Comments on Van Inwagen's "Inside and Outside the Ontology Room"

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These comments were presented as part of an exchange with Peter van Inwagen in January of 2014 during the California Metaphysics Conference at the University of Southern California. They have not been updated or changed since their presentation. (I refer to van Inwagen as 'Peter', which I would not do in a published paper. I make some jokey remarks that might have been sort of alright if you heard them only once spoken aloud, but as I read them now make me cringe a bit. And so on.) These comments were never published.

I

Sometimes people say: "Chairs exist." More often, those people say things that imply that chairs exist. They say things like: "I sat on a chair." When they say these things, they say false things. This is because *there are no chairs*, and *you can't sit on what isn't there*.

Some of you will disagree with me, of course. And some of you will disagree because you hold unreflectively to the ontology of *homo janvenensis*, or whichever of our ancestors it was whose primitive mind first drew unjustified conclusions from the chairwise arrangement of tiny things. Should I have occasion to refer to you who thus embrace a redundant ontology, I shall do so condescendingly, but with unfeigned affection, as "the folk."

But my quarrel today is not with the folk. It is instead with Peter, who knows that there are no chairs, but who also thinks that the folk—at least when "outside the ontology room"—speak truly when they say: "chairs exist" or "I sat on a chair," and so on.

In my book *Objects and Persons* (available on Amazon), I give some reasons to reject Peter's approach that he does not address in his "Inside and Outside the Ontology Room." So let me tell you about a couple of them.

Get in the ontology room, if you aren't already there. Even so—even from inside the ontology room—many of you not only cling to your folk ontological beliefs, but also think that denying that chairs exist is crazy, or violates some Moorean principle, or is less plausible than the denial of at least one premise that leads to the conclusion that there are no chairs, and so on. I don't share your views, of course. But even so, I think we can all agree on something here. We can all agree that the claim that there are no chairs is, at the very least, *striking and surprising*.

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I say the best explanation of that claim's striking and surprising nature is that it *contradicts* what almost everyone believes.

But Peter thinks that that claim is *consistent* with what almost everyone believes—everyone, in fact, but a handful of ontologists, and even them only *qua* ontologists, only while they are working, only while they are in the ontology room. I say that this does not do justice to the striking and surprising nature of Peter's claim that chairs do not exist.

So that's my first reason for concluding that the claim that chairs do not exist contradicts folk ontology, and so for concluding that one speaks falsely when saying "chairs exist," even when one says this outside the ontology room.

To oppose my first reason, Peter could claim that there is nothing striking or surprising about his ontology. But that claim has the defect of falsity.

The only other way to oppose my first reason would be to give some account of how his ontology is striking and surprising, despite the fact that (so he says) hardly anyone at all, anywhere, rejects it. I suppose Peter could then say that his ontology is striking and surprising because it provides new solutions to puzzles that are considered (only) by ontologists *qua* ontologists.

But I don't think this is good enough. I don't think this would fully explain the fluttery excitement, and the sense of boldly following an argument where it leads to hell with the consequences, that I am sure Peter felt upon first discovering that chairs don't exist.

A second reason for objecting to Peter's view that the sentence 'chairs exist' is true when uttered outside the ontology room begins with noting that Peter and I both believe that human beings exist. And I say that the sentence 'humans exist' expresses one and the same proposition when used "inside" the ontology room as when used "outside." I believe that Peter agrees with me on this.

There are good reasons for him to agree. For example, Peter's opponents might wonder—especially since Peter has said they speak truly when they say 'chairs exist' outside the ontology room—whether Peter has some special, and especially demanding, form of existence in mind when he says 'chairs do not exist'. Peter will say that he does not. And the best way to explain that is for him to say:

> Look, it's just regular existence I am concerned with. Here is a paradigm case of regular existence that we can all agree on: you exist and I exist and, more generally, humans exist. That's the only sort of existence I am concerned with.

Peter can make this speech, since he believes that the sentence 'humans exist' expresses the same thing both inside and outside the ontology room.

