

JOHN HEIL, *From an Ontological Point of View*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003, xv + 267 pp, \$45.00 cloth, ISBN 0-19-925974-7.

Reviewed by ACHILLE C. VARZI, *Department of Philosophy, Columbia University, New York NY 10027, USA*

[Final version published in *Philosophical Books* 47:2 (2006), 148–154]

This book has three messages to offer. The first is metaphilosophical, and is clearly stated at the beginning: honest philosophy requires “what the Australians call ontological seriousness” (p. 2). The second is methodological: the idea that the character of reality can be ‘read off’ our linguistic representations of it—or our suitably regimented linguistic representations—is both wrong and pernicious. Among other things, it is responsible for the pervasive tendency to posit different levels of being, which in turn generates a myriad of philosophical puzzles that on closer look are just “puzzles of our own making” (p. 8). Finally, the third message is strictly philosophical and involves a detailed articulation and defence of Heil’s own serious, one-level ontology, the central ingredients of which are properties, understood as ways particular objects are, and objects, understood as things that are various ways. Heil argues that this view fits well with what we have learned or might learn from the empirical sciences as well as with ordinary canons of plausibility. He then proceeds to apply the view to a number of topics that feature prominently in current philosophical literature, such as identity, colour, intentionality, and consciousness.

Concerning the first message, there is not much one can say. Either you agree (as I do) or you don’t. Either you think you need to do ontology in order to do philosophy, or you think it’s better to repress or even suppress your ontological impulses and work out your philosophical views on different grounds, or from a different perspective. Heil is candid about this. Ask him, and he might even tell you he’s an amateur in matters of metaphysics. But he thinks every philosophical view owes an ontological debt, and paying that debt honestly requires ontological seriousness. You must put your cards on the table at some point. I suppose this is why Heil felt compelled to write this book, after years of militant contributions to other areas of philosophy (notably: epistemology and the philosophy of mind).

The second message is mostly negative, and it partly depends on the first, but here one begins to feel the pressure of Heil's arguments. Don't start with language and try to work out your way outwards—he says—otherwise you'll never get outside language. One can see why someone serious about ontology would want to issue this message. Suppose you are serious about properties, i.e., you think that properties are real and that they are what they are independently of what we take them to be. Then surely there is no reason to think that you can learn something about such entities by scrutinizing features of our language—no reason to think that the reality and character of properties is reflected in the predicates we use to talk about the world. Never mind the fact that some predicates might strike you as utterly artificial. (You don't need to be ontologically serious to be suspicious about the reality of Cambridge properties, or Humean projected properties, or other sorts of putative properties the possession of which would make no difference to their possessors.) Also with respect to those predicates concerning which you may be an avowed realist you should resist the thought that they carve reality 'at the joints'. You should think that such predicates truly apply to objects by virtue of properties possessed by those objects, but that doesn't mean that the predicates themselves pick out those properties, nor does it follow that it must be possible to analyze such predicates into other predicates or concepts that do pick out the relevant properties. Your realism about ' $\phi$ ' just tells you nothing about the properties by virtue of which something may actually  $\phi$ .

Even those readers who do not share Heil's views on ontological seriousness, however, will find his methodological caveat worth listening to. Of course there is a long tradition in analytic philosophy that emphasizes precisely the importance of linguistic analysis, the idea that in pursuing philosophical questions one should start with language and work one's way outwards. Wittgenstein famously held that our philosophical conundrums are self-imposed—that they arise, not from the nature of things, as in the case of scientific puzzles, but from our distorted ways of thinking and talking. Yet this is just the beginning. One may follow Wittgenstein's deflationary attitude and conclude that paying due attention to our linguistic practices will result in a *dissolution* of our conundrums (hence of the need for distinctive philosophical theorizing). But one might also think that by properly attending to the ordinary use of language one can get a better grip of the problems and, consequently, begin to work out a reasonable *solution*. One might think that because our ordinary linguistic practices may be 'misleading' (as Ryle put it), we have to be careful; the truth lies beneath the surface and the task of philosophy is to bring

it out. Arguably, this is how most analytic philosophers conceive of their work, *pace* Wittgenstein. And to these philosophers Heil's caveat should at least sound disquieting. What guarantee do we have that by suitably disentangling our linguistic practices we would get closer to the truth? What guarantee do we have that our concepts and the words we use to express them, when properly analyzed, will provide us with a key to understanding the nature of things? The only guarantee, says Heil, would stem from a tacit adherence to what he calls the 'Picture Theory', the view that elements of the way we represent the world linguistically—at the level of logical form if not in ordinary discourse—line up with elements of the world itself. But this view has disruptive consequences.

