

# From Ontological to Semantic Disagreement

Luca Morena\*

\* University of Bologna & University of Torino, Italy: luca.morena@labont.it

**Abstract.** Among Quine's main concerns in his "On What There Is", there was that of solving a *problem of expressibility* for ontological denials. His proposed solution to such a problem was, in a purely Carnapian vein, a shift of attention to the semantic features of ontological claims – what Quine called the strategy of "semantic ascent". Quine's relevant assumption is that talk about language is much less controversial than first-order talk of worldly items. My contention is that the semantic ascent strategy fails as a somehow "neutral" means to *clarify* ontological disputes and that it is better understood as a means to *resolve* or even *dissolve* such disputes.

## 1 Introduction

"There are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy", says Hamlet. But imagine for a moment you are Horatio and suppose you don't agree: you do *not* think that there is (or might be) something besides the entities countenanced in your philosophy. How would you express *that belief*? After all, how can you talk about and refer to what Hamlet believes in but you do not? Alternatively, suppose that upon reflection – maybe because Hamlet's theory is the best available theory – you are somehow led to believe what Hamlet says, but you still feel uneasy with such a belief. Then, you would believe that there are somehow things that you do not believe to exist. But is there any intelligible way of expressing such a belief?

Quine (1948) thought that both of these questions of *expressibility* could be answered in some way. As we shall see, the answer to the first question – perhaps the crucial concern of his "On What There Is" – is also, to a certain extent, the *only possible answer* given Quine's specific assumptions, and it amounts to providing a purely "semantic characterization" of ontological disagreement. On the other hand, the answer to the second question, for Quine, can be just a clear-cut and unmistakable *negative* answer, on pain of allowing for plainly inconsistent speech (for there is no intelligible and safe way for Quine to assert something like, "There are Fs and yet I don't believe there are Fs").

In what follows, I shall try to show how Quine's strategy in answering the first question of expressibility ("How can one *coherently* refer to things in whose existence he or she does not believe in?") – the strategy of "semantic ascent" – can in effect be exploited not only to answer positively to the *second* question, but is somehow exploited in *arguing* for those very ontological views that are Quine's main polemical targets. To make things as clear as possible, I shall distinguish between four different views of ontological disagreement, and spell out the sense in which the last three of them share in the end the same underlying dialectical strategy

– i.e. a shift of the subject of the disagreement from ontology to language. My contention is that such a strategy of semantic ascent is better understood as a means to *resolve* or even *dissolve* ontological disputes, rather than as a somehow “neutral” means to *clarify* this kind of disagreements.

## 2 A Problem of Expressibility

Quine identifies at least two compelling reasons “for operating on a semantical plane” in an ontological debate<sup>1</sup>:

i) “One reason is to escape from the predicament [...] of not being able to admit that there are things which McX countenances and I do not. So long as I adhere to my ontology, as opposed to McX’s, I cannot allow my bound variables to refer to entities which belong to McX’s ontology and not mine. I can, however, consistently describe our disagreement by characterizing the statements which McX affirms.”

ii) “Another reason for withdrawing to a semantical plane is to find common ground on which to argue. Disagreement in ontology involves basic disagreement in conceptual schemes; yet McX and I, despite these basic disagreements, find that our conceptual schemes converge sufficiently in their intermediate and upper ramifications to enable us to communicate successfully on such topics as politics, weather, and, in particular language. In so far as our basic controversy over ontology can be translated upward into a semantical controversy about words and what to do with them, the collapse of controversy into question-begging may be delayed.”

