

Making Sense of Ontological Commitment

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Abstract

According to Quine, a sentence S commits us to F s just in case F s must be assumed to be among the values of the bound variables of S in order for S to be true. I argue that this and related criteria of ontological commitment are inadequate, as they trivialize the notion of ontological commitment. I then offer a different criterion of ontological commitment in terms of what sentences rationally require us to believe if we accept them. This alternative criterion is in line with characterizations of ontological commitment offered by Quine in central works. If, however, this alternative criterion is correct, then a rather surprising consequence follows: ontological commitment is not a relation between a sentence and an object or a class of objects but is rather a relation between an intentional act and a special kind of intension.

Overview

- **What does it mean?**
- What it doesn't mean
- Commitment Talk
- Ellipsis
- Analysis
- Objections
- Hyperintensionality
- Consequences
- Conclusion

Ontological Commitment

What does it mean?

A sentence *S* ***commits us to Fs*** just in case ***Fs must be assumed to be among the values of the bound variables*** of *S* in order for *S* to be true (Quine: “On What There Is”, 1948).

“As applied to discourse in an explicitly quantificational form of language, the notion of ontological commitment ***belongs to the theory of reference***” (Quine: “Notes on the Theory of Reference”, 1953, emphasis added)

What it doesn't mean

- Quine: the OC relation is on a par with the reference relation ('n' refers to n), i.e., it is extensional.
- An extensional relation is referentially transparent in both positions.
- But the OC relation is ***not extensional***. 'Santa is' and 'Odin is' do not have ***the same commitments***.

What it doesn't mean

Another Argument Against Extensionality

Implication Principle (IP)

The commitments of a sentence's implications (e.g., ***there are roses***) are among the commitments of the sentence itself (e.g., ***there are red roses***).

What it doesn't mean

Ontological commitment is *not* extensional.

First horn of dilemma (Parsons)

- If OC is extensional, then the **set of entities that satisfy 'Fx'** is a subset of the set of entities to which '∃xFx' is **committed**. ***'There are red roses' commits us to red roses and to roses.***
- But any sentence '∃xFx' entails a sentence of the form '∃x(Fx ∨ not-Fx)'.
- The set of entities that satisfy 'Fx ∨ not-Fx' is the universal set.
- So, '∃x(Fx ∨ not-Fx)' ***is committed to the universal set (only U has U as a subset).***
- By IP, '∃xFx' ***is also committed to the universal set, regardless of what 'F' is!***

What it doesn't mean

Second horn

- If OC is extensional, then the set of entities to which ' $\exists xFx$ ' is **committed** is a subset of the set of entities that satisfy ' Fx '.
- But any sentence ' $\exists xFx$ ' is entailed by a sentence of the form ' $\exists x(Fx \ \& \ \text{not-}Fx)$ '.
- The set of entities that satisfy ' $Fx \ \& \ \text{not-}Fx$ ' is the empty set.
- So, ' $\exists x(Fx \ \& \ \text{not-}Fx)$ ' ***is committed to the empty set (only $\{\}$ is a subset of $\{\}$)***.
- By IP, ' $\exists xFx$ ' ***is also committed to the empty set, regardless of what 'F' is!***

What it doesn't mean

“ ‘There are Fs’ commits us to Fs”

Suggestion (Modal)

“Necessarily, if ‘There are Fs’ is true, then there are Fs” (Rayo)

Alternative (Truth-Maker): “Necessarily, if ‘There are Fs’ is *made true*, then there are Fs”.

What it doesn't mean

Problem

Suppose necessarily, numbers don't exist

Counterpossible indicative. Vacuously true.

“Necessarily, if ‘2 exists’ is true, then 2 exists” True

“Necessarily, if ‘2 exists’ is true, then 2 does not exist” True

We can't distinguish:

“ ‘2 exists’ commits us to the number 2”

“ ‘2 exists’ doesn't commit us to the number 2”

What it doesn't mean

“Necessarily, if ‘ $\exists xFx$ ’ is true, then there are Fs”

Other unintuitive consequences

- Any sentence whatsoever is committed to ***necessary entities*** (e.g., numbers).
- ‘John is sitting’ commits us to ***zygotes***.
- ‘Bush Jr. & Bush Sr. exist’ commits us to ***fathers***.