Relatedly, Peter denies that the existence of the self is a controversial ontological thesis of the sort that only philosophers affirm. Rather, he thinks that the existence

of the self is an obviously true thesis of the sort that only philosophers (and not many of them) deny, but everyone else accepts. In *Material Beings*, he takes that obviously true thesis to be a reason to reject mereological nihilism. I take it he also thinks the widely accepted truth expressed by 'humans exist' is also reason to reject mereological nihilism. But then it surely seems that he must take 'humans exist' to express the same proposition when uttered outside the ontology room as when uttered inside.

At any rate, Peter should and does believe that the sentence 'humans exist' expresses the same proposition when it is used outside the ontology room as it does when it is used inside the ontology room. So Peter should and does believe that the sentence 'humans exist', when used outside the ontology room, has as its Tarskian translation '$\exists x$ x is a human'.

But then Peter must say that, outside the ontology room, those who say 'chairs exist' and those who say 'humans exist' are making very different sorts of claims. This is because one of those claims wears it logical structure on its sleeve, the other does not. And one of those claims is committed to the existence of the entities that it says exist, the other is not. But I object that the sentence 'chairs exist' and the sentence 'humans exist' evidently do have the same logical structure. And I object that the sentence 'chairs exist' commits one to the existence of chairs in just the same way that the sentence 'humans exist' commits one to the existence of humans. That is, I object that this is how things are when both of those sentences are used straightforwardly and literally.

II

Suppose the folk say: "Chairs exist." Suppose the ontologist *qua* ontologist says: "Chairs exist." Peter thinks that the folk have expressed a different proposition than has the ontologist. But this is not, according to Peter, because the folk speak one language (English) and the ontologist speaks a different language (say, Ontologese).

Rather, says Peter, they are both speaking English. I can see why Peter wants to say this. For the benighted ontologist who says "chairs exist" inside the ontology room surely seems to be speaking English. Moreover, you don't have to take a Berlitz course in Ontologese before you can do ontology; you merely need to speak English, or any other natural language with the resources to state and motivate, say, the puzzle of the Ship of Theseus.

So how can Peter both think that the folk and the ontologist are speaking the same language, but also think that they differ in the proposition expressed in their use of "Chairs exist"?

An analogy will help. Here it is. Two English speakers utter the sentence 'It is cold'; one of them is in Alaska and speaking truly; the other is in Hawaii and speaking falsely. Because they express propositions with different truth-values, they express different propositions. But this difference is not explained by their speaking different languages or even by their uttering different sentences in the same language. Instead, this difference is explained by their being in different *contexts of utterance*; one such context of utterance is Alaska, the other Hawaii.

Peter takes the ontology room to be a context of utterance. And he takes everywhere else—that is, everywhere outside the ontology room—as another context of utterance. And Peter relies on these different contexts of utterance to explain why, according to him, the sentence 'chairs exist' often expresses a (false) proposition when uttered by, say, Amie Thomasson or Dan Korman, and a distinct (true) proposition when uttered by, say, Amy Adams or Dan Aykroyd.

Let *p* be the proposition expressed by uttering the sentence 'chairs exist' outside the ontology room. Peter says that the sentence 'chairs exist' does not express *p* when that sentence is uttered inside the ontology room. In fact, Peter seems to think *no sentence* can express *p* inside the ontology room. Let me read to you footnote 20 from Peter's paper:

> "Well, then," asks the exasperated interlocutor, "what proposition *is* the outside proposition if it's not the proposition that that there are things that are arranged chairwise?" And I reply: "It's the proposition that 'Chairs exist' expresses when it is used in the ordinary business of life. You speak English, don't you? If you do, you know what proposition that is." I suspect that this reply will not satisfy … the exasperated interlocutor. I suspect that what [the exasperated interlocutor] wants me to do is to offer a *philosophical paraphrase* of 'Chairs exist' (in its ordinary business- of- life sense)—something *like* 'There are things that are arranged chairwise' but which, unlike that sentence, *does* express the outside proposition. But, by the nature of the case, I can't do that: any sentence that would count as a philosophical paraphrase of 'Chairs exist' (etc.) would *not* express the outside proposition.

