Putnam, Context, and Ontology[1]

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I   Introduction

When a debate seems intractable, with little agreement as to how one
might proceed towards a resolution, it is understandable that philoso-
phers should consider whether something might be amiss with the
debate itself. Famously in the last century, philosophers of various
stripes explored in various ways the possibility that at least certain
philosophical debates are in some manner *deficient in sense*. Such moves
are no longer so much in vogue. For one thing, the particular ways they
have been made have themselves undergone much critical scrutiny, so
that many philosophers now feel that there is, for example, a Quinean
response to Carnap, a Gricean reply to Austin, and a diluting prolif-
eration of Wittgenstein interpretations.[2] Be that as it may,[3] there do of

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1   This paper was written for the conference 'Hilary Putnam and the Pragmatic
    Tradition' held in Münster in 2000. I thank Marcus Willaschek and Marie-Luise
    Raters for the invitation and Hilary Putnam for his response at the conference. I am
    grateful also to anonymous referees for their comments.

2   See, e.g., Quine (1951) in response to Carnap (1950), and Grice (1967) in response to
    Austin (1956). I won't attempt a bibliographical guide to the Wittgenstein literature.

3   See Stein (1992) for a defense of Carnap against Quine. See Travis (1985) for a defense
    of Austin against Grice. The writings of Hilary Putnam, the subject of the present
    paper, are deeply informed by his understanding of Wittgenstein.

course remain many philosophers who worry about such matters, albeit often with battle-tempered caution.[4] For them, dissatisfaction with past versions of this dissolution strategy should motivate a search for *other* ways the charge might be entered (and resisted).

One philosopher who clearly feels that the dissolution strategy's resources have yet to be exhausted is Hilary Putnam. In recent writings especially, he has suggested that debates surrounding, for example, realism, epistemological scepticism, and the mind/body problem 'fall short of full intelligibility.'[5] Of course, the suggestion alone can seem only minimally interesting, in that it reminds us of a sometimes over-looked possible position.[6] It matters to what extent the conception of unintelligibility underlying Putnam's suggestion can be fleshed out, how it might differ from those underlying other dissolution strategies,[7] and whether it can be compellingly applied to the debates at issue.

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4 Thus, just to cite two, we have Kim (1993):

> Concerning such questions as whether there 'really are' events (over and beyond substances and their properties), whether substances are 'ontologically prior to' events or vice versa, what the 'metaphysical nature' of events is, along with many other similar questions about facts, properties, continuants, time-slices, and so forth, it just seems wrong-headed to think that there are 'true' answers, answers that are true because they correctly depict some pre-existing metaphysical order of the world. (ix)

And van Fraassen (1995):

> The failure of verificationism, and perhaps even more its ill-advised bludgeoning use before that failure became apparent, have made us wary of calling any philosophical discourse unintelligible. But, warily, I do want to raise the question of intelligibility ... how shall I, if I am an analytic philosopher engaged in ontology, proceed *responsibly* when introducing a theory in which it is asserted that the world, or even more than world, exists? (154-6; having introduced some requirements he deems insufficient, van Fraassen continues as follows, alluding to the reaction Lewis [1973, 86] reports his modal realism has elicited. See also Lewis [1986, 133f.].) Perhaps the stares are not incredulous? Perhaps, instead, they express a sense of being utterly nonplussed? ... It seems to me that however we continue this rational reconstruction of the philosopher's art, we reach a negative verdict on its works.

5 See, respectively, Putnam (1992, 363), Putnam (1998b, 284), and Putnam (1999, 83).

6 Cf. Fodor (2000), a review of Putnam (1999).

7 Yablo (1998), for example, is another contemporary philosopher who questions the intelligibility of ontological debates. The basis for his charge, however, is totally different from Putnam's: he argues that the best attempt to legitimize ontology — viz., the Quinean program — presupposes mistaken views concerning the literal/metaphorical distinction.

In what follows, I focus on Putnam's questioning of ontology, the science of being. Ontology asks, among other things, what exists. For example, we may ask whether numbers exist (we say such things as 'there exists a prime number between 8 and 12,' but on the other hand, lacking causal interaction with such putative things, how, if they exist, could we ever come to know or even refer to them?), we may ask whether the city of Muenster exists (if it doesn't exist, how could I be *in* it right now? — and yet perhaps there's really nothing further that exists over and above certain individuals and the relations in which they stand), and so on. About such questions and the debates they engender, Putnam (1999, 7) claims that the assumption that they so much as 'make sense' is 'radically misguided.'[8] Indeed, he even goes so far as to suggest that their existence amounts to something of a scandal:

> Questions which even the Middle Ages did not take seriously, such as, for example, Do Numbers Really Exist, are the subject of books and papers today. At least two books on these questions by good philosophers of mathematics have come out in the last five years. Yet it is hard to understand in what way this sort of philosophy can be subject to any kind of control at all, or, indeed, what the questions mean. Grown men and women arguing about whether the number three ''really exists'' is a ludicrous spectacle.[9]

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8 I won't attempt to provide a more explicit and precise characterization of what 'such questions and debates' includes. As we'll see, Putnam himself presents a wide variety of examples. It's possible, given the nature of his position, that there's a limit to the informativeness with which one can descriptively characterize this variety.

9 Putnam (1995b, 44). Three comments. First, my own initial reaction to this particular passage was: 'Yes, an odd, perhaps unintelligible question ... but *surely* the medievals discuss the ontological status of numbers — how could they not have taken up such a *natural and important* matter?!' And indeed they did. If they seemed less troubled by such questions, it is in part because they thought they had fairly good (if diverging!) answers — not, I believe, because they found the questions unintelligible. In responding to my presentation of some of this material in Muenster, Putnam suggested that the question of whether numbers exist couldn't even be formulated prior to the development of modern logic. (Cf. Parsons, 1982, 497.) But it's unclear to me whether we should say instead that our *conception* of such questions changed with the development of modern logic. Answering whether we then had *new* questions might require addressing difficult (perhaps by Putnam's lights not fully intelligible) questions concerning the analytic/synthetic distinction as applied to the relevant concepts. Incidentally, when Carnap (1950) criticized Quine's reintroduction into serious philosophy of the despised word 'ontology,' Quine (1951, 203-4) replied by noting that it was precisely words empty of meaning that he felt most free to *imbue* with meaning. He immediately added, however: 'But actually my adoption of the word ''ontology'' ... is not as arbitrary as I make it sound. Though no champion of traditional metaphysics, I suspect that the sense in which I use this crusty old word has been nuclear to its usage all along.' Quine (1981, 9)

I want to explore what one can make of such a view. I begin by sketching a model of how such unintelligibility might arise, one based on Putnam's recent emphasis on the *context-sensitivity* of philosophically significant terms.[10] My interpretive gambit is to see whether one might thus reconstruct Putnam's various remarks concerning the unintelligibility of *ontological* disputes.[11] Towards this end, I next consider some

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holds, and I think Putnam would agree, that 'a fenced ontology is just not implicit in ordinary language. The idea of a boundary between being and nonbeing is a philosophical idea.' Their disagreement here would thus be over whether the particular philosophical idea Quine explores pre-dates the rise of modern logic. Putnam's main criticism of the Quinean ontological program is precisely the general point we are about to discuss: that it assumes that terms like 'exist' are context-in-sensitive — or 'determine exactly what is *said* on each occasion of the use of the words.' See Putnam (1999, 179, n. 12). I discuss Quine's views further in Gross (1998, Ch. 5).

My second remark: the two books Putnam refers to may well be Hellman (1989) and Field (1989), both by former students of Putnam who build on Putnam's *own* work in the area — see Putnam (1967a) and (1971), respectively. Putnam (1971, 347-9) in fact contains an argument *against* at least one of way of advancing the charge of unintelligibility concerning such questions. And so one might conclude that Putnam must count his earlier self among his targets. Even pre-*Kehre* Putnam, however, did not unequivocally construe his work as addressing a clear ontological question. See, for example, Putnam (1956, 87), (1975a, xii), and (1998b, 245). In any event, whatever ambivalence there might have been several 'Hilaries' ago leaves no trace in the passage quoted above.

Third, Putnam lifts the phrase 'ludicrous spectacle' from Kemp Smith's translation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*:

To know what questions may reasonably be asked is already a great and necessary proof of sagacity and insight. For if a question is absurd in itself and calls for an answer where none is required, it not only brings shame on the propounder of the question, but may betray an incautious listener into absurd answers, thus presenting, as the ancients said, the ludicrous spectacle of one man milking a he-goat and the other holding a sieve underneath. (A57/B82-3)

10 See, e.g., Putnam (1999, 87-91).

11 Putnam refers to the phenomenon (phenomena?) underlying the unintelligibility of philosophical disputes in a variety of ways: 'context-sensitivity' (Putnam, 1999, 88), 'conceptual relativity' (Putnam, 1987b, 97), non-'univocality' (Putnam, 1999, 179, n. 12), multiplicity of 'senses' (Putnam, 1993, 256), multiplicity of 'uses' (Putnam, 1992, 367), etc. It is a question whether these labels — and the explanations of them Putnam provides — are in fact verbal variants (encoding perhaps different emphases) or rather mark substantively different models. I shall assume that Putnam has basically the same phenomenon in mind throughout, and I shall thus try out the interpretive gambit of seeing whether focusing on the adversion to context-sensitivity in particular proves a fruitful way of fleshing out Putnam's remarks on ontology. Below, I say a bit more about how one might so adapt some of his remarks on conceptual relativity.

argumentative strategies, based on Putnam's remarks, that one might deploy in attempting to apply this model to specific cases. I argue, however, that these strategies should fail to convince an ontologist expecting a non-question-begging argument for the unintelligibility of ontological claims. Putnam, as I then acknowledge, might not expect or intend his discussions to convince someone sceptical of his scepticism: it's possible that his remarks are meant mainly to mark his difficulty in understanding such disputes. But, at this point, I allow the ontologist, who has so far been limited to rebutting arguments against the intelligibility of her claims, to raise a potential problem for Putnam's own position — viz., that it precludes its own expression. The available replies, I argue, involve controversial commitments. Finally, I close with a brief plea for tolerance concerning the pursuit of ontology: I suggest that there are grounds Putnam himself can accept for such tolerance even if it happens that he's correct in charging unintelligibility.

II   Unintelligibility and Context-Sensitivity

A sentence is *context-sensitive* if its truth-conditions may vary across occasions of use even as the sentence's standing meaning in the language remains unchanged. A sub-sentential *constituent* of a sentence is context-sensitive if its *contribution* to the determination of truth-conditions can vary across contexts of utterance without change in meaning.[12]

One characterization Putnam repeatedly *rejects* is that of multiplicity of *meaning*, or *ambiguity*. (See, e.g., Putnam, 1991, 304-5.) Linguists distinguish two kinds of ambiguity: homonymy and polysemy. Homonymy is, roughly, when a word has two or more unrelated meanings — e.g., 'bank' can refer to a financial institution or to a side of a river. Polysemy is, roughly, when a word has two or more *related* meanings — e.g., type-token ambiguities. Perhaps Putnam means only to disqualify homonymy. Current linguistic theories treat homonymy, polysemy, and context-sensitivity very differently. Cf., e.g., Stanley and Szabó (2000) and Pustejovsky (1995). But it's unclear how much significance Putnam would allow the distinctions drawn by current semantic theorizing, at least in interpreting his own remarks. I should remark also that the literature on tests for ambiguity tends to focus on distinguishing it, not from context-sensitivity, but from generality. (One term is more general than another if what the latter denotes is a determinant of the determinable the former denotes.) A classic discussion of ambiguity tests is Zwicky and Sadock (1975); see also Atlas (1989).

