

# Ontology

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## Philosophical Concept

The word 'ontology' is used to refer to philosophical investigation of existence, or being. Such investigation may be directed towards the concept of being, asking what 'being' means, or what it is for something to exist; it may also (or instead) be concerned with the question 'what exists?', or 'what general sorts of thing are there?' It is common to speak of a philosopher's ontology, meaning the kinds of thing they take to exist, or the ontology of a theory, meaning the things that would have to exist for that theory to be true.

### 1. Existence and being

Since so many central debates of philosophy concern what types of things exist, scrutiny of the arguments used in them was bound to lead to investigation of the concept of existence and its logic. The most famous case of this kind is the Ontological Argument for the existence of God, and one of the most famous moves in the ensuing debate is Kant's claim that existence is not a property or predicate of existing things: 'cats exist' clearly tells us something, but it does not tell us of things which, in addition to being furry, feline and fleet of foot, have the further property of existence (see God, arguments for the existence of §§2–3; Existence).

This point, with which modern logic agrees, may teach us to formulate 'cats exist' as 'there are things which are cats' – in which it doesn't even look as if existence is functioning as a predicate. But many will think that this does not take us very far. It does not tell us how to describe the difference between a world in which cats exist and one in which they do not – other than by repeating the formula 'there are cats'; it will not advance our understanding of what it is for something to exist. Nor will it touch the somewhat dizzying question 'why does anything exist, rather than nothing?'.

Some philosophers, however, have taken an interest in existence or 'being' (as it tends to appear in their works or in the English translations), not because it appears as part of so many philosophical claims but because they take it for the central concept of philosophy. The most prominent examples are, in antiquity, Parmenides, and in the twentieth century Martin Heidegger.

### 2. What is there?

In its characteristically philosophical form, this is not a question of detail (for example, are there mammoths?) but about the most general *kind* of thing: are there universals, or only particulars? – is there mind or spirit, or is there only matter? – is there anything that exists without being in space and time? Thus the debate on the first of these questions between Platonists and nominalists, or on the second between idealists and materialists, might in each case be described as a difference of opinion about the correct ontology. So might the conflict over whether values are objective aspects of reality, or rather ‘in the eye of the beholder’, a matter of how we react to things rather than the things themselves (see Emotivism; Projectivism).

The questions ‘What kinds of thing *ultimately* exist?’ or ‘... *really* exist?’ or ‘... exist *in themselves*?’ are even more characteristically philosophical forms of the general ontological question. To understand what usually lies behind these additional terms one needs a grasp of (1) the concept of a *reduction* and (2) the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves. *Reduction*. Berkeley famously claimed that material objects were just collections of ‘ideas’ (see Berkeley, G. §3). He did not mean that there were no chairs or tables, but that such things did not have a material, non-mental component; what really existed was all mental. There are spirits and their ideas, and we speak of chairs and so on when the latter occur in familiar, stable groupings. In modern terminology, he was claiming that material objects can be *reduced to* ideas. There are other common examples. In political discourse we often speak of what a particular state has done – but without having to suppose that there are such things as states distinct from the individual people who compose them. A once-popular thesis about the nature of mind was that there is nothing but bodies and their behaviour, and that words apparently naming mental states and happenings are just convenient ways of indicating types of behaviour (see Behaviourism, analytic; Reductionism in the philosophy of mind).

*Things-in-themselves*. We may distinguish between the way a thing appears, which will depend partly on the faculties and situation of whoever is perceiving it, and the way it is, independently of how anyone perceives it. The latter is the thing-in-itself. The terminology was made instantly famous by Kant, arguing that space and time (and therefore everything in space or time) were merely the way in which a non-spatiotemporal reality, things-in-themselves, appeared to humans (see Kant §5).

### **3. Ontological commitment**

The notion of ontological commitment has come to prominence in the second half of the twentieth century, mainly through the work of Quine (see Quine, W.V. §5). On Quine’s view the right guide to what exists is science, so that our best guide to what exists is our best current scientific theory: what exists is what acceptance of that theory commits us to.

But what is that? How do we determine what exists the acceptance of a given theory commits us to? Quine proposes a criterion, often summarized in the famous slogan ‘to be is to be the

value of a variable'. We are to see what types of thing are quantified over when the theory is stated in canonical form with predicate calculus as the underlying logic; the theory's ontological commitment is precisely to things of those types. This line of thought has given rise to much discussion (see Ontological commitment).

### **References and further reading**

Heidegger, M. (1953) *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. R. Manheim, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959.

(Heidegger's understanding of being. Readers new to Heidegger may not find this as introductory as the title had led them to hope.)

Kant, I. (1781, 1787) *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith, London: Macmillan, 1929.

(For the famous passage about existence not being a predicate, A598/B626–A601/B629; for the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves a good example is A45/B62–A46/B63.)

Nozick, R. (1981) *Philosophical Explanations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(Chapter 2, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' is at times a little bewildering, but good fun – for the more experienced reader.)

Quine, W.V. (1948) 'On What There is', in *From a Logical Point of View*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953.

(Classic paper on existence and ontological commitment. First published in the *Review of Metaphysics*.)

Williams, C.J.F. (1981) *What is Existence?*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

(Extensive discussion of all the issues arising out of the 'logic and language' – rather than the 'deep metaphysics' approach to existence.)