Peter denies that the sentence 'chairs exist' expresses *p* inside the ontology room. But he does think it expresses some proposition inside the ontology room. That proposition, Peter holds, is also expressed in Tarskian by '∃*x x* is a chair'. Let's call that proposition *q*. Peter seems to think that *q* cannot be expressed *outside* the ontology room. For Peter seems to think that the minute one expresses *q* one is thereby in the ontology room. Moreover, he says:

> But—*I* say—not only are the inside and the outside propositions distinct, but it is only in the ontology and meta-ontology rooms that anyone has ever so much as *considered* the inside proposition. In my view, only metaphysicians (or at any rate only people who have been exposed to discussions of the metaphysics of artifacts) have ever considered—ever

entertained, ever grasped, ever held before their minds—the inside proposition.

So Peter's view is not merely that the sentence 'chairs exist' expresses one proposition inside the ontology room, and another outside. His view is that the proposition expressed outside the ontology by the sentence 'chairs exist' *cannot be expressed inside the ontology room* and, moreover, the proposition expressed inside the ontology room by the sentence 'chairs exist' *cannot be expressed outside the ontology room*.

An Alaskan utters the sentence 'It is cold' and I utter the sentence 'It is cold in Alaska'. This is just one example of that fact that, at least normally, if a proposition can be expressed in one context of utterance, that same proposition can be expressed in a different context. But we have seen that this is not how things go inside and outside the ontology room. This just shows how strange "inside the ontology room" and "outside the ontology room" are, when taken to be contexts of utterance. It makes me wonder if maybe they aren't really contexts of utterance.

Peter holds that the sentence 'chairs exist' only expresses an *ontologically controversial* proposition in the context of utterance that is the ontology room. That is, what *explains* the claim that 'chairs exist' expresses the ontologically controversial proposition *q* is a combination of the meaning of that sentence in English and the context in which that sentence is uttered, which is inside the ontology room.

Given this, you might expect Peter to say that what explains why *any* sentence in English expresses an ontologically controversial proposition is a combination of the meaning of that sentence in English and the context in which it is uttered, which is inside the ontology rom. But I don't think he can say that for the following sentence:

> 'If a chair has n parts, then, in the region that chair occupies, there are at least n+1 things, namely, the parts of the chair and the chair'.[1]

Rather, I think that he thinks that that sentence and other select sentences—such as, for example, sentences that state and motivate, say, the Ship of Theseus puzzle—themselves create or constitute or are what explain being inside the ontology room. Thus I do not think that part of the *explanation* of why those sentences express ontologically controversial propositions can be that they are uttered inside the ontology room. Rather, it's the other way around. That is, we are in the ontology room *because* those sentences have been uttered.

Set aside the above highlighted sentence—the one about a region and parts and n+1 things. Even so, I still think that Peter has to say that uttering certain

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[1] This sentence expresses a proposition that is contradicted by the ontological thesis that composition is literally identity.

sentences explains why we are in the ontology room. After all, to be in the ontology room is not to be located in a literal room. Rather, to be in the ontology room is to be engaged in a certain ontological practice. We can engage in this practice by uttering certain sentences. Uttering these sentences constitutes engaging in that practice only if those sentences have ontological import. So, just given the nature of the ontology room, it seems that Peter must say that the uttering of certain ontologically-loaded sentences is what explains our being in the ontology room.

The above highlighted sentence—the one about a region and parts and n+1 things—does express a proposition. And surely Peter will insist that its expressing a proposition is explained by a combination of its meaning in English and its context of utterance. But, as we have just seen, the proposition that it expresses is not explained by its being uttered "in the ontology room." So the ontology room *is not the context of utterance* for that sentence, a sentence that expresses an ontologically controversial thesis. But to the extent that I have a grip on what the ontology room is, that sentence is uttered in the ontology room. I am really starting to suspect that "inside the ontology room" is not a genuine context of utterance.