12 To express the idea of context-sensitivity at all, one needs *some* sort of distinction between the content of expression-types ('standing meaning in the language') and the content expressed on the particular occasions those expressions are used. I have attempted here to use wording that is either unobjectionable to or can be easily

The truth-conditions of 'It's big,' for instance, can vary across different occasions of use depending on what's being referred to, the time of utterance, the contextually relevant comparison class for 'big,' and perhaps more. To understand what was said on some particular occasion of utterance, it thus doesn't suffice that one is a competent speaker of English who knows, in particular, what that sentence means. One must also track various features of the context of utterance. Context-sensitivity is a multifarious and pervasive feature of natural language: it's difficult to find sentences that are not context-sensitive in various ways.[13]

How might the phenomenon of context-sensitivity give rise to some distinctive way of falling into unintelligibility? Well, for the utterance of a context-sensitive sentence to determine truth-conditions, the context of utterance must supply information that sufficiently augments the information supplied by the sentence uttered. But perhaps there are contexts that *don't* provide the necessary information. I may utter 'He's bored,' for example, *thinking* that I'm pointing at a student fighting sleep, when in fact it's just a trick of the light (and my poor vision) that causes me to see a human form in the glare from the empty seat in the rear. So then there's no contextually relevant male to serve as the referent of 'he.' Not everyone holds that such reference failure entails a failure to produce something that can be evaluated for truth — but many do. If they are right, then we have an example of how context-sensitivity can give rise to unintelligibility: a speaker may utter a perfectly good sentence, with the intention of entering a claim with determinate truth-conditions, and yet fail to do so, if the sentence is context-sensitive but the context of utterance fails to supply the information the sentence requires of it. If 'exists,' 'object,' and other terms deployed in ontological disputes are likewise context-sensitive, then perhaps utterances of sentences containing them can likewise sometimes fail to determine truth-conditions. The

'translated' into a wide variety of frameworks for discussing notions of content. Perhaps Putnam might yet object to some aspect of my characterization. But then he would be obligated to clarify his talk of context-sensitivity in some other way.

I will similarly allow myself a certain looseness on various matters when nothing relevant seems at issue and the concerned reader can readily find wording more to her taste. For example, I'll go back and forth between a *sentence's* saying something and a *speaker's* saying something by uttering it. Also, I'll sometimes speak simply of a (putative) *claim*, as opposed to a sentence as uttered in a context or the truth-conditions it determines.

13   Cf. Gross (1998, Ch. 1).

basic model is thus fairly straightforward, though, as we shall see, also difficult to apply convincingly to particular philosophical cases.[14]

Before we face this task, let's note some features of this model. First, to charge *this* sort of unintelligibility is not to charge the *sentence* with unintelligibility. Indeed, far from impugning the sentence uttered, the charge requires that *it* be linguistically impeccable. There is thus a great difference between this sort of unintelligibility and that exhibited by baby-talk or by such strings as 'table scalar un- few.' Second, it nowhere posits *ambiguity*: the standing meaning of the sentence is assumed held fixed throughout. Third, the charge need not involve questioning some aspect of the speaker's cognitive competence: the speaker needn't be cognitively culpable for falsely believing she would succeed in uttering something with determinate truth-conditions. Fourth, directed as it is towards particular *utterances*, it allows that on *some* occasions an utterance of the sentence can indeed succeed in saying something. It's not held, that is, that an utterance of the sentence at issue can *never* determine truth-conditions.

The model thus avoids the drawbacks of some other ways of charging unintelligibility. We needn't claim that philosophers are somehow incompetent in their native tongues, or that they tend to forget what the words of their respective languages mean when they enter the philosophy seminar room. We needn't posit ambiguities,[15] and thus open ourselves to the oft-made charge of laziness,[16] if instead we can advert to a phenomenon not only antecedently agreed to be pervasive, but further arguably at work, as we shall see, in the expressions at issue independently of the particular uses to which philosophers put them. We needn't convict philosophers of simple cognitive blunders. And we

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14 Again, there are a variety of ways of developing the basic model. For example, if one defends an approach according to which speakers typically utter sentences with the intention to express propositions, then in such cases one may say that the sentence fails to express a proposition. Someone averse to positing propositions might say only that the sentence, as used, is neither true nor false. It doesn't seem that Putnam takes his discussion to turn on such matters. (He is not one himself to speak of propositions, but perhaps by his own lights he should hold that it's not a good question to ask whether propositions exist.)

15 As did, for example, Ryle (1949) concerning 'exists.' See White (1956) for criticism and Atlas (1989) for further discussion.

16 Kripke (1977): 'It is very much the lazy man's approach to philosophy to posit ambiguities when in trouble' (19). Cf. Grice (1978): 'Modified Occam's Razor, *Senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity*' (47-9; emphasis in original); and Ziff (1960): 'There is no point in multiplying dictionary entries beyond necessity. (That is the point of Occam's eraser)' (44).

needn't deny that *sometimes* it's perfectly acceptable to say, for example, that Muenster exists (indeed, we can even agree that what is thus said is true!).

As presented so far, however, the model can seem to pass over an important difference between an utterance of 'He's bored' failing to determine truth-conditions and an utterance of 'Numbers exist' so failing (supposing it does). In the former case, it's *patently obvious* to any competent speaker of the language that an utterance of that sentence will fail to determine truth-conditions if the context of utterance fails to supply certain needed information. No competent speaker could think that the sentence 'He's bored' could be evaluated for truth or falsity *independently* of any context that would supply a referent for 'he.' A defender of the following debate would be just silly:

> -True or false: He's bored?
> -Who? Were you referring to Tom or Dick or Harry...?
> -Don't give me any ''it depends if you mean this or that''! You're a competent speaker of the language. I'm not asking if ''He's bored'' is true or false *relative* to this person or to that person or what have you. I'm asking if it's true or false *punkt*!

But the ontologist who complains 'Look, I just want to know whether numbers exist *punkt*!' doesn't — or needn't[17] — seem so silly even to an anti-ontologist.

The moral to draw here is just that not *all* context-sensitivity is so obvious. One might not be reflectively aware (until it's pointed out) that the predication of 'green' in 'The apple is green' is context-sensitive as to the relevant *part* of the apple (are we looking for a Granny Smith, or for apples with moldy interiors?) — yet competent speakers easily track this contextual feature as required. Indeed, given the demands real-time facility places upon our cognitive resources, it's no surprise that much of this tracking occurs unreflectively. Someone applying this model in fact *needs* it to be the case that it's *not* obvious that the conversational context in ontological discussions supplies insufficient information for, say, 'Numbers don't exist' to determine truth-conditions. Otherwise, it would be inexplicable how competent speakers — experts on the matter at hand, insofar as there are any! — could converse so long unintelligibly.

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17 Putnam does suggest, as we saw, that such debates are 'ludicrous.' But I suppose that, even among those who are not unsympathetic to Putnam's reaction, many are at least sufficiently ambivalent to allow the pull of ontological debates, or are at least sufficiently impressed by the sincerity and intelligence of ontological practitioners. We noted that Putnam himself has made signal contributions to such debates.

But now is there reason to think that ontologists *are* open to the charge of unintelligibility understood on this model? Could an utterance of, say, 'Numbers don't exist' or of 'Muenster does exist' fail to issue in determinate truth-conditions in this way? To answer these questions we have to answer the following: Are such sentences context-sensitive? Could the requisite contextual features, whatever they be, be absent on some particular occasion of utterance? And, in particular, could the occasions that interest us — when philosophers debate ontology — be such occasions?

III   Arguments for Anti-Ontology

Let's see whether we might find in Putnam's remarks any non-question-begging arguments for the anti-ontological position that answer affirmatively the questions just posed.[18] I suggest that in fact we can't. I don't mean to assume, however, that it's the anti-ontologist who must shoulder the burden of proof — though I do suppose that there might be something to be learned from having him at least assume it for the nonce, even if only as something like 'faith seeking understanding.' At the end of this section, I'll briefly remark upon what Putnam's own considered attitude towards the argumentative status of his position may be.

(1) *context-sensitivity as default*: Putnam sometimes supports a context-sensitivity-based unintelligibility charge by displaying the context-sensitivity of some terms *other* than those invoked in the debate at issue. For example, in laying out and defending his charge that certain counterfactuals invoked in the mental causation debate lack full intelligibility, Putnam (1999, 87-91) adduces the context-sensitivity of 'coffee,' 'green,' 'flat,' etc. Why, one might ask, should the context-sensitivity of *these* terms be thought relevant? One possibility is that displaying this pervasive mundane context-sensitivity might be a 'softening up' maneuver. If we accept context-sensitivity here, we might be more willing to consider the possibility that the terms relevant to the particular philosophical debate are likewise context-sensitive. So intended, however, this constitutes not an argument *for* Putnam's position so much as a consideration in favor of it as a *possibility*. Something stronger, however, may be

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18 I will often below refer to 'the anti-ontologist.' It should be understood throughout that I mean a *Putnamian* anti-ontologist. Again, one might challenge the intelligibility of ontology on other grounds. Also, to aid comprehension, I'll consistently use 'he' for the anti-ontologist and 'she' for the ontologist when third-person singular pronouns are called for.

intended. The various examples might be intended to support Putnam's contention that context-sensitivity, 'far from being a special phenomenon, is the norm.'[19] Perhaps, then, the suggestion is that context-sensitivity should be seen as the default: absent reason to the contrary, one should assume that an expression is context-sensitive. This claim, however, would only provide a potentially relevant consideration against an ontologist who would deny the context-sensitivity of the sentences used in ontological debates. If, on the other hand, an ontologist were willing to grant the context-sensitivity of terms employed in her debates, this consideration, preaching as it does to the converted, would go no distance further towards establishing Putnam's conclusion. For it would still remain unclear why the ontologist should think that in fact when *she* utters the relevant sentences, context is lacking such that she fails to express something fully intelligible.

In fact, most linguists and philosophers of language accept that sentences containing quantifier expressions such as 'there exist' are context-sensitive: they are convinced by mundane cases in which it seems that their associated domains shift across occasions of use.[20] If we're moving furniture, for instance, and I answer negatively your question 'Are there any chairs?' my claim is not invalidated by the existence of a chair on the other side of the globe: the contextually relevant domain of discourse is restricted to the furniture we are moving. On another occasion, however, the distant chair may indeed fall into the contextually relevant domain. Such sentences containing quantifier expressions are thus context-sensitive: to understand what is said in their utterance, it's not sufficient to know their standing meaning in the language; one must also track relevant features of the context of utterance. And so it seems there is indeed room to argue that the sentences used in ontological debates containing the quantifier expression 'there exists' are likewise context-sensitive. An ontologist, however, can welcome such context-sensitivity. What she doesn't see is how unintelligibility follows in the cases relevant to her.[21]

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19 Putnam (1999, 88). He is here following Charles Travis and cites Travis (1989) and (1991).

20 Most, but not all. Bach (1987), for example, defends strict Russellianism. For a defense of the view that quantifier domain restriction is an example of context-sensitivity, see Stanley and Szabó (2000), though see also in reply Bach (2000).

21 Incidentally, to return briefly to the mind-body case, theories of counterfactuals — for instance, those of Lewis and Stalnaker — tend to *emphasize* their context-sensitivity. See, e.g., Lewis (1973, 66-8 and 91-4), and Stalnaker (1984, 147-8).

(2) *the nature of quantifier context-sensitivity*: Perhaps a closer examination of how quantifier context-sensitivity in particular works will enable the anti-ontologist to establish his point. What features specifically must a competent user of quantifier expressions track?[22] The theoretically minimal answer would seem to be: the feature *what the contextually relevant domain of discourse is*. This answer is theoretically minimal in that it provides the least specific, non-trivial information sufficient to determine the claim expressed given what the sentence means.[23] More specific information would indicate which of various further features obtain *in virtue of which* the contextually relevant domain is what it is. Of course, *tracking* what the contextually relevant domain is will indeed involve tracking a wide range of such further features — viz., whatever features fix, and enable parties to the conversation to know what is, the contextually relevant domain. A full account of *that*, assuming one could be given, would be extremely complex. But no doubt the relevant determinants would often include the interests, purposes, intentions, and current activities of the parties to the conversation.

What the anti-ontologist must hold, then, is that in ontological discussions the conversational context contains insufficient information to fix what the relevant domain of discourse is. When we sit around the philosophy seminar room pursuing ontology, sentences such as 'Chairs exist' fail to determine truth-conditions because — unlike when we're moving furniture — what we are talking about is left undetermined by our interests, purposes, larger activities, and/or whatever other contextual features might be thought relevant.