The first reason Quine identifies is that in expressing an ontological disagreement one might express *self-defeating* claims such as “There are things that you countenance but I do not”. Of course, *as it stands*, such a claim is far from being obviously self-defeating. A given statement is self-defeating to the extent that it defeats the very aim it is designed to serve. In this sense, “Thank God for atheism” is unmistakably self-defeating. But in order to construe the statement “There are things that you countenance but I do not” as a self-defeating one, one has to assign a particular “ontological responsibility” to phrases such as “there are” or “something”, namely to what in logical jargon are called the idioms of existential quantification. Quine’s notion of “ontological commitment”, in effect, brings with it such an idea of ontological responsibility as regards our idioms of quantification. Things can be made even clearer if we put the matter in terms of *belief*, for some kind of belief is what “ontological commitment” seems to come down to<sup>2</sup>. Then in asserting a statement such as “There

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<sup>1</sup> Quine (1948, p. 16).

<sup>2</sup> van Inwagen (2004) has given a rather clear formulation of such a correlation between ontological commitment and ordinary belief in Quine’s account: “According to Quine, the problem of deciding what to believe about what there is is a very straightforward special case of the problem of deciding what to believe. [...] If we want to decide whether to believe about the existence of properties – Quine tells us – we should examine the beliefs that we already have, and see whether any of them commits us to the existence of properties. If any does, then we have a reason to believe in the existence of properties: it is whatever reason we had for accepting the belief that commits us to the existence of

are things that you countenance but I do not” one would just assert something like the Moorean-sounding, “I believe that there are things in whose existence I don’t believe”.

The second, related reason to operate on a semantic level that Quine identifies is somewhat Carnapian. Namely, it is the idea that talk about language constitutes a fairly “common ground on which to argue”. On Quine’s picture, in effect, in disagreeing about ontology we may, more or less inadvertently, slip into equivocation and question begging, precisely because of the aforementioned problem of expressibility. Quine’s relevant assumption here is that talk about language is much less controversial than first-order talk of worldly items. This isn’t in general true, I believe. However, as we shall see, the problem is that the semantic ascent strategy is bound to fail as a “neutral” means to clarify ontological disputes, for it is largely used as a means to resolve or dissolve such disputes. But let us now review Quine’s reasons in more detail, and let us take into account some of their more significant consequences.

### 3 The Naïve View

Let us begin by taking into consideration Quine’s first reason to withdraw to the semantic plane in ontological debates. Such a reason, as I have already said, has to do with the very possibility of *expressing disagreement*. Quine’s worry is due to the apparent conflict between what looks like a plausible way to understand the truth-making underpinnings of existential claims and what appears to be a rather uncontroversial way to characterize ontological debate. We might reconstruct Quine’s reasoning as follows. Suppose, for the sake of explanation, that among the things that Hamlet believes inhabit Heaven there is Pegasus; and suppose that Horatio doesn’t believe that there is any such thing. A prima facie plausible way to describe how they might express their ontological beliefs in such a disagreement – call it the “Naïve View of Ontological Disagreement” – seems to be the following<sup>3</sup>:

**[Naïve View of Ontological Disagreement]** “Pegasus exists” is such that (i) it can be used by Hamlet to express that he believes in the existence of Pegasus (ii) its negation can be used by Horatio to express that he does not believe in the existence of Pegasus

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properties – plus the *general intellectual requirement that if one becomes aware that one’s belief that p commits one to the further belief that q, then one should either believe that q or cease to believe that p.* (p.9, italics mine)

<sup>3</sup> This way of reconstructing Quine’s reasoning is partly founded on some illuminating remarks I found in B. Hellie’s unpublished paper *On What Exists*.

The Naïve View accounts for the intuition that the disagreement between Horatio and Hamlet is *about* Pegasus. More precisely, by saying “Pegasus exists” Hamlet would be talking about Pegasus and by saying “Pegasus does not exist” Horatio would be talking about Pegasus as well. Pegasus indeed is the *object of their debate*. This is what happens in any ordinary disagreement, or at least so it seems<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the Naïve View seems also to account for the intuition that Hamlet’s and Horatio’s choice of words is the most straightforward in order to express their own views about the matter in question. In other words, there seems to be no apparent reasons for them to choose a different way to express their opinions. According to Quine, however, a plausible case can be made to the effect that such a characterization is not as uncontroversial as it might seem at a first glance.

