

# Ontologese and Musical Nihilism: A Reply to Cameron

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*In a recent essay in this journal, Ross Cameron presents a novel solution to the problem of musical creation.<sup>1</sup> The solution is of the ‘using a sledgehammer to crack a nut’ variety, since side by side with a dissolution of the problem of musical creation, his approach, if successful, would yield a swift answer to pretty much every central question in the ontology of art, and, for that matter, to a wide variety of perennial metaphysical difficulties. Nothing of this magnitude should be nonchalantly swept aside. Unfortunately, Cameron’s approach does not survive close scrutiny.*

## Method: The Ontologese Red Herring

Cameron’s approach to the problem of musical creation is grounded on a nihilist premise in musical ontology: in a sense yet to be explained, so Cameron insists, there simply are no musical works. In the second section of this paper, I discuss the significance of Cameron’s thesis for musical ontology, and for metaphysics in general. In this section, I dwell on Cameron’s methodology in favour of his version of musical nihilism.

Musical works are not the only victims of Cameron’s strategy. His denial of existence (in a sense still to be clarified) explicitly reaches statues (pp. 297–304), complex objects (p. 302), and institutions such as the Supreme Court (pp. 309–312). Indeed, it is not difficult to envision how Cameron’s tactics could be applied to other sources of traditional metaphysical befuddlement, such as numbers, people, or propositions. Cameron does not give us positive reasons to accept that any of these alleged entities do not in fact exist, on a ‘proper understanding’ of failure to exist. But he does explain at length why adherence to his position is not as counterintuitive as it may seem. His strategy is to show that the non-existence (in the relevant sense) of works of music (or statues, institutions, etc.) is compatible with the truth of certain intuitively true sentences in vernacular English, such as ‘there are musical works (statues, institutions, etc.)’.

So, for instance, for Cameron ‘there are statues’ is ‘a true sentence of English’ (p. 300):

(1) ‘there are statues’ is true.

It is, furthermore, trivially amenable to disquotation:

(2) ‘there are statues’ is true iff there are statues.

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1 Ross P. Cameron, ‘There Are No Things That Are Musical Works’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 48, no. 3 (2008), pp. 295–314. All page numbers in the text refer to this paper.

But (1) and (2) apparently entail that there are statues, a conclusion seemingly at odds with Cameron's aims. Cameron concedes that the entailment holds, but denies any clash with his metaphysical claim:

My claim is that 'there are statues' is true but **there are no statues**; and there is no contradiction here, because the sentences are sentences of different languages. (p. 301)

The expression in bold type is 'in a different language' from the rest of the paragraph because, Cameron tells us, it is a sentence in *Ontologese*, rather than English.

Appeals to Ontologese are ubiquitous in Cameron's article. But it is utterly mysterious what their role is supposed to be. Consider the passage just quoted. It is expressed in a word salad that includes English expressions and expressions of another language. Stylistically, this is comparable to an article that is half in English and half in German, which would be bizarre, even if you were confident that your readers knew both languages, and that they could tell when you were switching from one to the other. Stylistic oddity aside, in Cameron's case, it had better be the case that we *do* know how sentences in Ontologese are to be understood, if passages such as the one I just quoted are to be intelligible. But if we do know that much about Ontologese, why not put forth the claims they encode in plain English?

Indeed, the ease with which the reader proceeds through Cameron's text suggests that these are *English* sentences in bold type: the Ontologese '**no**' simply means negation, and '**statues**' talks about statues. Cameron's use of bold for '**there are**', on the other hand, apparently merely plays the role of signalling an ontologically perspicuous 'mode of speech': Ontologese, we are told, is 'a language we use to describe how the world is at its fundamental level' (pp. 300–301). The relationship between 'there are' and '**there are**', and the related notion of a 'fundamental level' of reality, deserve closer scrutiny. For my purpose here the adjunct in the phrase I just cited would seem to do the job: '**there are no statues**' simply means what the sentence 'at the fundamental level there are no statues' means in English.