Now, the ontologist of course will remain unmoved. A natural position for her to take is that such context-sensitivity always involves a domain *restriction* — in particular, what happens is that attention is contextually restricted to only *certain* things from among *all that there is*, as when it may be clear in the context that, when I say 'There are no chairs,' the relevant domain is, from among all that there is, just *the furniture we are moving*. But when we pursue ontology (she will say), it is clear — and can be, if needed, said explicitly — that no such restrictions are in place. The domain then is simply *everything*. What *fixes* this as the domain is simply that no aspect of the conversants' interests (or what

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22 For ease of exposition, I cast this discussion as if natural language quantifiers were best analyzed as are quantifiers in first-order logic. Below, I briefly remark upon the 'generalized quantifier' approach to natural language quantifiers.

23 Trivial information would be: *what claim is expressed*. For further discussion, see Gross (1998, Ch. 2).

have you) imposes a domain restriction and, indeed, that their common purpose is to learn what *exists* (without restriction).

Likewise, this *alternative* picture will not move someone antecedently committed to the *anti*-ontologist's stance. From that point of view, the ontologist's clarification that she is concerned with 'all that there is,' with 'learning what exists,' will remain empty. If you hold that these context-sensitive expressions fail to lead to determinate truth-conditions when uttered in philosophers' ontological discussions, then you will hold that they fail sufficiently to contribute to content in such *descriptions* of ontological discussion as well. Just as it's unhelpful simply to say 'by ''he'' I meant him' (without any further indication of the relevant male), so it's unhelpful to say 'by ''everything'' I meant everything.'

But remember that we're inquiring into what non-question-begging arguments the *anti-ontologist* can muster. His complaint that he doesn't understand the ontologist's expression of intent is *consistent* with — indeed just an application of — his critique of her other problematic ontological pronouncements; however, it supplies no reason for her to *accept* this critique. As far as she's concerned, she's merely seen a gesture towards some model according to which her utterances lack full intelligibility: OK, there may be such a model (she will say), but why think it accurate?

(3) *context-sensitivity (and 'extendability') of other, conceptually linked ontological terms*: Putnam (1992, 367) holds not only that the 'different uses' of 'exists' undermine ontology, but also that this is true of other, 'conceptually linked' ontological terms. He holds, for example, that 'object' is such a term. Putnam has in mind the so-called *logical* conception of object, according to which it is a conceptual truth that an utterance of 'everything is an object' always expresses a truth, assuming it succeeds in saying anything at all.[24] (No doubt Putnam would allow that 'object' has other meanings or uses that do not honor this link.) Putnam (1992), writes that:

> the notion of an ''object'' is an inherently extendable one; we extend it when we speak of the strange ''objects'' of quantum mechanics as objects; we extend it ... when we refer to *numbers* as ''objects''; we extend it when we invent such recherché notions as ''mereological sum'' and begin to refer to mereological sums as ''objects''; and we shall undoubtedly continue to extend it in the future.... Because the notion is inherently open in this way, the very notion of a ''totality of all objects'' is senseless.... Thus there is no fact of the matter as to whether ''numbers exist'' and no fact of the matter as to whether ''mereological sums exist.'' (367; emphases and usage of quotation marks are Putnam's.)

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24 For general discussion of the logical conception of object, see Parsons (1982).

Putnam's talk of extendability can suggest that he has in mind only, or primarily, changes in possible contribution to propositional content *over time*. But such changes can harden into aspects of a term's standing meaning or use. Diachronous change can accrete into synchronous ambiguity or context-sensitivity. A possible argument would thus run as follows: 'object' is conceptually linked to 'exists'; but 'object,' being inherently extendable, is context-sensitive — context-sensitive, moreover, in a way that undermines talk of the totality of all objects; so, 'there exists' is context-sensitive, moreover in a manner that precludes its context-sensitivity as arising solely from the restriction of a domain of, as it were, *all* objects.

The ontologist, however, while able to accept both the context-sensitivity of 'object' and — at least in its logical use — its conceptual link to 'exists,' will reject the claim that this context-sensitivity is undermining of ontology. If she's not moved in the case of 'exists,' why should she be moved by these reflections on 'object'? Well, but what about this inherent extendability? She can find place for this idea — albeit otherwise construed. For her, this extendability reflects our extendable *understanding* of *what objects are* and of *what exists*.[25] To extend these notions, that is, is just to come to know more about them, not to alter their content — though an expanded understanding does indeed enable us contextually to restrict in new ways the application of these terms when it is useful to do so. In elaborating this response, the ontologist might even draw upon Putnam's own work on natural kind terms. 'Object' may not be itself a natural kind term, but (the ontologist might suggest) we need some reason to think that it might not be *like* natural kind terms in the following manner: its extension (as the term is used in ontological debates) may remain fixed even as our *beliefs* about what falls therein change.[26]

(4) *the foundational semantics of formal terms*: The anti-ontologist might object that the ontologist underestimates the difference between terms for 'formal' concepts and natural kind terms: in the former case there seems to be nothing like an empirically discoverable 'essence' that would serve to fix an extension and play a role in explanation. If 'object' (at least in its logical use as deployed by ontologists) has a fixed extension, no matter how our *knowledge* of that extension might alter, *what* fixes that

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25 Cf., in a different, though related, context, Boolos (1974, 32).

26 I should note, however, that many readers of Putnam (1975b) on natural kind terms overlook the section entitled 'Other Senses,' which can be read as of a piece with his later emphasis on context-sensitivity — as can the use of 'relevantly similar to' in his statement of how the reference of natural kind terms gets fixed.

extension? In virtue of what does it have the extension the ontologist supposes it to have?[27]

It's unclear, however, that the ontologist must accede to such questions of 'foundational' semantics.[28] Putnam himself has railed against the reductivist presuppositions of such questions. His own discussion of natural kind terms is certainly not intended to be, or to provide the basis for, a reductive analysis; nor does he think it either *possible* in general to naturalize content or metaphysically *required*.[29] An ontologist who *shared* Putnam's leanings here could thus rebuff the challenge to state what fixes the extension of 'object' as used in ontological discussion. To block this response, the anti-ontologist would somehow need to show that maintaining the intelligibility of ontology commits one to the reasonableness of such questions in foundational semantics, so that the demand for answers could be entered *ad hominem*.

Suppose, though, that the questions are in fact legitimate. The anti-ontologist's raising them doesn't itself constitute an argument against there being a perfectly good answer. The ontologist, that is, could acknowledge the project she must take on while denying that any *argument* has been presented for its in principle futility. If the anti-ontologist protests that, nonetheless, he has shifted the burden upon her, she can reply that it's not obvious that the anti-ontologist's position leaves him any better or worse placed to explain what fixes the (varying) extension of 'object.'

For the anti-ontologist to advance any further in this direction, so that he can claim to have advanced an argument and thus indeed to have shifted the burden, he must engage in at least some positive theorizing himself. I leave this for the anti-ontologist. But to indicate that it is a far from trivial task to do so in a way that might underwrite an anti-ontological argument, let me just scratch the surface of one way he might try

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27 One must in fact distinguish two questions here: (1) In virtue of what do such expression-types as 'exists' and 'object' have the standing meanings that they have?; and (2) In virtue of what, given those meanings, are they associated on particular occasions of use with the particular extensions that they are in fact then associated with? *Both* questions might be raised to ontologists and anti-ontologists alike.

28 For the label 'foundational semantics,' see Stalnaker (1997). Foundational semantics, which addresses *how* terms get their semantic values, is to be distinguished from *descriptive* semantics, which states what those values are.

29 This formulation assumes that an acceptable response to this 'in virtue of what' question must be in some sense naturalistic. Perhaps the anti-ontologist could try to articulate some weaker requirement — for example, that what fixes the extension be in principle specifiable in non-intentional (though not necessarily naturalistic) terms.

to develop a dissimilarity between 'formal' terms and natural kind terms.

The anti-ontologist might claim that what makes 'object' and 'exists' differ from natural kind terms — what makes them instead *formal* terms — is their intimate relation (perhaps a 'conceptual link') to quantifiers and thus in particular to the inference rules that license the latter's introduction and elimination. Further, he might suggest that answers to foundational semantic questions concerning these terms must be couched at least in part in terms of these rules. It's unclear whether a *purely* inferential approach can in fact succeed. But, in any event, it's unclear why the ontologist's suggesting that 'object' and 'exists' are in *one* way like natural kind terms precludes her acknowledging their formal aspect. Let me very briefly indicate why. The *prima facie* problem for a purely inferential approach is roughly this. The application of standard quantificational inference rules requires both an understanding of what closed terms are acceptable substituends and a conception of terms or variables as potentially standing in for objects *arbitrarily*. The former requires some grasp of which terms in fact *denote*, while the latter requires some grasp of how broadly the arbitrariness extends.[30] Applying the rules thus seems to presuppose some grasp of the domain over which they apply (what *exists*, what *objects* there are in the logical sense). The anti-ontologist must claim that the varying domain is fixed by contextually varying factors. The ontologist has two options: she can either agree, claiming that such contextual variation is in fact the contextual restriction of the default domain at issue in ontological disputes; or she can hold instead that there is but one fixed domain underwriting quantificational inference rules, adding that their application presupposes that contextually supplied information be explicitly represented in logical form (e.g., one might represent the relevant utterance of 'Everything's been moved' as something like: For all x, if x is something we were supposed to move, x has been moved). Either way, she will maintain that she's not yet seen why her pro-ontological stance prevents her from developing an account of the determinants of the relevant terms' content. And so she will continue to maintain that no argument has been given for why the context in which ontological disputes take place fails to secure intelligibility for her terms. Perhaps the anti-ontologist has other or better ways of pursuing this line, but the burden is now shifted squarely back onto him.

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30 I'm indebted here to Glanzberg (1996, Ch. 5).

(5) *ontological hard cases*: The anti-ontologist might feel that the ontologist nonetheless fails to take sufficiently seriously the somewhat arbitrary and fungible nature of the ontological classifications that Putnam adduces. Consider, for example, another passage in which Putnam (1999, 7) says that it makes no sense 'to speak of a fixed totality of ''all'' objects':

> We can speak about wars, but is the Second World War an *object*? ... We can speak about the color of the sky, but is the sky an *object*? We can speak about mirror images, but are mirror images *objects*? We can speak of ''objects of desire,'' such as the novel I wish I had written; are such ''intentional objects'' really objects? And the list goes on and on ...

As this quotation and the one above from Putnam (1992, 367) illustrate, Putnam's presentation and defense of his position regarding ontology often takes the form of a list (accompanied by varying degrees of development) of particular *hard cases*, cases where it can seem that there's just no fact of the matter as to whether would-be things of some kind exist or are objects — or, to put the point perhaps more appropriately in meta-linguistic form, where it seems that there is nothing sufficient to determine whether 'exists' or 'are objects' apply here as they are being used. Putnam's talk of extendibility would seem to suggest that the terms could be explicitly *regimented* so as to apply or not (their amenability to such sharpening is arguably an aspect of their context-sensitivity). But, on his view, this would amount to a decision as to how to use the terms for some particular purpose, not an answer to an antecedently intelligible ontological question.[31]

The ontologist will agree, of course, that there are many hard cases: that's why, she will say, there is so much work to be done! She holds, that is, that their hardness does not indicate that they have no answer, that the question of existence is as of yet insufficient in content to determine truth-conditions. Rather, their hardness reflects how difficult it is for us to *ascertain* whether the conditions obtain. Consider, for example, the case of mereological sums. If x and y are distinct material

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31 Putnam thus might not raise an unintelligibility objection to philosophers who explicitly deny that they are addressing an antecedently intelligible ontological question, who claim rather that they mean only to introduce a particular use of these terms for some particular purpose. (Recall that, with context-sensitivity-based unintelligibility objections, one may allow that *some* uses of the sentences at issue succeed in determining truth-conditions.) Perhaps some forms of 'constructivism' in ontology could be so construed. The question might remain whether, by Putnam's lights or others', such projects are of *interest*.

objects neither of which is a proper part of the other, does it follow that there exists a third material object z, not identical either to x or y, whose matter is exhausted by that of x and y? According to Putnam (1987a, 19), the answer depends on how one is using 'object' and 'existence.' But van Inwagen, for instance, simply replies to Putnam that there *is* a fact of the matter as to whether for all x and y there exists a z such that z=x+y ('+' here denoting mereological summation). And he holds — and has argued — that the claim is in fact *false*.[32] In short, ontologists are well aware of the cases Putnam lays out; indeed, they are their bread and butter. Since they already know that settling these cases is hard, Putnam's presentation can strike them as, again, providing only a reminder of an alternative, anti-ontology position — something that itself doesn't constitute an *argument* for that alternative.