Now Peter might reply that the ontology room is the context of utterance for that sentence, even though its being uttered in the ontology room does not help to explain what proposition that sentence expresses. But that makes the claim that "inside the ontology" room is a context of utterance even more suspicious, since Peter himself seems to think (rightly) that context of utterance is always part of what explains which proposition a sentence expresses. And if Peter were to deny that the ontology room as a context of utterance partly explains which proposition is expressed by a sentence, then he would be left without an explanation of why 'chairs exist' expresses one proposition when used by an ontologist *qua* ontologist, but another when used by a movie star *qua* movie star.

Moreover, recall that the above highlighted sentence—the one about a region and parts and n+1 things—illustrates that the following general claim is false: If a sentence in English expresses an ontologically controversial proposition, this is partly explained by that sentence's being uttered inside the ontology room. So I wonder why Peter should believe that when the sentence 'chairs exist' expresses an ontologically controversial proposition, this is partly explained by that sentence's being uttered inside the ontology room.

Some of my remarks just given have assumed that a certain explanatory circle is vicious: I have assumed, that is, that it would be vicious to say both that expressing a given ontologically loaded proposition by uttering a sentence such as the one about a region and parts and n+1 things explains why we are in the ontology room, and also that being in the ontology room explains why that sentence expresses the proposition that it does. Maybe Peter will accept that sort of circle. I don't think he should. This is partly just because it seems vicious to me. But it is also partly because, if he did accept this sort of circularity of

explanation with regard to "inside the ontology" room as a context of utterance, inside the ontology room looks to me to be even less like an ordinary context of utterance and increases my doubts about its being a *bona fide* context of utterance.

Or maybe Peter will find the notion of explanation opaque here, and so not even understand the circle and my charge of viciousness. I don't think he should do that either. For if he did that, we would lose at least one of the following: His own explanation of when 'chairs exist' expresses one proposition that he accepts and when it expresses another that he rejects. Or, instead, what seems to be his explanation of how we get to be inside, as opposed to outside, the ontology room.

III

Peter thinks that 'chairs exist', when spoken outside the ontology room, does not express a proposition at odds with his own ontology. And Peter says:

> I could put this point by saying that "outside" speakers are not only not speaking Tarskian, but are not committed to the "obvious" translations of their sentences into Tarskian.

He then adds:

> The thesis that '$\exists x\ x$ is a chair' is an "obvious" translation of 'Chairs exist' into Tarskian is, if not established, then at least strongly supported, by the following fact: If, in a course in elementary formal logic, students were given the following exercise
>
> Symbolize 'Chairs exist'; use the scheme of abbreviation Cα: α is a chair,
>
> the instructor would accept no answer from them but some alphabetic variant of '$\exists x\ Cx$'.

But, by Peter's lights, this instructor places unreasonable demands on her students. For, by Peter lights, none but us privileged few ontologists have "ever considered, ever entertained, ever grasped, ever held before their minds" the proposition expressed by '$\exists x\ Cx$'. So why should a logic instructor expect her students to write '$\exists x\ Cx$'—which expresses a proposition that they do not fathom—as a way to symbolize the sentence 'chairs exist', a sentence that expresses a proposition that, since this sentence is being considered outside the ontology room, they do grasp?

I think Peter is forced to say one of three things, all of which have depressing consequences for teaching logic. First, the students can mechanically write down

'∃x Cx' but—because it expresses the ontologically controversial thesis expressed in the ontology room by 'chairs exist'—they are not able to entertain the proposition it expresses, and will walk away falsely thinking that it expresses the same proposition as the one they express with the sentence 'chairs exist'.

