Privileged Ontology

Categories of Being

What Really is?

- Ἆρα τὸ ἀληθινὸν ὄντως ὂν λέγων;

- 'So, you mean what is true is what really is?' (*Sophist*, 240b3)

Levels and Degrees

'Talk of a "fundamental level of reality" pervades contemporary metaphysics. The fundamentalist starts with (a) a hierarchical picture of reality stratified into levels, adds (b) an assumption that there is a bottom level which is fundamental, and winds up, often enough, with (c) an ontological attitude according to which entities at the fundamental level are primarily real, while any remaining contingent entities are at best derivative, if real at all' (Schaffer, 2003).

Contrasting Ontologies

- An ontology might be:

  - Flat:

    - All beings exist on an ontological par.

  - Privileged:

    - Some beings are ontologically prior to other beings, in the sense that there are asymmetric dependency relations between them.

Some Examples

- Flat

  - Nihilism: only atoms and the void exist

  - Mad dog nihilism: the world is atomless gunk

  - Unrestricted Mereological Aggregation

- Privileged:

  - Brutish moderation

  - Substance-based category theories: substances are basic beings.

Governing Assumptions

- Being is univocal $=_{df}$ being is simple in the sense that there are not different kinds of being (as opposed to different kinds of beings).

  - Nothing subsists as opposed to exists.

  - Existing in a 'strict sense' is, as Lewis rightly contends, existing in some restricted sense or other.

- Being is non-scalar $=_{df}$ being does not admit of degrees

  - Being is binary; and nothing has more or less of it than anything else.

    - The following is not syntactically complete, meaningful, and assertoric:

      - 'x is more than y.'

        - We shall always want to know: 'x is more what than y?'

Some Observations

- Neither univocity nor non-scalarity commends any form of flat ontology.

- Setting aside intention-dependence, the question dividing flat and privileged ontologies is rather: do some kinds of entities depend ontologically on the beings of other kinds of beings?

    - Flat: No.

    - Privileged: Yes.

        - Non-basic beings depend ontologically upon basic beings.

Basic vs. Non-Basic Beings

- Two Approaches:

  - Non-basic beings are *determined* by basic beings.

  - Non-basic beings are *ontologically dependent* upon basic beings.

Basic Beings

- Our questions, then, concern Basic Beings (BB) and such beings as may be ontologically dependent upon them:

    - Are any beings BB?

    - If so, in virtue of what are BB basic?

    - What forms of dependence do non-BB bear to BB?

    - Further, supposing that there are BB, are they (so to speak) really or merely conceptually basic?

A Question of Categories

- This last question makes sense only against the backdrop of an articulated category theory.

  - That is, if some kinds of beings are basic, and others not, then beings as a class divide into kinds or categories.

    - Further, unless this distinction (between BB and non-BB) is primitive, there is some principle of division in virtue of which these kinds are sorted.

      - This principle of sorting is the question of category theory.

Ontological Independence

- A crucial thought of realistic category theory: BB are independent beings; they do not require other beings for their existence, whereas other beings require them for their existence.

    - N.b. It is not necessary that there is at most one kind of BB.

- One may speak of the ontological dependence of x on y, when:

    - x depends on y in some more than merely causal manner

        - perhaps modally

            - perhaps essentially

                - perhaps even in terms of identity conditions

BB I: Modal Independence

- x depends ontologically on y $=_{df}$ Necessarily, if x exists, then y exists

- x is a BB $=_{df}$ there is no y such that x ontologically depends on y

  - This will prove much too coarse.

BBII: Essential Independence

- x depends ontologically^e on y $=_{df}$ Necessarily, (i) an essence-specifying account of x makes reference to y; and (ii) an essence-specifying account y makes no reference to x.

  - Informally: x exists only *because* y exists

  - Slightly more formally:

    - x depends ontologically^e on y $=_{df}$ Necessarily, (i) if x exists, then there is a function *f* such that x is necessarily identical with *f*(y); and (ii) the converse does not obtain.

- x is a BB $=_{df}$ there is no y such that x ontologically^e depends on y.