Ontology after Wittgenstein and Quine: Breaking free of atomism

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(very drafty) DRAFT

Ontological relativity and social construction

Ontological Relativity is one of Quine’s best-known theses, but, I want to suggest, it is under-appreciated (even by Quine himself). The slogan for the thesis is “to be is to be the value of a variable”: if we want to know what (sorts of) objects we are ultimately “ontologically committed” to—i.e., take to really exist—we put theories that we take to be true into regimented form and figure out what needs to be in the domains over which the variables range in order to make true the statements those theories regard as true. Questions about existence come to nothing more than that. To the extent that we can’t confidently say that a particular theory is true, to that extent we don’t yet know what sorts of things actually do exist; and that conclusion seems just right. We can, however, ask about our current ontological commitments: Given what we now believe about the world, however revisable we may regard our current theories to be, what sorts of things need to exist for those beliefs to be true?

I have, of course, deviated somewhat from what Quine actually says. He speaks not of “theories,” but of the one final, complete, comprehensive theory of everything, namely the theory (he calls it “physics”) that accounts for the states of all the points in space-time, the theory that comprises all the “facts of the matter.” Along with many of Quine’s critics, I find the idea that there could be a complete and comprehensive theory of everything highly problematic—unmotivated and almost certainly false. I do agree that, as he says, nothing happens, in any sense of “happens,” unless something happens to the states of some points in space-time, and it can seem (as it seems to Quine) to follow that once you’ve accounted for all those states, you’ve accounted for all the facts. But this claim (which can be expressed by saying that every other sort of theory globally supervenes on physics) is slippery. If it is taken to mean, as Quine puts it, that “[n]othing happens in the world, not the flutter of an eyelid, not the flicker of a thought, without some redistribution of microphysical states” (Theories and Things), then it’s true. But it doesn’t follow—as Quine himself and many others have taken it to—that all facts are physical facts, a claim I take to be false.

The truth of that latter claim amounts, in Quinean terms, to our not being really, ultimately committed to the literal truth of other theories (including those that, for one reason or another, we take to be non-reducible to physics), and hence not committed to the existence of the entities over which their variables range. A much-discussed, highly contentious example of such theories is, of course, psychology. I’ve argued elsewhere (“Against Physicalism”) that our ordinary, revisable but indispensable, ways of understanding ourselves and others, if taken seriously and literally (as I think we do and should take them), commit us to the existence of many sorts of things (such as emotions, beliefs, attitudes, desires, intentions, and so on) that are not conceivably reducible to, token-identical with, or in some physicalistically meaningful way made up of objects that might appear in the ontology of “physics.” The arguments to this conclusion are complex and, needless to say, controversial, but the same point can perhaps be more readily made with respect to another sort of object, namely such things as families, economies, governments, universities, corporations, and clubs.

Such things are, if anything is, “socially constructed,” in the most straightforward sense of
existing only and insofar as people think and talk about them and structure their actions around them in certain ways. Berkeley’s “esse es percipe” clearly applies to such things: if no-one perceived them, they wouldn’t exist (leaving aside such clearly marginal possibilities as a corporation’s continuing to have a legal life even after everyone concerned with it has somehow forgotten about it). As such, they are not “reducible to, token-identical with, or in some physicalistically meaningful way made up of objects that might appear in the ontology of ‘physics’.” The reason for this claim is that if we abstract from the social practices that constitute them, there is no way of specifying which physical objects (however complex) are “in” them. Before we get into the complexities of what constitutes, say, the government, we can’t even say what physical objects make up a particular government building: The air inside at any given moment? The dirt on the floor? The water in the pipes? The people working there or passing through? The food in their stomachs? It’s not so much that we can’t answer these questions as that they’re clearly the wrong questions. Someone asking them doesn’t get what it is for something to be a building, let alone a government. We do, of course, have ways of individuating government buildings, and governments, as well as families, economies, universities, corporations, and clubs. We just can’t do so in abstraction from our social practices concerning them.