(6) *conceptual relativity*: Putnam, however, doesn't merely point out that there are such hard cases. He argues further that — at least in some of these cases — there seem to be no relevant considerations that could settle the ontological conflict and, even worse, no agreement as to the kinds of considerations that matter here. In response to some ontological questions, '... God himself ... would say ''I don't know''; not because His omniscience is limited, but because there is a limit to how far questions make sense' (Putnam, 1987b, 97). One way Putnam presses this point is to urge that the ontologist can find no place for the phenomenon of *conceptual relativity*, according to which some claims — including some ontological claims — are true or false only relative to some conceptual scheme. For instance, Putnam (1981, 73) claims that a Newtonian world could be just as well described either as one in which there was action-at-a-distance among particles or as one in which particles acted upon each other by acting upon intervening fields of force. So, the question 'do fields of force really exist?' — supposing the world were in fact Newtonian — wouldn't have an answer independent of our choosing what concepts to deploy in describing the relevant phenomena.

Now, up to this point we've been focusing of course on Putnam's appeal to *context-sensitivity* in undergirding unintelligibility claims. Context-sensitivity and conceptual relativity can seem to be distinct phenomena. So, it will be useful to pause and consider how they might be related. For, if Putnam's discussions of conceptual relativity do not lend

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32 Van Inwagen (1999) replies to Putnam (1987a). He argues that not all pairs of material objects have a merological sum (though some do) in Van Inwagen (1990). Putnam (1999, 8 and 179, n. 13), incidentally, actually employs an argument that van Inwagen does as well — viz., that accepting this claim about mereological sums is ontologically profligate. Even Homer faces temptation?

themselves to recasting in terms of context-sensitivity, the ontologist will reasonably protest that we've switched to a *different* strategy for undergirding the unintelligibility charge from the one we set out to consider. Whether this other strategy is successful might be an interesting question, but the appeal to context-sensitivity would have been rebuffed.

So, consider the following *prima facie* differences between context-sensitivity and conceptual relativity. First, recognizing conceptual relativity requires admitting a relativized notion of truth, whereas adverting to context-sensitivity does not. Second, conceptual relativity can seem a rather *recherché* phenomenon, whereas we've seen that Putnam emphasizes precisely the *pervasiveness* of context-sensitivity in defending his unintelligibility charge so put.[33] Third, conceptual relativity, unlike context-sensitivity, explicitly requires a notion of conceptual schemes that raises many questions — for example, questions concerning their individuation.[34]

Are these differences *merely prima facie*? Let's take them in turn. First, there is an obvious way proponents of context-sensitivity can absorb (and, indeed, tame) talk of relativized truth. Even if one takes something like *propositions* to be the *primary* bearers of truth, one can *derivatively* speak of the truth of a context-sensitive *sentence relative* to some occasion of utterance (or, relative to a context). Why not so construe Putnam's talk of conceptual relativity? One can then understand someone's saying that some claim has no *absolute* truth as a way of saying that the relevant *sentence* considered independently of any context of utterance does not determine truth-conditions. Second, that the cases seem *recherché* can then be explained by noting that they are rather *unobvious* cases of context-sensitivity (at least to a lay person). Finally, questions concerning the individuation of conceptual schemes can get recast as questions concerning the individuation of *contexts*.

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33 Putnam (1991, 405) calls conceptual relativity a 'relatively recherché phenomenon.' Elsewhere, however (e.g., Putnam, 1990, x), he characterizes conceptual relativity as 'pervasive' — not that these features can't co-exist, especially if the pervasiveness is in relatively *recherché* domains, such as the mathematical and physical sciences, that indirectly but pervasively impact much else.

34 Putnam (1987b, 96-7) refers to our 'conceptual scheme of commonsense objects' as opposed to 'the scientific-philosophical scheme of fundamental particles and their 'aggregations'' but just after refers to differing *formulations* of a *scientific* theory as different conceptual schemes. And what about sentences that seem to *cross* schemes, as 'The trashcan is made of aluminum' seems to do — at least given the sorts of schemes Putnam admits?

Suppose, then, we may freely take Putnam's talk of conceptual relativity as convertible to his talk of context-sensitivity.[35] How might this further the attempt to support the unintelligibility charge?

At first, it might seem that if we've supplied *merely* an alternative description of Putnam's position, then *ipso facto* we've failed to supply a further argument for it. Won't the ontologist now just ask why it's not question-begging to assume that there *is* any such phenomenon as conceptual relativity, or at least why any of the instances alleged to undermine the intelligibility of ontology should not instead be construed simply as genuine theoretical disagreements? Casting the debate in terms of conceptual relativity, however, allows us more natural access to another Putnamian notion, that of *cognitively equivalent theories*. Two formalized, mathematically complete theories (thought of as idealizations of the partial theories we may now possess) are cognitively equivalent, Putnam proposes, if and only if the theories explain the same phenomena and, in each direction, there exist formally possible (not necessarily meaning-preserving) definitions that enable a translation preserving theoremhood and relations of explanation — more briefly, if and only if they are mutually interpretable and identical in explanatory power.[36] In at least *some* cases, it would seem we may deploy the notion of cognitive equivalence to flesh out Putnam's talk of conceptual relativity.[37] Adverting to conceptual relativity might thus advance debate by

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35 Perhaps this convertibility provides a 'higher-order' example of the very phenomenon being described.

36 Putnam (1983) contains his most fully developed discussion of cognitive equivalence. The idea stems from the notion of 'equivalent description' found in the work of his teacher Reichenbach (1938). Equivalence of this sort plays a role in Putnam's philosophizing well before his use of it explicitly to challenge metaphysical realism. See, e.g., Putnam (1967a). Putnam (1989, 372, n. 14) refers to his invocation of cognitive equivalence against metaphysical realism as a model-theoretic argument, since it turns on the possibility of relative interpretability. But the argument from cognitive equivalence should not be conflated with those of Putnam's arguments that have come to be more widely referred to as 'the model-theoretic arguments.' The former turns on the mutual relative interpretability of *two* theories satisfying various constraints; the latter turn on, roughly, the inability of *one* theory satisfying various constraints to single out its intended interpretation. Putnam clearly distinguishes the two types of argument — see, for example, Putnam (1978, Part 4) and Putnam (1989).

37 That Putnam discusses some cases under both headings encourages this interpretive move, as does his (1991, 405) invocation of cognitive equivalence in explicating conceptual relativity. But it would not seem apt for all cases. The notion of cognitive equivalence, with its explanatory component, arguably applies to purely mathematical cases only in a degenerate sense. That Putnam's explication seems more

enabling us to see how appeal to cognitive equivalence might be used to bring out the particular way in which some hard cases may be hard.

How might this go? Putnam argues that there are cases where we have two ways of describing the same phenomena, which ways are mutually interpretable, possess the same explanatory force, and seem to disagree as to what exists. Suppose the sentences used so to describe the phenomena were context-*in*sensitive. Then there would be a genuine disagreement between the two descriptions.[38] Since contradictions can't be true, there would have to be a fact of the matter as to which description was right. Being cognitively equivalent, however, there is nothing further that could settle which is right: here's where there's the temptation to say 'God himself ... would say "I don't know."' So there's no fact of the matter dividing the two descriptions. The disagreement must not be genuine, and so the sentences must be context-sensitive. For example, if we were living in a Newtonian world, the sentence 'There are fields' could be used either to express a truth or a falsehood, depending on the conversational context (in particular, whether one mode of description were in play or the other). An ontologist who insisted 'Look, I want to know which description is *right*, whether fields exist *punkt*' would have fallen into unintelligibility by using a context-sensitive sentence independently of the sort of contextual features necessary for the utterance to determine truth-conditions.

There are various ways the ontologist might resist this line of thought. Let me briefly canvass a few. First, she might question Putnam's proposed explication of cognitive equivalence. For example, perhaps it ought to be required further that the descriptions be equally simple — in some one or in some of the several senses of simplicity. (Cf.

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tailored to empirical theories is perhaps just as well, however, since with the mathematical, there are fictionalist and profligatist moves more plausibly available to the ontologist than in empirical cases. Perhaps more significantly, though, it's not clear that cognitive equivalence is suitable for fleshing out the conceptual relativity that Putnam (1987b, 96-7) says obtains between 'the conceptual scheme of common-sense objects' and 'the scientific-philosophical scheme of fundamental particles and their "aggregations"' — for it's unclear that the former constitutes a *theory* (or even a theory *fragment*). Indeed, in part because it seems not to apply to such cases, talk of cognitive equivalence seems to avoid some of the questions of individuation alluded to above. It should be noted that the restriction to formalized theories does fit well with the Quinean ontological program that has set the scene for much recent ontological discussion.

38 Assume that there are no ambiguities present. If the sentences expressing this 'disagreement' are context-sensitive, then they no more disagree than the sentences 'I'm tall' and 'I'm not tall' uttered by different speakers. Cf. Putnam (1991, 404).

McMichael, 1988.) But let's suppose the anti-ontologist willing to add such further 'operational' constraints. Second, she could question Putnam's claim to have provided genuine cases of cognitive equivalence. Several writers (e.g., Wilson, 1981, and McMichael, 1988) have argued, for instance, that formulations of Newtonian theory in terms of just particles are not cognitively equivalent to formulations in terms of both particles and fields. Such objections, however, only work case by case and so of course don't preclude some better example coming along. Third, the ontologist could allow that Putnam has supplied cases of genuine cognitive equivalence, but argue that the descriptions can nonetheless differ in their relations to descriptions of *other* phenomena in a way that favors one description over the other (perhaps, for instance, there is an affordance between one of the descriptions and theories of some other phenomena, yielding an explanatory unification).[39] Suppose, however, that again the anti-ontologist is willing to broaden the conception of 'operational' constraints to include such considerations.

Even if there remain descriptions that are cognitively equivalent in this sense, the ontologist can still object, fourth, that this may be a temporary situation: as inquiry advances, the descriptions' respective 'operational' standings can alter, for example, by dint of their differing relations to *newly devised* descriptions of other phenomena. Perhaps, then, in the absence of reason to think that no further developments could settle the issue (or at least tip the balance), our attitude towards the competing ontologies of cognitively equivalent theories should be one of *agnosticism*. The anti-ontologist in response might try to suggest, regarding some particular case, that as things stand we (or, working scientists) can foresee no such development that would weigh in; and thus he might charge that there exists here no *positive* reason (based on some conception of how theorizing might in fact reasonably develop) to think that the tie will be broken, but rather only an appeal to bare possibility. Surely, though, the ontologist will simply shift the burden back: why shouldn't it be the anti-ontologist who is required to produce positive reason for holding that there *won't* be such developments?[40]

Suppose, though, that the ontologist were to concede that even in the Peircean limit cognitively equivalent theories may remain (or perhaps, even more strongly, *will* remain). This concession is supposed to help the

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39 Although Putnam's explication of cognitive equivalence applies to mathematically complete theories, he does not suppose that they are 'total' in the sense roughly of covering *all* phenomena. Cf. Quine (1975).

40 We briefly return to this question below in considering whether Putnam intends his remarks to constitute arguments that should convince the ontologist.

anti-ontologist press his argument, but it's worth noting that Putnam himself may not be able to accept it: he questions whether the idea of a 'causal-descriptive world-view' that is 'complete' has ever been 'satis-factorily defined.'[41] If he doesn't accept it, however, the ontologist, as we saw, can always ask what rules out the possibility of further develop-ments deciding between two otherwise cognitively equivalent theories. To carry the debate further on behalf of the anti-ontologist, then, let's suppose he overcomes his scruples (perhaps someone succeeds in indi-cating to his satisfaction what such a limit might be like).