#### 4 The Quinean View

In particular, “Pegasus does not exist” *cannot* be used by Horatio to express that he does not believe in the existence of Pegasus. In effect, in order for this kind of assertions to be *meaningful*, it seems that the name or denoting phrase that features in them must succeed in picking out *something*. But if “Pegasus” succeeds in picking out something, then what it succeeds in picking out has, after all, some *measure* of existence, and “Pegasus doesn’t exist” will be then false. This is a genuine puzzle – and one with a quite long historical pedigree – so, according to Quine, something in such a picture must be given up. Otherwise, Horatio would find himself in a somewhat puzzling rhetorical disadvantage for he simply cannot disagree with Hamlet.

Following the path traced by Russell (1905; 1918), Quine simply denies that existential denials like “Pegasus does not exist” have a *subject-predicate form*. Indeed, he thinks that Russell’s theory of descriptions has clearly and definitively showed that reference to the very items whose existence is denied in negative existential claims is in the end *not* essential in making such claims. For we can meaningfully use apparently denoting phrases without supposing that there be any corresponding entities. Such apparent denoting phrases can indeed be paraphrased “in context” as “incomplete symbols” that disappear as soon as one reveals the *deep semantic structure* of the sentences in which they feature. The Naïve View of Ontological Disagreement should be then emended as follows:

**[Quinean View of Ontological Disagreement]:** “Pegasus exists” is such that (i) it can be used by Hamlet to say that he believes in the existence of Pegasus, provided that such a claim is regimented as  $\exists x(x \text{ pegasizes})$ , (ii) its negation can be used by Horatio to say that he does not believe in the existence of Pegasus, pro-

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, if I say that wine is good for your health, whereas you say that this is not the case, our disagreement is certainly about wine (we might want to say that it is also about other things such as health, goodness etc. but it goes without saying that the parties to such a dispute would take themselves as discussing about wine and its properties). The analogy is quite straightforward. Just like you are right and I am wrong if and only if there is something that is wine and has not the property of being healthy; analogously, Horatio would be right and Hamlet would be wrong if and only if there is something that is Pegasus and has not the property of existing.

vided that such a denial is regimented as  $\neg\exists x(x \text{ pegasizes})$ .

On the Quinean View, “Pegasus does not exist” can be used by Horatio to express his disagreement with Hamlet, because his denial, as it is now formulated, does not lead him to a contradictory conclusion anymore. From the first order formula “ $\neg\exists x(x \text{ pegasizes})$ ” we cannot derive that there is something that does not exist, but simply that none of the existing things has the properties that Pegasus is thought to have.

## 5 The Inflationist View

But why don't think just that Horatio might in the end be able to refer to and talk about things in whose existence he does not believe? In order to give an affirmative answer to such a question, one must seriously entertain the possibility that an item might *be* the value of a variable in Hamlet's domain and yet *not exist*, i.e., not be the value of a variable in Horatio's own domain. This looks like a quite plausible characterization of their disagreement, but as we just saw, on Quine's account such a characterization leads straight to contradiction. The only other option to avoid such a contradiction amounts to postulating some sort of *ambiguity* in our notion of existence, and this is something that Quine simply finds utterly unintelligible. Quine firmly refuses the idea to the effect that “exist” might have an equivocal meaning, and indeed views a disagreement about this as a *merely verbal* dispute. In fact, Quine disambiguates between the (alleged) alternative meanings by choosing for himself the word “is”<sup>5</sup>, so that *his* sense of existence should be identified with nothing but the “weakest” of the senses of existence endorsed by the (not so) imaginary philosopher Wyman<sup>6</sup>, namely what, by Wyman's own lights, would be the most *unrestricted* sense – the sense in which whatever can be thought of or referred to, by any means, is said to exist.