These reflections point toward a definition of what it is for something to be socially constructed: its existence as a particular thing is relative to a social context; abstracted from that context it is amorphic, lacking structure or parts. Socially constructed things are not physical things, since, with the conceptual resources of physics alone, they are not “things” at all. This is not a conclusion Quine accepts. He holds to a distinction between “ontology” (what there is) and “ideology” (what we say about what there is, including how we sort things into kinds).

But how could the ontology/ideology distinction square with ontological relativity? The fundamental insight of ontological relativity is that ontology can’t be prior to our best accounts of the world: the only purchase we can have on what exists is what our best theories tell us. The contradiction doesn’t exist for Quine because of his commitment to the one complete and comprehensive theory of everything, and—though he says less about this—an underlying attachment to an atomistic picture of the world and a mereological conception of explanation. On this view all facts are physical facts and all things are physical things. (Wittgenstein would call this being held captive by a picture.)

Breaking the grip of atomism

“The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.”
Muriel Rukeyser, “The Speed of Darkness”

The pre-Socratics debated the relative priority of things and relations; things won and atomism has been hegemonic within Western philosophy ever since. This presumption—that the existence of things is ontologically prior to the existence of relations (presumed to be between and among things)—underlies and helps to prop up otherwise seriously challenged positions, such as foundationalism and reductionism, both of which can seem unavoidable if what there ultimately is in the world is some particular collection of things. But there are reasons—ranging from developments in physics over the past century (see especially Karen Barad’s Meeting the Universe Halfway) to reflections on problems with political and moral individualism—to explore the possibilities of a non-atomistic ontology, one in which things are emergent, complex, contingent, in which the world is a matter of relationships all the way down—not, of course, all the way down to bedrock (where we would encounter the demand for the constituents of those relationships), but as far down as, on any particular occasion, in response to any particular demand for explanation or justification, we find it necessary or possible to go.
That contextual conception of explanation is, I want to suggest, what enables a rejection of atomism, and it is at the heart of one of the central shifts from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to the *Philosophical Investigations*. The claim in the *Tractatus* that “the world is the totality of facts, not of things,” turns out, of course, not to repudiate but rather to entail atomism. If the basic structure of the world consists in an array of logically possible relationships (atomic states of affairs), then there need to be things that stand in those relationships. All the ordinary things that we know are complex, have parts, exist contingently—there are facts about them; they cannot be the constituents of the most basic, simple facts, and there must be such constituents.

A central conundrum facing readers of the *Tractatus* concerns the nature of these simple objects. None of the suggested candidates, from space-time points to sense data, seems to work, and Wittgenstein is frustratingly unhelpful. He devotes a great deal of time to arguing for the necessity of their existence and none at all to explicating their nature. He is not, however, being perverse: simple objects simply are whatever they have to be in order to play the role they have to play, as the necessary constituents of atomic facts. Driven by what he later came to call “the hardness of the logical must,” he derives the existence of simple objects from the necessity of (absolutely) atomic facts; the underlying impetus is the demand for terminal analysis. (“2.021. Objects form the substance of the world. Therefore they cannot be compound. 2.0211. If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true.”) Were we able to say anything about simple objects, they wouldn’t be simple: they just are whatever there has to be to account for of our ability to say anything about anything.

Wittgenstein’s abandonment of atomism in his later work is of a piece with his abandonment of unique, terminating analysis. I want to suggest that we take him up on a possibility afforded by the view in the *Philosophical Investigations* of analysis—or explanation or justification—as always contextual, as ending when the particular concerns that set it in motion are put to rest: the possibility, that is, that relationships precede individuals. The hegemony of atomism makes it difficult (at least for those with modern European mind-sets) to think the world differently. As bizarre as we might find the metaphysics of the *Tractatus*, we are, I think, deeply enmeshed in the modes of thought that lead to it, modes of thought that the philosophical therapy of the *Investigations* is meant to shake us loose from. What would it mean to give up a fundamentally thing-based ontology? And what might things be if they are not ultimately made up of smaller things? I want to pull together a set of suggestions—an alternative set of pictures—for a relational ontology.

