relationship between this view and the conception of proper names as predicates, see Burge (1973) and the discussion in Bach (2015). Mill himself did not rule out the possibility that names can be used as predicates in this way; it’s just that, “when we predicate of anything its proper name [...] we do not, merely by doing so, convey to the hearer any information about them, except that those are their names” (1843, vol. 1, p. 44).
 16. As Quine acknowledged (1948, p. 21).
 17. Following Thomason (1976) and especially Kaplan (1979): insofar as any utterance of “I’m here” is bound to be true, this sentence would necessarily express a truth, even though it does not express a necessary truth for the reason that no one is bound to be at any particular place.

18. This is what Sidelle (1991) calls the “paradox of the answering machine”, though the same problem may of course arise in other contexts, e.g. written notes (Vision 1985), and was first raised by Kaplan himself (see 1989, p. 491, n. 12, a text written in 1977 and originally circulated in mimeograph). Indeed, similar worries arise with regard to all sorts of alleged logical truths involving indexicals (see Cohen and Michaelson 2013). Even “I do not exist”, or “I no longer exist”, may have true occurrences, e.g. in the context of a dead person’s will (a point noted in Salmon 1991, p. 176, n. 21 and fully elaborated e.g. in Predelli 2008).
19. “War is war” comes from Grice (1975, p. 52), who first discussed this phenomenon in connection with the first Maxim of Quantity (“Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange”, p. 45). The other cases are illustrative of the full extent of the phenomenon as discussed in the literature that followed. For an extensive list and tentative taxonomy, see e.g. Ward and Hirschberg (1991).
20. This one is from Yogy Berra, as first reported in Boswell (1977).
21. Exactly Grice’s diagnosis.
22. Leibniz’s question (*De rerum originatione radicali*; 1989, p. 151), which James called “the darkest of all philosophy” (1911, p. 46) and Heidegger “the first of all questions” (1953, p. 1), is actually more alive than ever. It made its way into contemporary analytic metaphysics through Nozick (1981) and Rescher (1984), and eventually van Inwagen (1996) and Lowe (1996), and is now the title topic of book-length monographs (e.g. Rundle 2004) and edited volumes (Goldschmidt 2013).
23. That ontology is really about the first question is the main point of Quine (1948). But the distinction between the two questions has a long history. Aristotle, for instance, was candid that we must not only seek the facts and the reasons why, but also if something is or is not *simpliciter*, “and having come to know that it is, we seek what it is (e.g.: Then what is a god? or What is a man?)” (*Posterior Analytics*, II, 1, 89b34–35; 1975, p. 48). Thomas Aquinas was equally explicit when he said that we must establish whether God exists (*an sit Deus*) before we can even ask what he is (*quid sit Deus*), indeed even if it turns out that we “cannot know clearly what he is” (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 2, 2, ad 3 and q. 2, 4, 2; 1964, pp. 11 and 31).
24. This is a classic worry. As Descartes famously put it, “According to the laws of true logic, we must never ask about the existence of anything [literally: *if it is*] until we first understand its essence [literally: *what it is*]” (*Primæ responsiones*, 141; 1984, vol. 2, p. 78). Even Aquinas, in some texts, might be read as expressing caution in this regard, as when

he writes that “I cannot know that I have chastity unless I know what chastity is” (*De Veritate*, q. 10, ar. 9, resp.; 1953, p. 50). For a full articulation of the worry, see Bottani (2014). For what it is worth, however, I think the worry can be resisted (Varzi 2011), even though I certainly endorse its weaker, semantic variant, as stated e.g. by Duns Scotus: “I never know of something ‘whether it is’ unless I have some *concept* of the thing of which I know that it is’ (*Ordinatio*, I, d. 3, q. 2, 11; 2016, pp. 43–44, my italics).

25. Yet another reference to Quine (1948), p. 21,

26. The “inventory” metaphor goes back to Broad (1923), p. 242.

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