However, non-fictitious advocates of such a view would just insist that what Quine is really doing here is *equivocating*. For what *he* takes to be the most unrestricted sense, is just the *restricted* sense by their lights, namely the sense in which quantification expresses only *actual* existence. In other words, such philosophers would argue, the extension of the notion of actual existence constitutes only a proper subset of the universe of discourse in *their* semantic framework. And this may be stated also as a difference between *being* and *existence*.

Such an idea has been famously central to the works of Alexius Meinong (1904), and has been revived by philosophers such as Routley (1980) and Parsons (1985). Call the view of ontological disagreement that follows from the idea that our notion of existence is ambiguous the “Inflationist View”:

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis (1990) wonderfully expands on these Quinean themes.

<sup>6</sup> “Wyman, by the way, is one of those philosophers who have united in ruining the good old word “exist” [...] in an ill-conceived effort to appear agreeable, genially grants us the nonexistence of Pegasus and then, contrary to what *we* meant by nonexistence of Pegasus, insists that Pegasus is. Existence is one thing, he says, and subsistence is another. The only way I know of coping with this obfuscation of issues is to give Wyman the word “exist”. I'll try not to use it again; I still have “is”. (1948, p. 3)

**[Inflationist View of Ontological Disagreement]** “Pegasus exists” is such that (i) it can be used by Hamlet to say that he believes in the *actual* existence of Pegasus (ii) its negation can be used by Horatio to say that he does not believe in the *actual* existence of Pegasus

The problem of expressibility is *dissolved* as long as what follows from Horatio’s denial is just that Pegasus is a *possible* object whose *actual* existence is denied. Notice, however, that it is still according to a Quinean standard of ontological commitment that the inflationist is admitting all sorts of non-actual objects. That is, it is still according to Quine’s view on ontological commitment (and responsibility) that such a view might be qualified as “inflationary”. The Inflationist seems committed to the idea that, whether possible or actual, anything in her domain of discourse enjoys *some kind* of existence. This observation is worth of attention, since advocates of the “Deflationist View” – in a certain sense the *mirror-view* of the inflationist one, given their common appeal to “quantificational ambiguity” – want to escape, as we shall see, any charge of inflationism precisely by denying the Quinean standard of ontological commitment.

## 6 Going Semantic

Let us take stock now. And let us review the dialectical strategies that underlie the Quinean and Inflationist Views of ontological disagreement in their attempt to resolve (or dissolve) the alleged problem of expressibility. As it turns out, they are all of the same kind, namely they are strategies that typically operate on a *semantic level*. The *apparent* reason for operating on such a level is that of avoiding equivocation and/or contradictory talk in ontological disputes; but the *genuine* reason for “going semantic” seems that of *arguing for* determinate ontological positions. In other words, Quine’s concern in “On What There Is”, was – to borrow Morton White’s (1951, p. 374) nice phrase – that of the “clearist”, namely that of the philosopher apparently engaged in the enterprise of clarifying the way we talk but surreptitiously advocating an *eliminativist* view. The Quinean appeal to a semantic characterization of ontological talk as a means to clarify ontological dispute appears, then, somewhat suspect. For ontological disagreement is possible (i.e. expressible) for Quine only at *his* semantic conditions.

Despite the appearances, on the other hand, the Inflationist alternative makes a somewhat analogous shift from disagreement about what there is to disagreement about the *meaning* of certain phrases. The inflationist takes the superficial grammatical form at face value. “Pegasus” does refer to something, namely to a possible object. Hence, in taking for granted the *prima facie* semantics of existential claims the inflationist is – as a matter of fact – *taking stance on semantic matters*. Moreover, she escapes charges of contradictory talk by means of a further move: i.e. by postulating an ambiguity in what *she* means with expressions such as “there is” and “exists”.

Even if the Quinean and the Inflationist approaches look as completely different accounts of the problem of expressibility, they both exploit the very same strategy, i.e. *non-neutral* forms of semantic ascent. As a result, on Quine’s view, for instance, we can disagree about whether there is something with all the Pegasus-properties, but we cannot say that “Pegasus” refers to a possible object. On the inflationist view, on

the other hand, we can disagree about whether Pegasus is an actual object, but still we cannot deny *being* to Pegasus.