The situation now is this: the anti-ontologist claims that there are sentences that express truths in conversational contexts in which one theory is salient, but express falsehoods when some other theory is salient; and, if these theories are cognitively equivalent in the strong sense that nothing decides between them in the Peircean limit, then disputes about the theories and about the sentences at issue, entered in conversational contexts in which neither theory is contextually marked as *the* salient theory, are unintelligible. The ontologist has conceded a fair amount in allowing that there might indeed be such strong cognitive equivalence. What she will now ask is: Even granting these concessions, has it in fact been successfully *argued* that the fact of cognitive equiva-lence makes these cases hard in a particular way, one sufficient to lead us to question the very intelligibility of the competing claims?

The anti-ontologist's crucial premise links intelligibility to epistemic status: no claim that P is such that there are cognitively equivalent theories that disagree as to whether P. There can be context-sensitive *sentences* that are *orthographic* contradictories and that each express theo-rems of cognitively equivalent theories. But what there can't be is some one claim P that is expressed by a sentence in the context of advancing the one theory while its negation is expressed by its orthographic con-tradictory in the context of advancing the other theory. The anti-ontolo-gist must preclude such claims, because, if there were such claims, they would be what ontologists argue about when they ask which of two cognitively equivalent theories is correct, and so their debates would be intelligible.

Ontologists will be moved by the argument from cognitive equiva-lence only to the extent that they are moved by this crucial premise. But should they be? The crucial premise linking intelligibility to epistemic status expresses an epistemic conception of truth: if the crucial premise were false, then there would be a claim P such that cognitively equivalent

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41 Putnam (1994b, 168 and 180, n. 35). By 'complete,' Putnam here means what I label 'total' in n. 39 above.

theories disagreed as to whether P; but then whether P was true or not would outrun the reasons we could advance for it. It should not be surprising if an ontologist gets off the boat here. Putnam himself sees the ontologist's claims as part of a larger metaphysical realism, characteristic of which is a rejection of epistemic constraints on truth: it is characteristic of metaphysical realism that how things are can outrun our abilities to *discern* how they are.[42] Such a view may be false or unintelligible, but an ontologist who's a metaphysical realist will complain: we were supposed to be considering an *argument* to that end; to assume that it's false or unintelligible begs the question.[43] Indeed, it's not even clear why, to reject the crucial premise, the ontologist must buy into full-blown metaphysical realism. To see this, we need only note that, although Putnam accepted an epistemic conception of truth during the period when cognitive equivalence was most emphasized in his writings (he held that truth and idealized justifiability — or, justifiability in the right sort of epistemic conditions — were interconnected concepts), this is a view that he has since abandoned (Putnam 1995a). But in doing so, he hasn't — or at least doesn't take himself to have — embraced metaphysical realism.

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42 Putnam (1990a, 31) characterizes metaphysical realism as the conjunction of the following claims: The world consists of a fixed totality of mind-independent objects; there is exactly one true and complete characterization of the way the world is; and truth involves some sort of correspondence. These are really *would-be* claims, since according to Putnam, not only the first, but all three lack full intelligibility, at least as deployed by the metaphysical realist. Metaphysical realism, he holds, is an illusion of a position towards which philosophers are perennially tempted.

43 It might be objected that metaphysical realism is a position the unintelligibility of which Putnam has *independently* argued for — via his 'model-theoretic' arguments (see Putnam, 1989, and the works cited therein). So, he could avoid begging the question here by adverting to *these* arguments in defending his crucial premise. But, first, Putnam's model-theoretic arguments have themselves been criticized as being either unsound or question-begging. (For a survey, see Hale and Wright, 1997.) And, second, Putnam himself does not present the anti-ontological considerations now under consideration as dependent upon other arguments against metaphysical realism. Rather, his argument from conceptual relativity against the intelligibility of the ontologist's claims is supposed to constitute a *distinct* argument against metaphysical realism. (See, e.g., Putnam, 1978, 130, and Putnam, 1999, 7.) One needn't deny, however, that Putnam's anti-ontology might gain support from its place in a larger synoptic vision.
　　Note, incidentally, that the ontologist who objects here to the invocation of an epistemic constraint on truth is not open to the charge of falling into scepticism by allowing that our whole conception of how the world is could be wrong. For by dint of the very fact that the cognitively equivalent theories are relatively mutually interpretable, we can speak of what is shared between them and thus not up for grabs.

It's not being suggested that Putnam would now also reject the crucial premise: to deny that truth in general is epistemically constrained is not yet to deny that truth *is* thus constrained in *certain* cases.[44] But again the ontologist's complaint is that no *argument* has been offered in its favor.

The anti-ontologist, however, has at least managed to establish this: if there *are* hard cases of this kind, then ontological debates at least about *them* are *pointless*, even by the ontologist's lights — not because they're *unintelligible* (though the anti-ontologist thinks they indeed are), but because they can never be resolved. Their irresolvability is what follows, after all, from the fact of cognitive equivalence. This result needn't have any practical upshot for the ontologist, however: our current epistemic position does not enable us to know *which* cases, if any, involve cognitive equivalence (which cases would remain unresolved in some idealized Peircean limit), and so does not enable us to know which are in fact pointless. Nor can we now know that they *all* are. For all that's been argued, therefore, even the concessive ontologist can absorb the possibility of hard cases so hard that we can't resolve them even in principle — without doubting their intelligibility and without being forced in any given case to admit *its* irresolvability.

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We have been arguing that Putnam's anti-ontological remarks do not seem to supply the basis for an argument that should convince an ontologist of the unintelligibility of her enterprise. But let us now acknowledge that it's difficult concerning such matters to construct arguments that are knock-down: there seems always the possibility (as the opposing side will characterize it) of biting the bullet. And so, in particular, it is difficult completely to ward off the charge of begging the question. So far we have been presenting Putnamian considerations as they might appear to an ontologist expecting a non-question-begging argument. At least some of Putnam's remarks, however, are perhaps better construed as rather attempts simply to articulate his difficulty in understanding his opponent's position — perhaps in such a way as to render his difficulty itself more intelligible to his opponent. Other remarks are more clearly argumentative in form but need not be read as appealing to some neutrally available criterion of intelligibility — indeed, Putnam (1999, 89) himself emphasizes that there is no such

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44   Putnam (1995a) still maintains, for example, that 'in the case of the great majority of our everyday assertions about the familiar objects and persons and animals with which we interact, truth and idealized rational acceptability do coincide' (299).

criterion: understanding what someone says involves exercising judgment. How might we then understand the function of Putnam's various examples and rhetorical questions, such as those quoted above? Putnam's aim, I take it, is to engage our sense of what's intelligible by displaying the differences between cases where settling some dispute in some relevant sense *matters* (practically or theoretically) and those where it doesn't. Hard cases may be hard for a variety of reasons, and adverting to the lack of a genuine question is but one possible explanation of our failure to make progress on the issue. But where there seems a failure of an ontological debate to engage sufficiently, if at all, with the rest of our on-going projects and inquiries, Putnam feels it reasonable to place the burden on the ontologist to provide the surrounding beliefs, purposes, practices (what have you) that would enable a sufficient grasp of what could be at issue. (No doubt my programmatic gesture here on Putnam's behalf will strike the ontologist as frustratingly vague. But it's in the nature of the position that risking ascent from worked cases yields at best orienting slogans.) This emphasis on our actual practices as touchstones for our philosophizing exhibits one way in which Putnam inherits an aspect of pragmatism.[45] In a more Carnapian mode, the claim is thus that not enough has been said *yet* to render the ontologist's claims fully intelligible *to him*, and until they are, he feels justified in not taking them seriously. (Cf. Putnam, 1999, 148.) The 'crucial premise' above might have therefore been better cast, not as an uncontroversial condition on intelligibility, but rather as marking why Putnam holds that his so exercising his judgment here is reasonable: if a putative empirical claim is such that two cognitively equivalent theories would conflict with respect to it, it is reasonable to hold that in fact no claim has been expressed until given sufficient positive reason to think otherwise, since in such a case we have (as of yet) no conception of how scientific practice or other relevant practices could bear on the would-be dispute. Thus might Putnam claim that, although mere examples may not constitute knock-down arguments, if they are well-chosen and the disconnect from our 'life with words' well portrayed, they still may yet persuade.

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45 Putnam (1999): 'if there was one great insight in pragmatism, it was the insistence that what has weight in our lives should also have weight in philosophy' (70). The emphasis on practice is found early and late in Putnam's writings, as is reflective awareness of this emphasis. For one example, see Putnam (1974, section 13). The centrality and continuity of the primacy of practice in Putnam's thought is emphasized by Ebbs (1992) and (1997).

But not if the ontologist, turning from defense to offense, can counter with some considerations aimed at the anti-ontologist's claims.[46]

IV   Objections to Anti-Ontology

So, how might the ontologist object to the anti-ontologist's position? Below, I consider variations on a 'standpoint' worry — viz., that the anti-ontologist's own position precludes him from expressing it (and precludes him from expressing various other arguably expressible

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46 It is sometimes claimed that there can be no 'totality of all objects,' no 'absolutely unrestricted quantifier,' on set-theoretic grounds. Because the claim will seem obviously germane to our discussion, it would perhaps be useful, before we move away from anti-ontological arguments, to address briefly in this footnote its relation to Putnam's views.

   The argument simply is that the power set axiom and the set-theoretic fact that a set's power set is always larger than it together guarantee that, for any set, there is another of greater cardinality. No set, therefore, can contain all sets as members; and, therefore, if sets are objects, no set can contain all objects. Thus, if a domain of discourse is a set, it must leave some objects out. Cartwright (1994), however, has forcefully objected that this argument rests upon an undefended 'all-in-one' principle, according to which the objects over which a quantifier ranges can always be gathered together into a set. Indeed, not only is this principle undefended, it further seems undermined by the truth of such claims as that the sets that don't contain themselves as members do *not* form a set. But without this principle, the set-theoretic anti-ontological argument can't get off the ground; for the ontologist will simply deny that the objects over which the quantifiers range unrestrictedly form a set. Talk about the *domain* (or *universe*) of discourse, which suggests that there is some one thing that contains everything there is, may be viewed as a *façon de parler*, eliminable by a plural description such as 'the objects over which the quantifiers range unrestrictedly'.

   Now, even if the all-in-one principle could be defended or the argument's dependence upon it avoided, it doesn't seem that the argument has the strength or generality the *Putnamian* anti-ontologist would want. For, the set theoretic argument proceeds by showing that there are more *sets* than can be contained in any set. It's conclusion, that is, is based on the profligacy of *set theoretic abstracta*. So, even if it could be shown that there's no 'totality of all objects,' it might remain the case that, for example, there's a 'totality of material objects.' But as Putnam's animadversions about mereological sums evince, he'd be just as unhappy with this claim. Set-theoretic considerations, therefore, could not alone serve as the basis for Putnam's position. Indeed, it is worth noting that, although Putnam has himself invoked such considerations (e.g., Putnam, 1967b, 14-5, 18-9, and 40), his most recent contribution to the philosophy of set theory (Putnam, 2000, 17) *assumes* that quantifiers (etc.) have 'many different uses' in order to *apply* the idea to sets, rather than arriving at it as a consequence of reflection *upon* sets.

claims as well).[47] I begin with an attempt to press this point that does *not* succeed. After developing a more troublesome version, I discuss how the anti-ontologist might respond.[48]

(1) *self-defeating (first attempt)*: Consider the following claim:

(*) No use of a quantifier ranges over all objects.

The ontologist might suggest that (*) expresses the anti-ontologist's rejection of her claim that, when engaged in ontological debate, she uses quantifiers unrestrictedly. However, if we are to understand what (*) says, we must in particular understand the quantified phrase 'all objects' as it's here being used. But on any occasion of use in a sentence that determines truth-conditions, the phrase 'all objects' ranges over all the objects in the contextually relevant domain. So, no matter what the context, an utterance of (*) that succeeds in expressing a claim will always trivially express a *falsehood* witnessed by its own use of quantification. (Obviously, the anti-ontologist would be well-advised not to attempt to avoid this conclusion by claiming that on *this* occasion he intended to quantify over, not just all the objects in some contextually relevant domain, but rather 'all objects unrestrictedly'!)[49]

The anti-ontologist, however, may respond as follows: The moral to draw here is simply that some care is needed in articulating my position. I (the anti-ontologist) hold that various (would-be) claims entered in ontological debates are unintelligible. This is a *meta-linguistic* claim; at no point must I *use* illegitimately the expression whose illegitimate use I deride. I need only talk of the context-sensitivity of such words as 'all' and 'object' and of how some contexts fail to provide information sufficient to enable these terms to contribute content sufficient to determine

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47 It's perhaps worth noting that Putnam himself is well-known for raising standpoint worries against various positions — see, e.g., Putnam (1981, ch. 5).