Be that as it may, since English sentences are presumably true or false depending on how the world is at the fundamental level, their truth-conditions must also be expressible by means of sentences aiming to describe that level—such as plain English sentences prefixed by 'at the fundamental level', Cameron's sentences in bold, or whatever other device one may deem to be suitable for these purposes. Let *S* be such an expression of the fundamental truth-conditions for the vernacular 'there are statues', so that

(3) 'there are statues' is true iff *S*

is a true biconditional. Given (2), *S* and 'there are statues' must be equivalent statements of the truth-conditions for the English sentence 'there are statues'. What, then, are the advantages of (3) over (2)? Consider a parallel in the philosophy of language. While debating the logical properties of a sentence such as 'John did not meet anybody', I detect in my audience a pernicious tendency to treat that sentence on a par with, say, 'John did not meet Jane'. I thus hasten to add that, although

- (4) 'John did not meet anybody' is true iff John did not meet anybody  
will do as a statement of the truth-conditions of 'John did not meet anybody',
- (5) there is no individual such that John met him/her

more perspicuously serves the function of unveiling its logical commitments. Although (5) and the sentence on the right-hand side of the biconditional in (4) both express the truth-conditions for ‘John did not meet anybody’, only the latter ‘wears its logical form on its sleeve’. A similar methodological point seems to be the core of Cameron’s strategy: although (2) is a perfectly appropriate statement of the requirements for the truth of (1), it is *S*, the sentence on the right-hand side of (3), that provides an ontologically perspicuous way of identifying the truth-maker of (1).

We will get to Cameron’s choice of *S* in the next section. What we know at this stage is that, whatever *S* turns out to be, it had better not entail ‘**there are statues**’ (or its English translation, presumably ‘at the fundamental level there are statues’). For if it did, ‘**there are no statues**’ would turn out to be false. The conclusion is that the truth-conditions of (1) may be spelled out in different ways, including (2), but that their ontologically perspicuous presentation does not entail the existence of statues at a fundamental level. Thus, what we are left with, when superfluous appeals to a specialized language and exhortations not to fall victim to subtle equivocations have been set aside, is a familiar strategy: an ‘analysis’ of problematic sentences is being suggested, which fails to carry the sort of ontological requirements apparently put forth by the surface structure of the *analysandum*. Ontologese does not play an essential role in this approach: whether anything is to be gained from Cameron’s position hinges, as usual, on the appropriateness of the analysis in question. So, is the analysis any good, and, if so, does it sweep away the problem of musical creation as swiftly as Cameron hopes?

### Substance: The Analysis

Whether Cameron’s strategy succeeds depends on two claims: (i) that (3) states the right conditions, i.e. that Cameron’s choice of *S* correctly identifies the truth-conditions for (1), and (ii) that ‘**there are no statues**’ may be true without falsifying *S*, i.e. that the fundamental level of the world may correctly be described by *S* without it being the case that, at the fundamental level, there are statues. (Similarly, of course, for parallel instances about musical works, the Supreme Court, etc.)

As for (ii), there is no argument in sight in Cameron’s essay that *guarantees* this claim. In fact, his explicit conclusion in this respect rests satisfied with the assurance that

the point for today is simply that fundamental ontology *need not* contain distinct entities with distinct powers to make sentences of English [such as ‘Michelangelo’s *David* exists’, ‘musical works exist’, or ‘The Supreme Court can do X’] true. (p. 312)

But Cameron’s ‘need not’ is unjustified. Let *S* be the analysis for (1) (his example is in Ontologese, ‘**there are simples that are arranged statue shaped**’, p. 301), and let us grant that nothing in its surface form logically entails the English sentence ‘at the fundamental level there are statues’, or, if you prefer, the Ontologese sentence ‘**there are statues**’. But this much is by no means sufficient to ensure that it is metaphysically possible that both *S* and ‘**there are no statues**’ are true. For clearly the premise that *S*<sub>1</sub> does not entail *S*<sub>2</sub> is by no means sufficient for the conclusion that, for some metaphysically possible world *w*, both *S*<sub>1</sub> and *not S*<sub>2</sub> are true descriptions of *w*. (A parallel: ‘NN exists’ does not entail ‘x

and  $y$  once existed', where  $x$  and  $y$  are the sperm and egg from which NN originated. Yet, in every possible world in which NN exists, it must be the case that  $x$  and  $y$  also existed.)