The analysis of negative existentials – and the resulting contrast between a view such as Quine’s and a view such as the Inflationist one – is indeed perfectly illustrative of how the implicit or explicit shift to a semantic level in ontological debate has an *argumentative* function, as long as such a shift is intended to convey “introductionist”<sup>7</sup> and eliminativist positions (or “realist” and “antirealist” positions, as you might say).

According to the picture I’m trying to suggest, in an ontological disagreement, say, about the existence of “ordinary objects”, it won’t then be enough for a believer in their existence to merely state her view by asserting, “There is a round table in the office”. This will not suffice to commit her to the existence of tables, for her claim, as Carnap would have it, is somehow “incomplete”<sup>8</sup>. She will be committed to the existence of such entities only *after* having *qualified* her claim to the effect that it has to be interpreted at face value, so that it has the appropriate truth-conditions according to which such entities must exist for the statement in question to be true<sup>9</sup>. To put it in a more familiar terminology, before one is allowed to read off any ontological commitment from a given claim, one must somehow establish how to interpret this very claim. The main reason for this resides in the fact that *eliminativist challenges* – i.e. the expressions of disagreement about the existence of a given sort of entity – enter the “playfield” precisely in relation to the interpretation of the anti-eliminativist’s claims. This is why Quine questions the naïve semantics of negative existentials: the problem of expressibility is nothing but a problem with the alleged *ontological consequences* of a given talk.

In other words, familiar eliminativist moves seems to make sense *only* on the “semantical plane” or at the *formal level*, to use Carnap’s terminology. Precisely because eliminativists argue to the effect that, in light of a *correct interpretation* of the language concerned, there is nothing which is referred to or described in *material* talk, say, of *Fs*. Typically, then, disbelievers in the existence of some kind of objects will provide a story about how claims apparently about them should be interpreted in ways that do not carry any commitment to such things. The dispute, once it has reached such a stage – i.e. the semantical plane or formal level – seems somehow bound to be carried on by its participants at this very same stage. Thus, believers in the existence of *Fs* would answer – indeed they look as they are somehow *forced* to answer – to the eliminativist challenge by *arguing for the correctness* of their (*material*) talk about *Fs*. Once the *semantic question* is raised, it seems, there appears to be no easy way out for believers in the existence of certain kind of entities who are willing to refuse to play the game<sup>10</sup>, so to speak. In meaning what they say,

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<sup>7</sup> The terminology is borrowed from Carrara and Varzi (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Carnap (1935, p. 77)

<sup>9</sup> Of course, in the case of inflationist positions there may be the further semantic qualification concerning the *sense* of “existence” in question.

<sup>10</sup> Compare Lewis (1996, p. 559): “No matter how far-fetched a certain possibility may be, no matter how properly we might have ignored it in some other context, if in *this* context we are not in fact ignoring it but attending to it, then for us now it is a relevant alternative. It is in the contextually determined domain.” That is, any possibility that one actually attends to cannot be properly ignored (this is what Lewis calls the “Rule of Attention”).

such believers are, as a matter of fact, undertaking the commitment to stick with what is implied by a *literal* understanding of their assertions<sup>11</sup>.

## 7 The Deflationist View

The semantic ascent strategy's underlying assumption is that we can make sense of a disagreement only *within* a shared (by the disputants) semantic framework. In order to avoid equivocation and contradictory talk in a given disagreement, we need to clarify what parties to such a dispute mean with their words. Generally speaking, the "clearist" intentions seem entirely justified, for there could be no genuine disagreement without reciprocal understanding. However, in an *ontological* disagreement things become somewhat trickier, given the use of "non-neutral" semantic ascent strategies, such as those explicitly advocated by Quine and implicitly presupposed by the Inflationists. For the proposed clarifications simply boil down to providing interpretations of the claims in question that supports specific ontological views (somehow begging the question in relation to other ontological positions). But then how can parties to an ontological disagreement be in the end able to avoid equivocation and question begging?