Consider a standard scenario. You believe that Gus is in pain, i.e., you take the assertion 'Gus is in pain' to be true. Suppose you also regard this assertion to have exactly the logical form that it wears on its sleeve: you are ascribing pain to Gus. As an adherent of the Picture Theory, you must take this to mean that your pain predicate picks out a property of Gus's. But of course the very same predicate applies to other creatures as well, sentient creatures belonging to a large variety of species. Since it is doubtful that all such creatures (actual or merely possible) share a unique physical property in virtue of which your pain predicate applies truly to them, you are led to infer that the property corresponding to your predicate must be something non-physical. It must be a 'higher-level' property that those creatures possess in virtue of their possessing some other, 'lower-level' (physical) property. Reality, you conclude, is hierarchically structured—a conclusion that will soon be reinforced upon considering that many other genuine predicates turn out to be irreducibly 'multiply realizable'. Moral: you now start worrying about supervenience, epiphenomenalism, and all that; you start worrying about the sort of inter-level relations that keep the pieces together. That may well be worth the while, but at some point you should take stock and ponder upon the nature of your enterprise: you were brought into this mess by your reliance on the Picture Theory. There are other options, of course. You may just give up your initial belief and conclude that because your pain predicate (for example) does not line up with any element of the physical world, pain is just a *façon de parler*—that is, you may become an eliminativist, and revise your linguistic analysis of 'Gus is in pain' accordingly. Or you may become a committed reductionist: keep looking and with some luck one day you will succeed in identifying pain with a suitable physical realizer. Be that as it may, in each case your adherence to the Picture Theory has not led to a solution of a problem; it has generated an embarrassing *richesse* of new and challenging difficulties. Perhaps that is what

philosophical progress is all about. But perhaps it is instead a sign that your methodology is just hopeless—and that’s the point of Heil’s message. “The history of philosophical analysis provides little reason to think that in this case, as in most other philosophically interesting cases, we could hope to find an analytic route from concept to truth-maker” (p. 9). (Other ‘interesting cases’ considered by Heil include colours, statues, human beings, propositions.)

Besides, the very idea that we can suitably disentangle our linguistic practices so as to uncover the ‘logical form’ of ordinary statements is, on closer look, deeply problematic. The big lesson from the early days of analytic philosophy is that what you see is not what you get. But who decides what lies beneath the surface? Who gives philosophers the right to determine what we really mean when we speak with the vulgar? Russell’s analysis of definite descriptions was driven by his “robust sense of reality”; drop that—drop his ontological seriousness—and the analysis is up for grabs. Davidson’s analysis of action sentences was driven by his commitment to standard predicate logic; drop that and the analysis has many competitors. So-called ‘hermeneutic’ understanding of linguistic regimentation is currently under attack from all sides, and rightly so. On the other hand, its ‘revolutionary’ understanding—the idea that regimentation does not reveal the logical form of an ordinary statement; it just fixes it—is certainly not something you can rely on if you are planning to ‘start with language and try to work out your way outwards’. Revolutionary regimentation can only take place at the end of the process, *after* you have worked out your views. One way or the other, then, the idea that we can learn something about the world by laying open the logical structures underlying our language is intrinsically problematic. Surprisingly, Heil does not exploit this line of reasoning. He could have done so, though. And, had he done so, his second, methodological message might very well have turned into an argument for the first—his metaphilosophical plea for ontological seriousness.

Be that as it may, let me repeat that this second message is mostly a negative one. Heil tells us not to buy into the Picture Theory, and devotes the first six chapters of his book to debunking the ‘levels of reality’ conception that so easily follows from it. But what is the alternative? What else is there that could serve as a vehicle for (serious) ontological inquiry, if our linguistic representation of the world is a non-starter? Heil doesn’t say. He wants to be a realist, so obviously he is not giving up on the idea of truth making; on the contrary, Heil emphatically endorses C.B. Martin’s principle: “when a statement concerning the world is true, there must be something about the world that makes it true”

(p. 61). But standard truth-maker theories rest on the idea that Martin's principle calls for an analytical path between truth-bearers and truth-makers—that we can explain truth making in terms of entailment, for example—and that “is just the Picture Theory in another of its many guises” (p. 66). Nor does Heil have any substitute account to offer. So we are left with the negative message, along with the conjecture that truth making may just not be explicable “in a way that employs simpler, clearer concepts” (p. 67).