I want to suggest that we take Muriel Rukeyser literally: things are made of stories (or narratives: I will use the terms interchangeably). At the heart of narrativity is the notion of salience, of what matters, and, relatedly, of point of view: what matters always matters to someone (or, I will suggest, to something). Narrative is space and time made salient, and it is perspectival (here and there, then and now, once upon a time, long long ago and far away...).

Salience, mattering, and perspectivity are typically thought of as part of what we, as humans, bring to the world, along with story-telling; but they can, I want to suggest, be seen rather as at the heart of thing-ness. To be a thing is to be a node in at least one narrative, to be a locus of salience, a site of mattering. Things do not encounter the world around them with indifference—some things matter to them, some don’t, and those that matter matter in distinctive ways. Think of trees, whose rings record climate but not birdsong; of rock formations that are the traces of volcanoes, glaciers, and rivers, but not of the color of foliage sprouting from them; of plant and animal species that co-evolve appearance and
behavior in response to relationships of predator and prey. Things emerge from such saliences and persist through persisting with them: this is one way of thinking about what Spinoza called conatus, the desire of all things to continue into the future as the things that they are.

Thing-ness is not all-or-nothing—it admits of degrees. What matters are the number and robustness of the narratives—the saliences—that actually hold the thing together. Robust narratives are stable and "thick"—detailed, precise, and complex; and in their terms things have parts that stand in particular relationships to each other. It’s not a matter of stories that we tell, but rather of stories that actually constitute things themselves, saliences that, whether we notice them or not, constitute the structure of things. Marx was lamenting the absence of such narratives, hence the relative "non-thinginess" of the French peasantry when he wrote in the 18th Brumaire that

"[t]he small-holding peasants form an enormous mass whose members live with similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with each other. Their mode of production isolates them from one another instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse. . . . Thus the great mass of the French nation is formed by the simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes. . . . Insofar as there’s merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, the identity of their interests forms no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not constitute a class. . . . They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented."

Part of what is missing, in Marxist terms, is class consciousness, but in this passage Marx focuses on the material conditions that isolate, rather than interconnect, peasants: similarity of conditions and interests, he argues, isn’t by itself ground for class identity. To be a member if a class is not just to have interests identical to those of others similarly situated; rather, it’s to be part of a larger whole, which is more, and ontologically different from, being a member of a group identified by the sharing of common characteristics.

Discussions about the ontological nature of, for example, races and genders, founder on this distinction when they focus on the similarities, or lack thereof, among the members of the groups in question. As Iris Marion Young argued, in proposing Sartre’s notion of seriality to account for the ontology of gender (the reality of women as a group), what matters is what difference it makes that one is taken to be a member of the group and how one’s life circumstances are bound up with others who are so taken. Similarities (possibly more consequence than ground of group membership) are relevant, but they are not what make a group real. If races or genders are real, it is because they are themselves, as collectivities, things: loci of narratives, of saliences, internally complex (e.g., having more and less central, paradigmatic members), inclined to persist. Solidarity is the intentional aspect of this “thing-ness,” but its motto of “one for all; all for one,” has a non-intentional aspect: whether the members of a group that is real in this sense will it or not, what is done to or by one member reverberates on all. The group itself has (is) a story; some things that happen in the world matter to it, and it in turn matters.

Solidarity in this sense is a lot like solidity, what makes a physical thing a thing. Think of the difference between a stone and a pile of pebbles. A stone has a comparatively robust narrative—how it came to be the size and shape that it is, how it came to have the composition it does—and a comparatively robust proclivity to continue in existence as the thing that it is. It also acts as

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'Many thanks to Angelika Bammer for bringing this quote to my attention.'
a whole in causing events and in absorbing effects: if I kick it, my toes are bruised by the whole stone’s mass, and if I kick it hard enough, the whole stone moves. By contrast, a pile of pebbles has a relatively shallow story—cast on the beach, perhaps, by the last wave—and relatively little tendency to continue as the thing it is—dispersed by the next one. The mass of the pile itself doesn’t bruise my toes, nor does it move when kicked. But not all piles are created equal. Cairns, for example, are piles with a thicker story; there’s something to be said about them, they mean something as wholes and communicate with travelers, who collaborate in keeping them in existence.