An answer to such a question might be that of taking the ontological consequences of a given talk *less seriously*. The view I shall define as the "Deflationist View" is meant to provide such an ontologically innocent semantic framework. Such a view is intended as a reasonable way to accept both the Naïve View and its strict consequences – without accepting however their ontological costs. For the sake of explanation, I shall focus on a promising version of this view that has been recently advocated by Thomas Hofweber (2000; 2005).

Hofweber does not deny that quantifiers often function as Quine says they do, namely as carrying ontological commitment to *objects*. For instance, Hofweber maintains, a sentence like "Something ate my cheese" can be true only if there is some "object or entity that ate the speaker's cheese." In this sense, there seems to be "no doubt that there is a close connection between the truth of some quantified statements and ontology" (2005, p. 268). In particular, Hofweber holds that we should distinguish between *two different ways* in which quantifiers actually function in natural language. This, again, amounts to postulating some form of ambiguity in the meaning of "existence". The first way our quantifiers may function is the one that is spelled out by the *objectual* interpretation, i.e. the interpretation under which, for instance, the sentence "something ate my cheese" "will only be true if reality contains an object or entity that ate the speaker's cheese" (2005, p. 268). Such an interpretation, Hofweber points out, "imposes some conditions on the domain of entities that our discourse is about". (2005, p. 271), and this is why he calls it the "domain conditions" reading. In other words, on such a reading, when we quantify we somehow try to reach out, so to speak, the sphere of our language, so that the success or failure of such an attempt is strictly dependent on the actual composition of such an

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<sup>11</sup> Bigelow and Pargetter (1991, p. 35) have suggested that realists can escape the game set out by antirealists, for they "are distinguished, ultimately, by what they do *not* say, by refusing to give a deflationary [antirealist] account of what they have been saying to date". However, as Psillos (2005, p. 45) has rightly emphasized, "choosing *not* to say something that *could* be said is no less a semantic matter than saying it".



“external” domain of entities. However, there is a further function that quantifiers can have according to Hofweber. They can be used in what he calls the “inferential role”. On such a role what typically counts is not the external domain of entities, but rather the *communicative function* of quantifiers. For instance, he explains,

One of the uses we have for quantifiers is to communicate information that is in certain respects lacking with sentences that have quantifiers in them, and apparently have them essentially (given the information we have). (2005, p. 271)

The example that Hofweber asks us to consider in support of such a claim is the case in which one might utter a quantified statement like the following:

- There is someone that Fred admires very much, and that person is also admired by many detectives

despite the fact that one has forgotten that the detective in question is Sherlock Holmes. As it happens, there is no such person “out there”. So, on the objectual interpretation (the “domain condition” reading), the sentence simply turns out false. But Hofweber points out that it *still* has a true reading – the reading in which the quantifier is regarded as a mere “placeholder” for the forgotten part of the information<sup>12</sup>. On the inferential role reading of quantifiers the concern is somehow wholly *internal* to the sphere of language spoken by the relevant speaker, for what counts are the inferential relations between statements.

So far, so good. But how all this is meant to apply in view of a Deflationist account of ontological debate, and in particular in relation to the problem of expressibility? Hofweber’s account seems to make room for the possibility of sticking to the Naïve View, while dissolving the problem of expressibility that concerned Quine so much. For the inference from the negative existential claim “Pegasus does not exist” to “There is something that does not exist” would be both trivial and *ontologically unloaded*, precisely because the reading of the quantifier in such a case *should* be the “inferential role” reading<sup>13</sup>. Then the Deflationist View would roughly amount to a *qualified* version of the Naïve View:

**[Deflationist View of Ontological Disagreement]** “Pegasus exists” is such that (i) it can be used by Hamlet to say that he believes in the existence of Pegasus (ii) its

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, he argues that “if we had not forgotten who it was, we could have used a name or some other term for this person instead of the quantifier. But given that we forgot we have to use a quantifier to communicate less than the complete information. Furthermore, it doesn’t matter here whether or not the person admired is real and exists. In either case we can get useful information out of what we know about Fred. Whether the person admired is real is not of importance here. The quantifier has to be a placeholder no matter what the original term was, whether or not it referred to some entity, failed to refer, or had some completely different function” (2005, p. 272).