Still, giving up the Picture Theory doesn't mean one should feel at loss. After all, we do not just encounter the world through the veil of language; we have plenty of other experiences. We see, touch, taste, smell, and hear the things around us. So even if Heil is not explicit about the underlying method, surely his ontological views don't come out of the air. It is to these views that the bulk of the book, from Chapter 8 to Chapter 16, is devoted. And it is the theory that emerges from such views that constitutes Heil's third message, the positively philosophical one. To reiterate, the one-sentence summary of the theory is that the world comprises two ingredients: properties, construed as ways particular objects are, and objects, i.e., property-bearers—things that are various ways. What Heil means by ‘ways’ (or ‘modes’) is reminiscent of what others call ‘tropes’: particulars, not universals (Ch. 13). (Universals are “an acquired taste”, p. 149.) But trope theorists tend to think of objects as mereological aggregates of such particulars, whereas Heil thinks of them as genuine Lockean substrata (on one reading of Locke): an object is something that *is* various ways, not something made up of those ways (Ch. 15). Objects are not bare particulars either, and they are not thin particulars to which properties are affixed. A property-bearer has all the properties it ‘supports’ and no more. And “just as an object must be some way (nothing can be no way at all), ways must be ways something is” (p. 172). Moreover, properties are simultaneously qualitative and dispositional, i.e., they also contribute to the dispositionalities of their bearers (Ch. 11)—again, a view that Heil takes from C.B. Martin, if not from Locke; and although an object's dispositions, or ‘powers’, are dispositions *for* particular kinds of manifestation, with particular kinds of reciprocal disposition partner, they are not relations but intrinsic features of that object (Ch. 8). Nor are quality and disposition two distinct ‘aspects’ of properties: “A property's dispositionality and its qualitativity are . . . the selfsame property differently considered” (p. 112).

Now (take a breath), each of these theses is carefully articulated, though I suspect that few readers will be convinced by everything Heil says on their behalf. In most cases, Heil's strategy is not to argue *for* a particular thesis, but

rather to make it plausible, or to show that the alternatives are either independently problematic or else betray an implicit allegiance to the iniquitous Picture Theory. This is not a surprising strategy at this point, and it just confirms what Heil declares at the outset: in ontology as elsewhere, getting things right “may require triangulation rather than anything resembling direct comparison of theory and world” (p. 3). The side effect is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to venture a reasonable assessment of Heil’s accomplishments in just a few lines, so I am afraid I’ll have to leave the details to the reader. Let me just focus on the bottom line, which presumably is also what Heil cares the most about. This is meant to be strictly a one-level ontology, or rather a ‘no-levels’ ontology (p. 173): if there are levels, “these are levels of complexity or organization or, alternatively, levels of description or explanation, not levels of being” (p. 67). How is this picture supposed to work? What verdicts does it deliver when it comes to the apparent complexity of our ordinary and scientific talk about pain (for instance), or about the existence and identity conditions of such “interesting cases” as statues, colours, human beings?

To begin with, don’t think that Heil’s objects should coincide with the things we ordinarily regard as objects. Heil’s ontology commits you to the view that there must be some basic, simple objects out of which all other objects are composed (mereologically), but it does not commit you to saying exactly what those basic and complex objects are. Perhaps the basic objects are material corpuscles; perhaps (more likely) fields. This may well be “an empirical matter” (p. 174). Likewise, don’t think that Heil’s properties should coincide with what we ordinarily regard as properties. His ontology commits you to the view that there are simple as well as complex properties, i.e., ways objects are. But what those properties are may be an empirical matter, and similarities among basic properties is a “primitive and irreducible” fact (p. 157). In short: “the question of what the objects are, like the question of what the properties are, is not one to be answered from the armchair” (p. 177). All of this may be problematic, of course, but never mind that. I am citing these theses just to make sure we don’t let our pre-analytical intuitions enter the picture at the wrong stage. Then here is how the machinery is supposed to work.