48 The discussion is directed only at the particular anti-ontology model we've been examining, according to which the relevant utterances by ontologists fail to express claims because they involve the use of context-sensitive terms in informationally insufficient conversational contexts. Since ontology might be deemed misbegotten on other grounds, the success of any objection raised below wouldn't of itself constitute an argument *for* the intelligibility of ontological questions.

49 This 'self-defeating' objection is raised by McGee (2000) to dismiss one sort of challenge to 'genuinely universal quantification' (55). He doesn't attribute the challenge to anyone in particular. (The bulk of his paper is concerned with worries posed by Putnam's model-theoretic arguments and related considerations, which he considers a much more serious challenge.) Moser (1990), however, directs a version of the 'self-defeating' objection at Putnam in particular.

truth-conditions. Sure, I may sometimes say things like 'There's no totality of all objects' and thus seem to deny something I ought to agree trivially expresses a truth whenever it expresses any claim.[50] But don't I typically distance myself from such 'claims' by the use of quotation marks, capitalization, and the like? This is precisely meant to indicate that in rejecting what the ontologist says, I don't assert their negation, but rather question their intelligibility.[51]

(2) *generality and the expressibility of anti-ontology*: But is the anti-ontologist right in claiming that at *no* point must he *use* illegitimately an expression whose illegitimate use he derides? Let's look more carefully at how his position may be stated meta-linguistically. According to the anti-ontologist, sentences containing various terms central to ontological disputes — for example, sentences containing the quantifier phrase 'there are' — are context-sensitive (which opens up the possibility of there sometimes being insufficient contextual supplementation to determine truth-conditions). Suppose S is such a sentence. Then:

> (^) There are c_1 and c_2 such that c_1 and c_2 are (possible) occasions of utterance and an utterance of S in c_1 and an utterance of S in c_2 would determine different truth-conditions.

But (^) — the sentence I just used to express the anti-ontologist's claim — itself contains quantifiers and so is context-sensitive. So, *it* can determine different truth-conditions across different occasions of utterance. In particular, the quantifier can be associated with different domains. Suppose c_3 and c_4 are two such occasions. The anti-ontologist makes his claim on each occasion, but then they are different claims. Which expresses his thesis? Well, he affirms both — that is, on each occasion, he would affirm what (^) would say. But is there no way of saying once and for all what he would say? It might seem that there's a generality the

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50   Bracket here and throughout worries stemming from the set-theoretic argument. The issue now isn't whether the objects can constitute one *totality*.

51   Cf. Horn (1978, ch. 6) on meta-linguistic negation. Incidentally, Putnam does not hold that, if any attempt to assert something using 'S' is unintelligible, then so is any attempt to assert something using 'not-S' (similarly, for other embeddings). For he holds that the assertion of the negation of a 'contextually *a priori*' claim is unintelligible, even though the contextually *a priori* claim is itself intelligible. (A claim is contextually *a priori*, roughly, if the agents of that context cannot conceive of its falsity.) So, in saying that the anti-ontologist will hold that both 'There's a totality of all objects' *and* its negation are unintelligible, I don't mean to rely upon any such *general* principle. Cf. Putnam (1993).

anti-ontologist needs to achieve in order to state her position but that the context-sensitivity of the quantifier blocks him from achieving.

The *prima facie* problem extends further. The anti-ontologist's model isn't exhausted by noting the context-sensitivity of certain sentences. Appeal was also made to what's required to understand what is said by utterances of those sentences on particular occasions. For instance, it was noted that different domains of discourse can be contextually relevant on different occasions of utterance. So, no matter what the domain of discourse in some particular context, there's some other context in which the domain is a different one. But haven't we just 'unrestrictedly' quantified over all the domains of discourse? Not if these sentences are themselves context-sensitive: then one has only talked about all the domains that were then available, as here we are talking only about all the domains that are now available (though, of course, adding the restriction 'now available' to the phrase 'all the domains' as uttered in the *same* context in fact does not restrict at all: holding fixed the context, the (extensional) semantic values of 'all domains' and 'all domains now available' always coincide). But then, again, by the anti-ontologist's own lights, the claim about contextually shifting domains *itself* differs in content from what he would express using that sentence on some other occasions.

The worry we've broached here is that the anti-ontologist's position can seem self-defeating, because stating it can seem to require the ability to express a kind of generality that the position itself precludes. In particular, it can seem that insofar as the relevant utterances *could* achieve the wanted generality, this would undermine his charge of unintelligibility; for the ontologist would simply say that it is with just this generality that her own ontological claims are (intelligibly!) advanced.[52]

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52 Indeed, the ontologist might even go further and question whether, by the anti-ontologist's own lights, his very attempt to articulate his position is intelligible: do his interests and purposes (or whatever else might be relevant) suffice to single out a contextually relevant domain of discourse for his use of quantified sentences? Note that, to raise this objection, the ontologist needn't take on the burden of arguing that the anti-ontologist's claims are *in fact* unintelligible — the objection would be rather that they are unintelligible by the *anti-ontologist's* lights. Even establishing the latter, however, is not required for raising the worry in the main text above. In raising that objection, the ontologist allows that the anti-ontologist (even by his own lights) succeeds in saying something when uttering such sentences as (^). A problem is supposed to arise because, by the anti-ontologist's own lights, he succeeds in saying different things in different contexts, so that the content of his own position contextually varies. That the objection in the main text doesn't require the ontologist to establish either unintelligibility or unintelligibility by her opponent's lights is to

Below, we will consider various replies the anti-ontologist might offer. But first I'd like to extend the worry even further.

(3) *what's the semantics?*: The ontologist might press us to specify more concretely than was done above just what a competent speaker knows who understands the meaning of the terms used in ontological disputes — quantifier phrases such as 'every' and 'there is,' predicates such as 'exists' and 'is an object.' According to one well-known, well-developed empirical research program, competent speakers possess their linguistic abilities in part by virtue of their 'cognizing' a complex collection of linguistic principles and rules. Their semantic competence, in particular, in part consists in their grasp of a compositional semantic theory that assigns truth-conditions to the language's possible sentential syntactic structures. Because natural language sentences are often — indeed are pervasively — context-sensitive, the semantic value assigned will often be *variable* truth-conditions. That is, the compositional semantic theory will say what truth-conditions the sentence has *modulo* the values of various specified parameters requiring contextual determination. Thus, roughly, an utterance of 'He's bored' will be true if and only if the contextually relevant male is bored. Investigating how to accommodate the various kinds of context-sensitivity found in natural language is a burgeoning sub-area of research in this program. Indeed, much of a recent issue of *Mind and Language* was given over precisely to the semantics of quantifier domain restriction.[53] The problem, then, for the anti-ontologist is to transform the rough model outlined earlier in the paper into a *bona fide* semantic hypothesis about sentences containing quantifier phrases. And it's not obvious how that is best done.

The anti-ontologist may well be inclined to slough off this demand. Not everyone is convinced that compositional semantic theories for natural languages can or need be given. Pragmatics (the theory of

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her advantage: as we've seen, providing a context-sensitivity based *argument* for unintelligibility is no easy task! If an ontologist *did* want to pursue an unintelligibility objection, a natural move would be to argue by parity of reasoning: if the anti-ontologist maintains that ontologists' utterances are unintelligible, he should say the same about his own attempts to articulate his position. It's not clear, however, that all things are indeed equal. Absent a more developed conception of the relevant contextual determinants, it's unclear whether the anti-ontologist's purposes and interests might suffice in a way it's alleged the ontologist's don't. (That the anti-ontologist might hold that determining this involves an exercise of judgment makes the matter all the more slippery.) The ontologist might complain here that the anti-ontologist in thus responding would be trying to benefit from his own position's lack of clarity and development.

53 See the symposium based on Stanley and Szabó (2000).

language *use*) doesn't seem to be compositional, so why must semantics be? Perhaps, then, the failure to accommodate fully the particular context-sensitivity posited by the anti-ontologist can be seen as just more grist for this sceptical mill.[54] The worry sketched below, then, need not be seen as one intrinsic to the very attempt to state the anti-ontologist's position.

The anti-ontologist (especially of the pragmatist variety) may wish to avoid running the risk, however, of dictating to science on philosophical grounds.[55] And so it's of interest to consider how the demand might be met. Insofar as it is taken up, the generality worries that arise can be seen as more specific versions of those previously raised: it's the form they take when the anti-ontologist admits constraints on a successful articulation of his model imposed by one stream of current empirical work in linguistics.

According to the generally accepted 'generalized quantifier' account of natural language quantifiers, such expressions as 'every,' 'some,' 'a few,' etc. are not context-sensitive at all. Rather, they context-insensitively specify cardinality relations that may be claimed to obtain among the sets that are the semantic values of other sentential constituents. So, for instance, the semantics of 'every' would be captured in a clause that says: a sentence of the form 'Every A is B' is true if and only if the number of A's that aren't B is 0.[56] How then might sentences containing such quantifiers (say, 'Every book is on the shelf' — which needn't be about all the books in the universe!) be context-sensitive? By inheriting their context-sensitivity from some *other* constituent: a sentence of the form 'Every A is B' can be context-sensitive (indeed, the quantifier expression 'every A' can be context-sensitive) if A is.[57] The sort of context-sensitivity

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54 In Gross (1998), I in fact tentatively advert to vagueness and its relation to context-sensitivity to suggest drawing just such a conclusion (100-2).

55 Cf. Putnam (1967a): 'When philosophy discovers something wrong with science, sometimes science has to be changed ... but more often it is philosophy that has to be changed' (44).

56 See, e.g., Larson and Segal (1995, ch. 8).

57 For such an analysis of quantifier domain restriction, see Stanley and Szabó (2000). Talk of the sentence's form above would have to be understood, according to Stanley and Szabó, as referring to its *surface* structure. For they argue that accommodating the phenomenon of 'quantified contexts' (i.e., the phenomenon whereby a contextually specified parameter gets quantified into) requires positing a parameter in LF, the syntactic representation of the sentence to which semantic values are assigned. Strictly speaking, on their view, it's not the nominal expression A that's context-sensitive, but rather the contextual variable that incorporates with it.

the anti-ontologist adverts to would then have its source in such terms as 'exists' and 'object' (in its logical use). But of course it would not be found only there: the extension of 'is a field' (granting Putnam's example of conceptual relativity above) would likewise vary with that of 'exists.' But how would the clause look that specifies the context-sensitive contribution of 'exists' to the truth-conditions of sentences containing it? A natural attempt would be:

> (#) For all x and c, if c is the context of utterance in which 'exists' is uttered, then x satisfies 'exists' if and only if x is in EXISTS(c),

where 'EXISTS' is not English's context-sensitive verb, but is rather a bit of technical jargon that denotes a function from contexts of utterances to the objects that constitute the universe of discourse in that context.

The obvious question to ask here, however, is what — according to the anti-ontologist — the variables 'x' and 'c' range over in (#). One wants to answer: everything, 'unrestrictedly' and context-insensitively; for otherwise, if their range is allowed itself to vary with context, (#) will fail to specify with full generality the predicate's contribution to truth-conditions. The clauses of a theory of semantic competence are supposed to be themselves context-insensitive; otherwise, unsupplemented by contextual information, they will themselves fail to express claims and so will fail to specify truth-conditions at all.[58] Supplemented by contextual information, they can express claims, but then can no longer express the standing knowledge we bring to bear in any particular conversational context. If, on the other hand, we therefore attempt to find some way of allowing that (#) *does* succeed in quantifying over 'all objects,' have we not abandoned anti-ontology?