<sup>13</sup> “In their internal use the inference from ‘F (t)’ to ‘F (Something)’ is always and trivially valid, no matter what ‘t’ is. Quantifiers in their internal reading are not directly related to ontological issues, i.e., the truth of ‘F (something)’ or ‘Something is F’ with the quantifier in its internal use, does not by itself settle the ontological question about Fs. It pushes the issue back to the quantifier free instances.” (2005, p. 274).

negation can be used by Horatio to say that he does not believe in the existence of Pegasus (provided that the quantifier featuring in the quantified statement “There is something that does not exist” that follows from the ontological denial is construed in its *internal – ontologically innocent – reading*).

According to Hofweber, both Quine, in envisaging a problem of expressibility, and Inflationists, in inflating the domain of entities with non-existent objects, make just “the mistake of collapsing this [internal] use of quantifiers into the domain conditions use” (2000, p. 23). However, one might argue against such a deflationist account from both the Quinean and the Inflationist perspectives.

The first objection amounts to pointing out that where Hofweber sees a difference in meaning (agreeing on this with the Inflationists, at least on the surface), a Quinean might be in its own right in seeing none. For such a philosopher what Hofweber calls a “collapsing” of uses would be, in fact, just a “coinciding” of uses. In the Quinean picture, the inferential role is strictly associated to the domain conditions and there’s simply no way one can *alleviate* the ontological burden of his or her quantifications. The second objection might be done along the same lines, but this time from the Inflationist’s standpoint: the latter, as Hofweber himself acknowledges (2000, p. 26), might account for the inferential role by claiming that it is really a case of imposing domain conditions on a larger domain, assuming that there are no empty names in our language. To both such objections, Hofweber somehow replies by appealing to a very plausible picture of how our language actually functions. A picture in which what he calls “partiality”, namely the possibility of reference-failure, and, most importantly, of *semantic underspecification* – a more radical form of “context-sensitivity” than the one advocated by Inflationists with their appeal to quantifier restriction – are inescapable features of our speech, going as far as to affect our idioms of quantification.

## 8 Literalism vs. Nonliteralism

However, a further problem has to do with such a semantic picture and its consequences as to the very *possibility* of ontological disputes. For even if Hofweber’s account still allows for an “ontological” reading of quantifiers (one might even talk of such use as the “literal reading”) – thus apparently allowing *ipso facto* for meaningful ontological disagreements – there would be always room for *questioning whether one’s use of quantifiers qualifies in the end as ontologically loaded or ontologically unloaded*. One might argue that precisely *as a result of* the pervasivity of semantic underspecification that Hofweber himself has compellingly illustrated, there might *not* be a principled way to tell the ontologically loaded uses from the ontologically unloaded uses. Philosophers such as Steve Yablo (1998, 2000, 2001), for instance, go as far as claiming that there is no way to purge the *metaphorical* or *fictional* features from our “serious” discourses, so that there might be in effect no reliable standards for reading off ontological commitments from quantified statements, for one can never be sure as to whether these statements has to be interpreted in a *literal* or in a *non-literal* spirit.

The problem with the Deflationist solution is that the very search for “ontologically neutral” ways of expressing our views seems to lead straight to *deflating the disagreement itself*, for no parties to the dispute could then safely draw inferences as

to the ontological beliefs of the other disputants just from what they say. So how can the believers in the possibility of ontological disagreement react to such a picture?