Consider pain (§14.8). You maintain that the predicate ‘pain’ truly and literally applies, or could apply, to a large variety of creatures, yet such creatures do not appear to share any unique physical property in virtue of which your pain predicate applies to them? The right thing to say, given Heil’s theory, is that ‘pain’ just does not denote a property, a way things can be; yet it can truly

and literally be applied to an object in virtue of (*see* truth making) that object's possession of any of a diverse range of similar (*see* brute facts) properties. The plurality of such properties shows that this is a case of multiple realizability, if you like that parlance; yet that only means that 'pain' is a higher-level predicate, not that pain is a higher-level property. Nor is there any pressure to analyze that predicate in terms of 'first-level' ones, if you have troubles with that; for truth making does not require analytic reduction. (This is the rough story. If you like nuances, you may, for instance, qualify your appeal to brute facts as follows: the relevant properties are 'dispositionally' similar, i.e., they are such that they would manifest similar outputs given similar inputs.)

Or consider fragility (§ 11.3). You want to say that the predicate 'fragile' truly and literally applies, or could apply, to a large variety of things that have nothing in common, such as ice cubes, light bulbs, kneecaps? Again, we have a so-called case of multiple realizability. But the right thing to say is just that your predicate applies to those things in virtue of their possessing any of a diverse range of similar dispositions. Putative lower-level realizers of higher-level fragility are just different ways of being fragile. And remember: dispositions do not require special treatment: every object's intrinsic properties are *simultaneously* qualitative and dispositional. So those ways of being fragile are just ways those objects are; they are properties those objects have, the possession of which endows those objects with certain powers. (You like nuances? Certainly dispositions and qualities seem to vary independently: dyeing an ice cube red would not alter its disposition to shatter. But then, again, it would change it dispositionally in some way: if you painted it red, it would *look* red, i.e., it would reflect light differently from a plain, colourless ice cube.)

For another example, consider the status of ordinary material bodies, such as statues and lumps of bronze (Ch. 16). It's easy to reckon why Heil would deem the Picture Theory responsible for those multi-level accounts that view a statue as something 'over and above' the bronze that constitutes it. Now, suppose it turned out that the basic objects are material corpuscles of some sort. Would you have to give up your belief that the statue in front of you is real? Surely not. It's just that the statue turns out to be a mereological aggregate of corpuscles, and so does the lump of bronze. Would you then have to give up your intuition that 'statue' and 'lump of bronze' are sortals, and that these sortals are associated with different identity conditions? Surely not. Treating a term as a sortal does not oblige you to suppose that it can only apply to basic objects. And saying that 'statue' and 'lump of bronze' are associated with different identity conditions does not oblige you to suppose that such conditions

reflect different (modal, historical, etc.) properties possessed by the objects to which these sortals apply, hence to distinguish the statue in front of you from the lump of bronze in front of you. It just means that there are different constraints on the application of those sortals: talk of statues is not analytically reducible to talk of lumps of bronze; yet it can truly apply to certain lumps of bronze in virtue of their possession of certain properties, i.e., in virtue of the ways those lumps (or the simples that compose them) are. There is no need to embrace an ontology of coinciding entities, no need to posit a hierarchy of things at different levels of reality.

What if it turned out that the basic objects are something other than material corpuscles? I suppose that if it turned out that they are fields, say, the picture would only require minor adjustments. But what if it turned out that there is just one object—space, or space-time, or some all-embracing quantum field? Would we be forced to give up our realist impulses and say that under such circumstances statues do not *really* exist? We wouldn't, says Heil. Were things so, “the deep truth about objects like statues and lumps of bronze would be that such things are in fact modes” (p. 189), that they are ways that one all-inclusive object is. You could still use the sortals ‘statue’ and ‘lump of bronze’ to speak truly about the world. It's just that the truth-makers for your claims would be properties, not objects.

These are just some examples, though I hope they suffice to illustrate how Heil's theory is supposed to work. Too good to be true? Maybe so. We are supposed to buy into a rich and powerful package, parts of which are unfashionable if not unpopular, and we are asked to rely heavily on a notion of truth making that is hard to pin down. But then, again, look also at the hard cases discussed in the last four chapters of the book: colours, intentionality, conscious experience, zombies. If it is true that the value of a philosophical theory lies (also) in its ability to deal with challenging philosophical puzzles, and if it is true that in this regard ontological theories are no different from other philosophical theories, if not from theories generally, then the package may well be worth the price. I will let the readers judge on their own. As far as I am concerned, I say the package is certainly worth a close look. Heil has given us a rich, refreshing, deeply interesting piece of work, broad in scope and loaded with content. No philosopher can afford to dismiss its messages, regardless of his or her willingness to make a treasure of them.