(4) *generality more generally*: We can extend the worry even further. For there are many further claims — beyond those meant specifically to express the anti-ontologist's own position (or to characterize our semantic competence in deploying the relevant expressions) — that may seem to require the ability to express a kind of generality anti-ontology can seem to preclude.

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58   In Gross (1998, 70-5) and (2005), however, I contemplate the possibility of *context-sensitive* truth-conditional theories of semantic competence, theories that allow context-sensitivity in the statements of truth-conditions themselves. Thus might an anti-ontologist allow clauses like (#) to play a role in explaining our linguistic behavior. But, as I discuss in Gross (2005), allowing context-sensitivity in the statement of what we cognize generates problems of its own — albeit not necessarily insuperable ones.

Richard Cartwright opens his essay 'Speaking of Everything' as follows:

> To speak of everything, as I shall speak of it, is to assert a proposition that can be expressed in a quantified sentence of a first-order language the variables of which range over everything there is. That we can thus speak of everything seems plainly true. We can say that everything is self-identical:
>
> (x)x = x;
>
> that everything is mortal if human:
>
> (x)(Hx → Mx);
>
> that nothing is a unicorn:
>
> (x)~Ux.
>
> In each case the variable '*x*' ranges over everything there is.[59]

Consider what the ontologist will say about the claim that everything's self-identical: Surely that claim is true — but, regardless, it's something I believe holds *unrestrictedly*. Have I (the ontologist) said what I think I said, what I intended to say? The anti-ontologist holds that such sen-

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59 Cartwright (1994, 1). Note that Cartwright is careful to say that such propositions *can* be expressed in a quantified sentence of a first-order language the variable of which range over everything there is, not that they *must*. Clearly, he holds that the associated English sentences as he uses them *also* speak of everything.

 Note further that he *doesn't* claim that *all* quantified claims in English (or any other natural language) can be expressed in a quantified sentence of a first-order language the variable of which range over everything there is: that not all natural language quantifiers are 'first-orderizable' is well-known. Still, whereas Cartwright has limited himself in this passage to examples involving 'everything' and 'nothing,' some might press further claiming: first, that propositions expressed by a 'syntactically' restricted quantified sentence such as 'Every human is mortal' also speak of everything since they can also be expressed by '(x)(Hx → Mx)'; and, second, that contextual domain restrictions left implicit in much everyday discourse can likewise be explicitly represented in a first-order quantifier's matrix. There are reasons one might resist these further claims, however. For instance, one might think that the syntactic differences between the natural language sentences and their formal counterparts suffice for a difference in propositional content, and one might doubt whether an appropriate explicit articulation of the implicit domain restriction is always available. I won't worry about this here. As for the first, though, note that in Cartwright's own examples there is arguably a syntactic difference between the natural language sentences and their formal counterparts, since 'everything' and 'nothing' are arguably morphologically complex. ('Everything', however, shouldn't be confused with 'every thing'.)

 In any event, Cartwright holds that there are at least some clear examples of 'speaking of everything' — which of course is perfectly consistent with also holding that the vast majority of quantified sentences are in some way (perhaps contextually) restricted so as *not* to 'speak of everything.'

tences are context-sensitive, and so express different claims on different occasions of utterance. If uttered in different contexts, with different operative domains, the sentence affirms self-identity of different objects. I (the ontologist) agree that there are contexts in which I might use the sentence 'Everything's self-identical' only to affirm self-identity of (say) the objects on my desk. But, when (for example) uttered in the context of a philosophy seminar, it's not meant to leave anything out! And on such occasions I'm using the quantifiers as I do when I dispute ontology: since that use is surely intelligible in the one case, it must be in the latter as well.

An anti-ontologist might respond that, since 'everything's self-identical' is context-sensitive, it's misleading to talk of *the* claim that everything's self-identical — except, of course, as understood as uttered in *this* very context. So understood, however, nothing is left out! If we are succeeding in *using* the term 'object' at all, then as we are using it, there are no *other* objects of which we are not speaking. It's just an illusion to think there's some *further* generality one could achieve, even if there is indeed a sense in which there is, as it were, 'other' kinds of generality one achieves in other contexts of use.

Some sympathy must be had here, however, for the ontologist's surprise at learning that 'nothing is a unicorn,' assuming it expresses something at all, expresses different claims, for example, in a context in which liberal talk of mereological sums is acceptable as opposed to one in which such talk yields falsehoods (since in the first context she would have been talking of different things than in the latter — or, in which 'things' would have had a different extension).

(5) *replies*: Let's consider now how an anti-ontologist might respond to the worry that his position precludes a kind of generality needed to express his own position as well as other claims. Recall the *prima facie* problem: insofar as the anti-ontologist succeeds in specifying a context from which his utterances achieve the requisite generality, the ontologist will complain that it's precisely such contexts in which ontological disputes intelligibly occur. The anti-ontologist thus seems forced to choose between, on the one hand, allowing a distinguished context for expressing her position in full generality and, on the other, admitting that anti-ontology is inexpressible. The former seems to leave her with no grounds to suggest that context might fail to specify sufficient information to determine truth-conditions when *ontologists* engage in their disputes. The latter seems to force her to countenance truths that are somehow inexpressible in principle though graspable.

a) I begin by putting aside the possibility of accepting this last consequence. Putnam would surely agree that graspable but inexpressible truths are at best unappealing and most likely incoherent. Thus, for instance, he rejects readings of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* according to

which there are truths that can be shown but not said.[60] According to the alternative reading Putnam favors, Wittgenstein's pronouncements simply are unintelligible — but his deploying them is meant to serve a purpose: through recognizing their unintelligibility, one is meant to recognize the unintelligibility of the pseudo-debates they seem to engage.

b) One might then wonder whether Putnam himself, as anti-ontologist, intends to *emulate* this aspect of Wittgenstein's strategy — in particular, whether he might deny that he's putting forward an alternative at all to ontologists. This would constitute a second possible reply to our *prima facie* problem. Perhaps he intends his remarks — or his making them — somehow to undermine the enterprise of ontology from within despite their own incoherence. This would certainly neutralize the worries the ontologist is now developing.[61] But at what price? The ontologist already takes herself to have rebutted the charge that Putnam's remarks constitute a compelling *argument* against her view. So, she wouldn't score Putnam many points for adding that, moreover, the basis for those arguments is incoherent. In any event, it seems highly implausible that Putnam doesn't mean just what he seems to mean when he speaks of philosophically significant terms being context-sensitive, non-univocal, etc. We may put this line of response to one side as well.

c) How else might the anti-ontologist respond? One strategy would be to argue that where some sort of 'further' generality is needed, the anti-ontologist can advert to *other* ways of expressing generality besides the use of context-sensitive quantified sentences, ways that don't reinstate the intelligibility of ontological disputes. I will mention two possibilities.

First, the anti-ontologist might claim that, in such cases where it can seem that some 'further' generality is intended, the speaker ought to be interpreted as asserting a tacitly *meta-linguistic* claim instead of, or in addition to, the object-level claim the sentence would typically express in that context. For instance, when it is claimed that everything is self-identical, the speaker can be understood to mean that no matter *what* the context, 'everything is self-identical' expresses a truth.[62] The ontolo-

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60 See, e.g., Putnam (1998a, 109). He's following Diamond (1988).

61 And it would neutralize, by accepting, the harder-to-stick unintelligibility charge raised in n. 52 above.

62 Cf. this arguably meta-linguistic comment from Putnam (1994a, 255): '... no matter how we extend the notion [of "object"], we intend the laws of logic to remain good ...'

gist might object that she didn't mean to be making a claim about a particular sentence of *English*. So, perhaps the claim rather should be that no matter *what* the context, a sentence that same-says 'everything is self-identical' expresses a truth.[63] Still, it may be objected that the claim wasn't meant to be about *language* at all, but rather about *all objects*. But here the anti-ontologist can object that the question is being begged against *him*. For he doesn't recognize what 'all objects' says here if it's intended to be interpreted in some superlative sense independently of what objects there are in this context (i.e., what objects there are). What's more, he's already agreed that an utterance here of 'everything is self-identical' of course expresses a truth (about all objects): the meta-linguistic claim just gives us something *in addition*.

There's another objection the ontologist can raise to the meta-linguistic response, however. The meta-linguistic claim is itself a quantified claim, and so the generality worry reappears. In quantifying over all contexts of utterances, we speak of all the various domains that might be contextually relevant, since they in part constitute the context.[64] Thus the original dilemma can be re-entered: if the meta-linguistic claim is itself context-sensitive, does it capture the generality needed (in particular — had we begun, not with 'everything is self-identical,' but rather with, say, (^) — would the meta-linguistic claim that it always expresses a truth capture the generality needed satisfactorily to characterize the anti-ontologist's own position); and, if it does, does this not mean that the ontologist can intelligibly talk 'unrestrictedly' of 'all objects' after all in pursuing her enterprise?

d) The second 'alternative generality' reply adverts to *systematic* (or, *typical*) *ambiguity*, the informal use of language to speak generally about subject matter the formalization of which (historically, to avoid set-theoretic or semantic paradox) precludes the ability to speak thus generally in the formal language.[65] It's not being suggested that the nature

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63 I borrow the expression 'same-says' from Davidson (1969).

64 The anti-ontologist is thus suggesting that it follows from the fact that contexts are in part individuated by the objects that constitute the contextually relevant domain that, since 'object' and so 'all objects' are context-sensitive in the way he claims, so are 'contexts' and 'all contexts.' It might be suggested more generally that most expressions in a natural language can be shown to be context-sensitive by appeal to hard cases of just the sort used to establish the context-sensitivity of 'object' (recall Putnam's emphasis on the *pervasiveness* of context-sensitivity). So, by (perhaps *ad hominem*) parity of reasoning, the Putnamian anti-ontologist cannot jib at the appeal to context-sensitivity here.

65 See Russell (1908) and Parsons (1974). Putnam (1990b, 15) previously confessed not

of the worries raised here on behalf of the ontologist have the status of the classical paradoxes, but only that the device invoked in discussion of the classical paradoxes might be available here as well.

The main problem with this tack, however, is the difficulty in understanding it. Attempts to explicate the notion of systematic ambiguity typically appeal to some invariance across more determinate uses of the expressions. So, for example, Russell backs up *his* use of typical ambiguity by noting a 1-1 correspondence among classes of different type. Glanzberg (1996, Chapter V) suggests that, in cases like 'everything is self-identical,' what's crucial is that the truth of the claim doesn't depend on the domain. This can seem to collapse the appeal to systematic ambiguity into the meta-linguistic strategy. But perhaps the suggestion is, not that the systematically ambiguous claim that everything is self-identical *just is* the meta-linguistic claim, but rather that the truth of the latter provides (partial) justification of the former. This might leave us still wondering just what the systematically ambiguous claim itself *says*. But perhaps nothing more informative can be offered here, if it's 'a kind of speech that is *sui generis*.'[66]

e) Another avenue of response might be more appealing to an anti-ontologist wary of positing this *sui generis* kind of speech. Instead of suggesting that there exists some alternative way of expressing generality, he might allow that there is indeed a way in which one may quantify 'unrestrictedly over all objects,' after all, so that the generalizations needed to characterize his position are expressible — while yet maintain-

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to understand the idea in application to talk of sets and truth (and in a previous version of this paper I claimed that he therefore would not be attracted to an appeal to systematic ambiguity here). But see now Putnam (2000).

66 Putnam (2000, 5). Putnam here, following others, also refers to such use of language as *schematic*. I've avoided this term because the sort of generality needed here differs from the use of *schemata* to achieve generality in logic. There, one uses schematic letters into which any syntactically appropriate expression of the language may be substituted. For example, one may write 'if Fa, then Fa' (with 'F' schematic) and thereby express something general without quantifying into predicate places. One might explicate this meta-linguistically (all substitution instances express a truth), but Boolos (1974, 34) argues that instead of understanding someone who wrote down such a schema to have thereby asserted a meta-linguistic generalization about each instance, we can simply understand the person to have thereby asserted each instance. In our cases, however, we are not dealing with different substitution instances of a schema. The sentential constituents are held fixed, while the context of utterance varies. It would seem that one cannot assert each of the claims the sentence would express in *different* contexts by uttering the sentence in *one* context. But this is what the relevant kind of systematic ambiguity would somehow need to allow us to do.

ing that, contrary to our formulation of the *prima facie* problem, the sense in which this is possible is *not* one that reinstates ontological disputes as intelligible.