Second, the students can mechanically write down '∃x Cx' but—because it expresses either no proposition at all or instead a proposition about sets in a model—they will walk away falsely thinking that it expresses the same proposition as the one they express with the sentence 'chairs exist'. Given either the first or second option, it is false that '∃x Cx' is anything like a translation of the sentence 'chairs exist' as used in a typical logic classroom.

Third, the students write down '∃x Cx', and it does express the same proposition as they express with 'chairs exist'. This implies that '∃x Cx' does not wear its logical structure on its sleeve. It is not, in the logic classroom, a sentence in (what Peter calls) "Tarskian."

I think each of these options is bad news not only for the teaching of logic, but also for Peter. Let's consider the first option. Students mechanically write down '∃x Cx' but have no idea what proposition it expresses, since '∃x Cx' expresses an ontologically controversial proposition. But (according to Peter) to express the relevant ontologically controversial proposition, that sentence must be uttered in the ontology room. (Either because the context of the room explains how that sentence can express that proposition, or because that sentence's expressing that proposition thereby creates an ontology room.) But surely when '∃x Cx' is uttered (or written) by the logic student it is *not* uttered (written) in the ontology room. For to be uttered in the ontology room is to be uttered by agents who are engaged in a certain ontological practice. The logic students are not engaged in this practice; they are just trying to fulfill their math requirement without taking math. So I do not think Peter can happily say that '∃xCx' expresses an ontologically controversial proposition that the students who write down '∃x Cx' cannot grasp.

Let's consider the second option. This is the option that '∃x Cx' does not—in the logic classroom—express a proposition at all, at least not one having to do with things other than sets in a model. Even so, Peter will say that the sentence '∃x Cx' does—in the ontology room—express the ontologically controversial proposition that chairs exist. But then the occurrence of '∃x Cx' in the logic class is not a sentence in (what Peter calls) "Tarskian." For if it were a sentence in Tarskian, it would usher us into the ontology room, and so express the relevant ontologically-loaded proposition about chairs.

(You might object that my reasoning with regard to the first option is in tension with my reasoning with regard to the second option. With regard to the first, I claim that students are not in the ontology room, as Peter seems to understand being inside the ontology room. With regard to the second, I claim that, given

Peter's views, if they were speaking Tarskian they would thereby be in the ontology room. If there is any inconsistency here, it is not my problem. In case you haven't noticed, I am running a *reductio* on Peter's views. So I am delighted with tensions and contradictions resulting from those views.)

Let's consider the third option. This is the option that '∃x Cx' expresses a proposition that the students *do* grasp, the very proposition that they express, outside the ontology room, with 'chairs exist'. But then this sentence—that is, '∃x Cx'—does not wear its logical structure on its sleeve and is not a sentence in Tarskian, not when it is expressed in the logic classroom.

So the second and third options imply that '∃x Cx', in the logic classroom, is not a sentence in Tarskian. Given these second and third options, someone can reasonably claim not to understand the language Peter calls "Tarskian"—after all, it's not anything we'd teach in logic, not even when teaching Tarski. I guess it is a language Peter invented in the paper we are considering today, and he doesn't really give us enough information to learn the language. And if we don't understand Tarskian, then we don't understand Peter's account of which proposition the sentence 'chairs exist' expresses when uttered in the ontology room.

Moreover, the second and third options imply that there are two ways to understand the existential quantifier. I can attempt to exhibit one of those ways by asking you to consider '∃x' as understood inside the ontology room where Peter's special language, Tarskian, is spoken; and I can exhibit the other by asking you to consider '∃x' as understood in the logic classroom, where work by Tarski is studied.

I hope it is clear how awful all the options are here. Please note that we could avoid all these awful options—and all the worries I've been raising in this commentary—if we just admitted up front that the folk are wrong when they say "chairs exist" and that they are wrong because they contradict those informed ontologists who say "chairs do not exist."

IV

Peter says:

> In my view, the metaphysical neutrality of the outside proposition can be established by a very simple observation: it is made true by such states of affairs as *that* (pretend, reader, that I am speaking rather than writing, and that, as I spoke the words 'such states of affairs as *that*', I made an ostensive gesture in the direction of some things arranged chairwise.)