In this sense, Cameron's conclusion, even on the assumption that his analysis is correct, ought to remain satisfied with a rather modest conclusion: fundamental ontology need not contain special entities *in order to provide appropriate truth-conditions for certain English sentences*. Although modest, this conclusion may perhaps not be insignificant, and would arguably free the already nihilistically inclined ontologist from certain truth-conditional worries. However, others may find consolation in the fact that, even if an intuition that a new entity resulted from Michelangelo's activity may perhaps not withstand rigorous philosophical scrutiny, it is untouched by Cameron's instructions for unveiling the fundamental commitments of the English sentence 'Michelangelo's *David* exists'.

Be that as it may, even the aforementioned 'more modest' claim would collapse if Cameron's proposals were independently incorrect: what is needed is that, fundamental or not, what Cameron suggests may indeed occur within a truth-conditional account of certain vernacular sentences. When it comes to works of music, what we are told (this time in plain English) is that

[i]n order to make ['there are musical works'] true the world need only contain objects which, at the time of utterance, play a certain role. (p. 304)

These objects are abstract sound structures, and the role they play consists in 'getting indicated by composers, who lay down instructions for their performance' (pp. 305–306). In a nutshell, then, the truth-conditions for 'there are musical works' may for Cameron be perspicuously expressed by appealing to something along the lines of

- (6) at the fundamental level, there are abstract sound structures indicated by composers as instructions for performance

Is this anything to write home about?

(6) presents an eminently familiar view about musical composition, and an equally familiar view about the work–performance relation: composers 'select' certain sound-structures, which in turn impose correctness constraints on appropriate sound events. I remain unconvinced by either of these ideas, for reasons I present elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Yet, less controversial considerations may be pedagogically more appropriate at this stage, having to do with what are commonly called the 'identity conditions' for musical works. Consider an application of Cameron's strategy to a particular example, say Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony. For Cameron, the claim 'the *Eroica* exists' must be associated with the condition that

- (7) at the fundamental level, there exists a sound structure  $E$  indicated by Beethoven as instructions for performance

and since the association in question must be of such a nature that the biconditional

- (8) 'the *Eroica* exists' is true iff (7)

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2 Stefano Predelli, 'The Sound of the Concerto. Against the Invariantist Approach to Musical Ontology', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2006), pp. 144–162.

is metaphysically necessary, what is sanctioned by (7) must also be a sufficient condition for the truth of ‘the *Eroica* exists’ with respect to any metaphysically possible world. Yet, it seems easy to envision a possible world  $w$  in which (7) holds, but with respect to which the English sentence ‘the *Eroica* exists’ would be false. Imagine for instance that in  $w$  Beethoven’s act of indication of  $E$  occurred in a ‘musical vacuum’: in  $w$ ’s musical history, nothing of artistic significance takes place in the centuries predating Beethoven’s endeavour. Arguably, the English sentence ‘the *Eroica* exists’ is not true with respect to  $w$ , because the identity conditions of a musical work are sufficiently closely tied to what Jerrold Levinson calls ‘a context’, and to what Gregory Currie calls ‘the heuristics’ that lead to its composition.<sup>3</sup>

Levinson’s and Currie’s ontologies are controversial, but that is not the point. The point is that the argument I sketched above is eminently familiar, and remains utterly untouched by any thesis regarding what ‘fundamental truth-makers’ may be appropriate for this or that sentence. The point, in other words, is that we have to confront ontological issues independently of the choice of a perspicuous layout for this or that Tarskian biconditional. Once irrelevant distinctions between what is true in English and what is true in Ontologese have been set aside, we are back to square one.

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3 See J. Levinson, ‘What a Musical Work Is’, *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 77 (1980), pp. 5–28; and G. Currie, *An Ontology of Art* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1989).