

PHIL 4603: Metaphysics  
Prof. Funkhouser  
Yablo, "Does Ontology Rest on a Mistake?"

I.

- At times, ontology can seem like a silly enterprise.

... it takes a good deal of training before one can bring oneself to believe in an undiscovered fact of the matter as to the existence of nineteen, never mind Chicago and Spanish. And even after the training, one feels just a teensy bit ridiculous pondering the ontological status of these things. (230)

- Quine's program: One could question its goal or its method. Yablo challenges the goal:

It's as though one were to call for research into whether April is really the cruelest month, or Chicago the city with the big shoulders, or Spanish the loving tongue. (230)

II.

- With respect to ontology, there are the *curious* (e.g., Quine) and the *quizzical* (e.g., Carnap). Yablo claims that curiosity is the "official" attitude amongst current analytic philosophers.

- In support of this official stance, Yablo first notes that existence does seem to be the kind of issue that requires a definite answer. Second, Carnap's quizzical position seems (to many) to have been refuted by Quine's related criticism of the supposed analytic/synthetic distinction.

III.

- Yablo claims that the internal/external distinction can be made without relying on the analytic/synthetic distinction. He also compares Carnap's frameworks to make-believe games and metaphors. And Quine does not think that figurative speech carries ontological commitments.

- Tables turned! Quine is committed to a problematic distinction: the literal/figurative.

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. (233)

#### IV.

- Yablo reminds us of Carnap's internal/external question distinction, based on the rules of a linguistic framework.

How can an external deployment of 'there are Xs' mean anything, when by definition it floats free of the rules whence alone meaning comes? (234)

- For Carnap, the ontological question is replaced with a practical question of what framework to accept.

#### V.

- Quine's idea: Carnap's supposed division between ontological (pseudo-) questions and empirical questions is as untenable as the analytic/synthetic distinction.

Compare:

But now, similar claims have been made about the statements commonly thought of as *analytic*; theoretical-sounding disputes about whether, say, the square root of -1 is a number are best understood as practical disputes about how to use 'number'. (235)

- A sample of Yablo's criticism of Quine:

Why a true-in-virtue-of-meaning sentence would be well suited for the role of a sentence that is untrue-in-virtue-of-being-cognitively-meaningless is not altogether clear. (236)

#### VI.

- Carnap agrees with Quine's holism, but sees this as a practical, rather than a theoretical, point.

#### VII.

- Quine thinks that considerations of simplicity, efficiency, etc. are relevant to settling theoretical disputes. Carnap, on the other hand, sees these considerations as characteristic of practical disputes.