And:

> Similarly, I might gesture in the direction of a tree-filled park on a sunny day and say, "The proposition expressed 'outside' by 'Shadows exist' is made true by such states of affairs as *that*."

Peter's Wittgensteinian view of language creates trouble for the revisionary ontologist. I get that. But I think that this view of language creates trouble for revisionary theses of all sorts, not just those in ontology. And I think Peter should agree, since he makes the following remark, which is not restricted to ontology:

> Well, I suppose I am enough of a Wittgensteinian to think that it is not possible for very much of what we say "in the midst of life" to be false.

Suppose God does not exist. And pretend that I am the village atheist. I live in a village with all and only speakers of a language a lot like English. All my fellow villagers take the sentence 'God exists' to be true and use it regularly in the midst of life. I (try to?) tell them (in the language of our village) that that sentence is false. I do not see how what I say could conceivably be correct, given the Wittgensteinian view of language.

Alternatively, suppose God does exist. And suppose I am the village theist who is the only speaker of my language who thinks that the regularly used sentence 'God does not exist' is false. So I say that it is false. Surely what I say—given our supposition—is correct, but the Wittgensteinian view seems to make that impossible.

Or recall an entire linguistic community in which everyone says 'the earth is the center of the universe'. They say this in the midst of life. Along comes Galileo who says that everyone is wrong. Galileo was right. But he contradicted what everyone else was saying, or else he would not have got into trouble. I do not see how Wiggensteinians about language can accommodate this data. For they must say the proposition expressed by everyone (but Galileo) who used the sentence "the earth is the center of the universe" was made true by states of affairs like *that*, gesturing toward the heavens.

Or imagine an entire linguistic community in which everyone thinks that slavery is morally right, and goes around saying things like "We should do the morally right thing, such as give to charity and support slavery." The reformer comes along and says: "It is false that slavery is morally right." I do not see how the Wittgensteinian can allow for the possibility that everyone but the reformer in this linguistic community have "in the midst of life" been wrong about the morality of slavery. For the Wittgensteinians will say that "such and such is morally right" is made true *by states of affairs like that*, as they gesture toward the institutions around them that are praised. But surely in this case the reformer is speaking the truth.

Or imagine a counterfactual situation very much like our own, but for the fact that, in that situation, determinism is true. Most people in that situation *think* they have a choice about things, act freely, and so on. But they are wrong. A bold philosopher in that situation, armed with a copy of van Inwagen's *An Essay on Free Will*, tells them that since determinism is true, they are wrong to believe they have free will. But this bold philosopher's Wittgensteinian compatriots object that "S freely does A" is *made true by states of affairs like that*, as they gesture toward the actions all around them that are either praised or condemned.

Or imagine a philosopher—this will not be hard to do—who refuses to call himself a revisionary ontologist yet wants to make the revisionary claim that the proposition expressed by the sentence '∃*x* x is a chair' is false. Wittgensteinians about language will not forget their Wittgensteinianism when dealing with logic. And so they will surely insist that, if the sentence '∃*x* x is a chair' expresses a proposition at all, it expresses a proposition made true by such states of affairs as *that*, while gesturing at things arranged chairwise.

Maybe a careful Wittgensteinian about language could develop her view in a way that accommodates the possibility of insightful reformers in religion and science and ethics and action theory and maybe even revisionary-ontology-in-Tarskian-that-claims-not-to-be-revisionary. But then—I want to know—why not accommodate the possibility of insightful and self-avowed ontological reformers as well?

Let me put it this way: What I have said so far amounts to a polemic against what I perceive as a widespread double standard in writings about the relation of revisionary ontology to Wittgensteinian approaches to language. This double standard consists in setting revisionary ontology a test it could not possibly pass, and in studiously ignoring the fact that very few of our revisionary beliefs on any subject could possibly pass this test.