The choice is somehow mandatory. They will react by providing a *different semantic story*, a story that makes room for the possibility of limiting the seemingly pervasive effects of semantic underspecification, and in which, there are indeed clear cases of *strict* and *literal* talk. As it might be clear, the pattern here is exactly the same as the one that we have identified in the case of the ontological disagreement between believers and disbelievers in the existence of some kind of entities. The only difference is that the *level* of the disagreement has changed: now the dispute has turned into a *metaontological* disagreement between believers and disbelievers in the possibility of ontological disagreement itself. While, on the one hand, such believers will advocate a broad semantic picture that we may define as a “*literalist*” picture of ontological discourse; disbelievers will appeal to an opposite – “*non-literalist*” – account<sup>14</sup>. One can regard, then, the shift to the “*semantical plane*” not only as a dialectical move *within* first-order ontological debates, but also as a dialectical move *within* the second-order controversy about the nature of ontological debates. Interestingly, one might even distinguish between *restricted* and *unrestricted* forms of literalism and nonliteralism. For instance, Quine’s view in relation to *denoting phrases* would qualify as a “*restricted*” form of nonliteralism. In spite of this, however, Quine’s view about ontological commitment seems founded on a form of literalism. According to Quine, in effect, the literal interpretation of quantifiers should be considered as the *default* interpretation when it comes to serious ontological reflection – at least as long as one cannot replace the ontologically committing talk with an ontologically innocent paraphrase. Only in this latter case, in fact, the quantification along with its supposed commitment might count, and excused, – somehow “*retrospectively*” – as a mere *façon de parler*<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> The literalist picture may exploit notions such as Lewis’ (1983) “*eligibility of the referent*”. See Sider (2007) for its application in metaontology. According to Sider, just as the world is structured in natural kinds that function as “*referential magnets*” for the meaning of our natural kind terms, thus the world “*comes equipped with logical joints*” that function as referential magnets for the meaning of our quantifiers. The nonliteralist picture may make appeal, on the other hand, to fictional talk and “*games of make-believe*”. Yablo (2001, p. 233) states his semantic challenge to the Quinean program in ontology as follows: “*To determine our commitments, we need to be able to ferret out all traces of non-literality in our assertions. If there is no feasible project of doing that, then there is no feasible project of Quinean ontology*” (italics mine).

<sup>15</sup> In “*Existence and Quantification*”, Quine makes this point rather clearly: “[The nominalist] will agree that there are primes between 10 and 20, when we are talking arithmetic and not philosophy. When we turn to philosophy he will condone that usage as a *mere manner of speaking*, and offer the paraphrase. Similar remarks apply to us; many of our casual remarks in the “*there are*” form would want dusting up when our thoughts turn *seriously* ontological. Each time, if a point is made of it, the burden is of course on us to *paraphrase or retract*” (1969, pp. 99-100; italics mine).

## 8 Conclusion

It seems, then, that ontological debates can be settled only insofar as the semantic dispute between literalists and nonliteralists has been settled<sup>16</sup>. I think there is something true about this, but nothing we should worry about. For this does not mean that ontological issues entirely turn on semantic issues. What exists does certainly not depend on the language we speak, but what we can say and how we express disagreement about what exists does indeed depend on the language we speak. Determining our ontological beliefs is, to be sure, a highly complex theoretical endeavor that crucially requires a whole host of considerations about what parts of our discourse convey such beliefs and how they manage to do so, and the merits of such considerations, of course, will be, in turn and somehow inevitably, debatable.

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed criticism of this sort of view see Devitt (1991, pp. 50ff). Devitt argues that in order to establish ontological commitment we don't have to appeal to any semantic theory whatsoever, for *ordinary interpretation and understanding* would perfectly do the job. The point, however, is to figure out exactly what ordinary interpretation and understanding amount to. Moreover taking them for granted amounts to choosing a semantic theory after all, namely, in Devitt's case, a realist (“correspondentist”) semantic account. For a similar criticism, see Psillos (2005).

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