To approach this, consider an ontologist who attempts to defend the notion of 'the totality of all objects' by asking why we can't just take all the various domains that the anti-ontologist says may on one occasion or another be the contextually relevant domain of discourse and consider at once all the objects they comprise. According to the anti-ontologist, there's a way of talking according to which 'There exist mereological sums' expresses a truth, and there's one according to which it doesn't. Suppose that's correct. Let 'D1' plurally refer — context-insensitively — to whatever satisfies the predicate 'is an object' as uttered in the first context; and let 'D2' refer to whatever satisfies it as uttered in the second. What's now to prevent us from forming the term 'D1 and D2' to refer to them all? But if there's nothing to prevent us, what's to prevent us from plurally referring to the objects comprising *all* the various domains? Recall, the ontologist wants to hold, first, that it makes sense to speak of *everything* (*sans* restriction) — even though in many contexts we use such terms as 'everything' in speaking of some restricted *sub*-domain — and, second, that this is how ontologists *qua* ontologists use the term. The picture is that, although quantifier phrases, 'exists,' 'object,' etc. may be context-sensitive, there exists a *privileged* context in which the domain contains everything that gets talked about in any other. To avoid any confusion, we could in fact introduce new expressions stipulated to have context-*in*sensitively the semantic value the relevant context-sensitive terms have when used in this privileged context: 'exists!,' 'object!,' etc.

We've been imagining that the anti-ontologist would jib at this idea — noting that 'all domains' in the sentences above is itself context-sensitive.[67] But suppose instead the anti-ontologist *concedes* all this to the ontologist, thus providing himself a privileged context from which to characterize his own anti-ontological position. Has he given up the game? Perhaps not. For although he's conceded a special status to this context (the domains of discourse of all other contexts are sub-domains of its), he has yet to concede that there's any reason this context should have any special status when it comes to addressing ontological questions. Why, it might be asked, should this domain be special *ontologically speaking* just because it's the biggest? To take this route would thus be to abandon the idea that what's fundamental to the debate is whether there is a 'totality of all objects' at least in one sense. In its place the anti-on-

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67 'The objects comprising *all* the various domains' thus can plurally refer to different objects on different occasions of use.

tologist would press the question: what makes any domain, including this 'total' domain, *ontologically* privileged?[68] He could thus still raise his unintelligibility charge as before: ontologists falsely assume that merely being in the philosophy seminar room discussing ontology suffices to single out the domain relevant for settling their debates; but their questions and disputes do not sufficiently engage significant human interests and purposes to single out the relevant domain — that one domain is the 'biggest' of all doesn't help.

It is attractive to have this way of expressing the generality seemingly necessary to characterize the anti-ontologist's position. Isn't it much better to *use quantifiers* to express generality than to search for an alternative — isn't that what quantifiers are *for*? The problem with this approach, however, is that it leaves the anti-ontologist with nothing left to say back to an ontologist who insists that *that* context is indeed the one in which her ontological remarks are to be construed as uttered.

Perhaps the anti-ontologist will suggest that thus privileging this context would in fact not appeal to many ontologists; for it would require that they adopt ontological positions they reject. Unifying the domains of cognitively equivalent theories, for example, would yield a multiplication of entities, unlovely in the eyes of some. A profligate ontology is a possible position, but not something ontologists would want forced upon them by the privileging of one context.

An ontologist, however, will reject this suggestion. The privileging of one context doesn't entail that its domain contains whatever has been (or could be) *believed* to exist. *If* 'There exist mereological sums (fields, abstracta, etc.)' ever expresses a truth, it will do so in particular in this privileged context. But *whether* it does is not answered by admitting a 'largest' domain. Thus, from the ontologist's perspective, the anti-ontologist's concession would seem to lead one willy-nilly right back into first-order ontological theorizing, rather than away from the questions altogether.

f) The last reply I'll discuss rejects the claim that there's a problem in the first place. The worry we're considering suggests that there's something the anti-ontologist wants to say in stating his position (and also something one might intend to say in uttering, for example, 'Everything's self-identical') the expression of which is precluded by that position. But is this really so? Instead of struggling to show how he *can*

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68   Cf. Putnam (1987a): 'What would be wrong ... would be to accept this idea ["that the notions of 'object' and 'existence' are not treated as sacrosanct, as having just one possible use"] and then go on to single out *one* use of the existential quantifier ... as the only metaphysically *serious* one' (35).

express the wanted claims (or admitting inexpressible truths, or admitting that his position *is* incoherent), perhaps the anti-ontologist might suggest that the objection in fact rests on the *illusion* of there being things (including things he needs to be able to say) that are left so far unsaid — and that to claim otherwise is to beg the question against *him*.

Recall that the anti-ontologist says of sentences S used in ontological disputes that:

> (^) There are c_1 and c_2 such that c_1 and c_2 are (possible) occasions of utterance and an utterance of S in c_1 and an utterance of S in c_2 would determine different truth-conditions.

Because (^) is context-sensitive, it was claimed that the anti-ontologist's articulation of his own position would differ in content (would determine different truth-conditions) in different contexts, and it was asked rhetorically: is there no way of saying *once and for all* what he would say?

But what is in fact *objectionable* if the sentences the anti-ontologist uses to articulate his position thus vary in content across conversational contexts — that is, if they are themselves context-sensitive? The ontologist might suggest that this means that there's no *one* set of claims that comprises the anti-ontologist's position. It would seem, by the anti-ontologist's lights, that he couldn't even say that his 'claims' are really *collections* of claims, the various claims that could be made in various contexts — or he could say such things, but such talk ('*all* the claims he could make in *all* contexts') again would express different claims in different contexts. — But is this a *problem*?

Answering 'no' and endorsing this reply is indeed a move available to the anti-ontologist. But in forsaking the ontologist's sense of a 'further generality,' the anti-ontologist takes on a substantial commitment. He must endorse a kind of linguistic perspectivalism: for each context, there are claims that can't be expressed from it, and so there are claims that can only be expressed from certain contexts.[69] For suppose the various claims the anti-ontologist can enter by uttering (^) (or, for that matter,

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[69] Note that to state this requires that there are claims that one can refer to or quantify over but cannot (in this context) express. The flip-side of linguistic perspectivalism is a kind of essential context-sensitivity: there are claims that can only be expressed by context-sensitive means. (If all claims could be expressed context-*in*sensitively, then they could be expressed from any context. So, they could all be expressed in *one* context.) One might think context-insensitive replacements of context-sensitive expressions as used on some occasion are easily provided by stipulation. But stipulations aren't guaranteed to succeed. I discuss such matters a bit more in Gross (2002).

'Nothing's a unicorn') could all be in principle expressed from one context. Then there would be a context from which he could quantify over everything over which he can quantify in any other context. But then these objects would constitute what we earlier labeled the 'total' domain, and the ontologist would say that this is precisely the privileged context in which ontology is intelligibly pursued.

Note that, if quantified sentences are context-sensitive in the way the anti-ontologist claims, and if contexts are individuated in part by the contextually relevant domain of discourse, then it's not the case that, when two contexts differ on account of a difference in domain, one can express this fact from each of those contexts themselves. For the expression of this fact involves quantifying over the objects in *both* domains. In general, the claim that there are objects a quantified sentence doesn't range over can only be made from a different context than the context of the utterance it's about — otherwise, the anti-ontologist would founder on the first 'self-defeating' objection. (The anti-ontologist must avoid the temptation to say such things as: there are objects I can't now talk about; or, for any context c (including this one), there's another whose associated domain contain objects not in c's.) One can only talk about the objects of other domains when they are among one's current domain: other domains are always smaller. Thus, the claim that there are objects a certain utterance of a quantified sentence doesn't range over is itself a claim that can only be made in certain contexts — in particular, not in the context of the original utterance.

Linguistic perspectivalism isn't an unfamiliar doctrine: some draw this consequence, for example, from reflection on so-called 'essential indexicals.'[70] But it's certainly a controversial doctrine. Among some of the standard worries raised against it are its *prima facie* difficulty accounting for the possibility of cross-contextual phenomena that seem to require preservation of content — such as successful communication, (dis)agreement, and accurate reporting and attributing of speech and thought. There exist avenues of response, however. For instance, one might distinguish the notion of sameness of content (or, the contextually relevant standards of sufficient similarity) required for accurate reporting of speech from the notion of difference of content used in articulating the notion of context-sensitivity.[71] These issues are obviously too complex to discuss fully here. Suffice it to say that the anti-ontologist, if he

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70 A classic discussion is Perry (1979).

71 Sententialist accounts, for example, are well-placed to draw such distinctions. Cf. Cappelen and Lepore (1997).

takes this line, must take on the challenge of defending more broadly an account of thought and communication that admits such perspectivalism.

No doubt this *ontological* perspectivalism is *particularly* controversial, far beyond the issues raised by such perspectivalism generally. We seem deprived of speaking once and for all of *what there is* independently of a particular perspective (and thus of speaking of 'all' the possible domains of discourse and of 'all' the possible contexts of utterance). But of course this doesn't constitute an additional *objection* so far as our discussion goes: that it's an illusion to think such talk makes sense is simply the central claim of the anti-ontologist.

In this section, we've surveyed six replies the anti-ontologist might make to the ontologist's objection. There are, I believe, two left on the table: adverting to systematic ambiguity or denying that general claims of some sort have somehow gone unexpressed. The former requires accepting a *sui generis* form of speech, the latter a kind of linguistic perspectivalism. There are thus serious consequences either way. But nothing I've said constitutes a knock-down objection to either. Our discussion shows, however, that a display of cases alone will most likely not persuade an ontologist: she will also need to be convinced that such consequences are unavoidable or anyway worth taking on. Otherwise, she will feel justified shifting the burden back to Putnam and proceeding with her business — as it were, leaving things there.

V   Concluding Remark

Ontological debates can indeed sometimes appear 'ludicrous,' but it remains an open question whether they are. I have sketched a direction in which one might develop some of Putnam's anti-ontological remarks. We've seen that Putnam's discussions fall short of providing non-question-begging *arguments* for such a position. But, as remarked, perhaps he's not best read as intending to shoulder that burden. Of course, one could not similarly accommodate a compelling *objection* to Putnamian anti-ontology. Thus, we've examined how one might advance a series of worries concerning the expressibility of generality — including, the worry that stating the anti-ontologist's position itself requires the expression of a kind of generality it precludes. We've also recorded various ways an anti-ontologist might respond — some unsuccessful, others involving controversial commitments.

Suppose an anti-ontologist were willing to take on such commitments. What should his attitude be towards those who remain unconvinced? Must he consider their ontological activities *scandalous*?

Wittgenstein (1929) once paraphrased Augustine as follows: 'What, you wretch, so you want to avoid talking nonsense? Talk some nonsense, it makes no difference!' (81) Pursuing ontology, on such a view, is at worst perhaps a waste of energy. But it can have benefits. Some logical constructions, for example, have proven most fruitful independent of the ontological motivations in part behind their development — and arguably some of the work would not have been pursued without those motivations. If ontological motivation might have been in fact *required* for the result, the anti-ontologist might recognize *pragmatic grounds* for pursuing ontology: let some pursue ontology, because their false belief that they are making sense may be a psychologically necessary illusion if they are to produce work that happens to be of interest for independent reasons.

Such support won't warm the cockles of ontologists' hearts. But there are also other reasons anti-ontologists might soften theirs. As Putnam (1999) emphasizes, judgments about intelligibility are 'fallible and revisable' (172). We may well be wrong about at least some of our negative verdicts. In cases where that's epistemically possible, we should be tolerant of those whose judgment tells them otherwise.

Neither side should want potential progress prematurely thwarted, whether that progress is more accurately described as the creation of new uses of ontological terms (as Putnam would have it) or rather as the answering of genuine ontological questions.[72]

Received: July 2003
Revised: January 2004

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72　After my talk in Münster, Putnam arose to defend intolerance (of the relevant kind, of course). In philosophy it's not always obvious who's 'the liberal — or at least the Girondist'! (Cf. Dreben, 1992, 296.)

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