Consequence

New Proposal: “ ‘S’ commits us to the existence of Fs” means “ ‘there are Fs’ **is a consequence of ‘S’** ”

1. “ ‘There are Fs’ commits us to the existence of Fs” is **informative**. But “ ‘There are Fs’ is a consequence of ‘There are Fs’ ” is not.

2. Which **logic**? **Classical**? If, necessarily, there are no numbers, ‘there are numbers’ commits us to everything.

Basicity

- “Ontological Commitment” is a **basic term**, which cannot be analyzed any further. We have pre-theoretical understanding of what it means.
- **Reply:** Is it a relation between a sentence and a class of objects, or a relation between a sentence and a property/intension? Does “Bush Jr. and Bush Sr. exist” commit us to the existence of fathers?
- I doubt we have sufficient **pre-theoretical understanding** of what it means, **unless “commit” means what it means in ordinary language.**

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Commitment Talk

- John is committed to paying child support
- Mary is committed to Peter
- The funds are committed to a reconstruction project
- Our university is committed to being international
- My wife is committed to believing in me.
- We are committed to believing God will fulfill every promise

Commitment Talk

IS COMMITTED TO

- Is obliged to
- Has promised to stay together with
- Is bound by contract to
- Is working towards the end:
- Is bound by code X to

Nonsense

“ ‘Santa is’ commits us to Santa”

Nonsense:

- “ ‘Santa is’ makes us obliged to Santa”
- “ ‘Santa is’ has made us promise to stay together with Santa”
- “ ‘Santa is’ binds us by contract to Santa”
- “ ‘Santa is’ makes us work towards the end: Santa”
- “ ‘Santa is’ binds us by code x to Santa”

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Ellipsis

“ _____ ‘Santa Claus is’ commits us
to _____ the existence of Santa
Claus”

Ellipsis

“ACCEPTING ‘Santa Claus is’ commits us to BELIEVING IN the existence of Santa Claus”

Ellipsis

“ACCEPTING ‘Santa Claus is’ commits us to BELIEVING IN the existence of Santa Claus”

“Accepting ‘Santa is’ requires us by code X to believe that Santa exists”

Which code?

Ellipsis

“ACCEPTING ‘Santa Claus is’ commits us to BELIEVING IN the existence of Santa Claus”

“Accepting ‘Santa is’ requires us by code X to believe that Santa exists”

Which code? RATIONALITY

Acceptance

- ***Acceptance***, in one sense, ***entails belief***.
- But acceptance is occurrent.
- One can fail to accept a sentence one believes.

Pluralism

We ought to be *pluralists* about the *primary bearers* of ontological commitment.

A range of normative criteria:

“*Asserting* ‘Santa is’ requires us, by the *rules of assertion*, to *assent* to ‘Santa is’ ”

“Presupposing ‘Santa is’ requires us, by the rules of presupposition, to assent to ‘Santa is’ ”

I will *focus on acceptance*.

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Analysis

“ ‘S’ commits us to Fs”

means

“Accepting ‘S’ rationally requires us to believe there are Fs”

Generalizing

“ ‘S’ commits us to Fs”

means

“Necessarily, if we accept ‘S’, then we are rationally required to believe that there are Fs”

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Objections: Unacceptable Sentences

- “Necessarily, if we accept ‘S’, then we are rationally required to believe that there are Fs”
- A: “It’s raining but I do not accept ‘It is raining’ ”.
- If no one can accept A, then A is ***unacceptable***. So, the analysis is true regardless of what ‘F’ stands for. So, A commits us to anything whatsoever (Pegasus, flying monsters, zombies, etc).

Reply

- *As to accept* is a ***psychological notion***, no sentence is unacceptable. Compare Moore's sentence, which is believable.

Objection: Rational Requirement

“Necessarily, if we accept ‘S’, then we are rationally required to believe that there are Fs”

I am rationally required to believe my mind exists in any world in which I accept ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’. So, ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ ontologically commits me to the existence of my mind.

Reply

- I am *not* rationally required to believe my mind exists in worlds in which ***I do not possess the concept of mind.***

Objection: Belief

“Accepting ‘S’ rationally requires us to believe there are Fs”

Suppose there are *no numbers*

Mary accepts “8 is an even number”. So, Mary is rationally required to believe that 8 exists.

If 8 does not exist, what does “8” refer to?

Reply: Belief

Fregeanism

- Names undergo *reference shifts* in belief contexts.
- “Mary believes that 8 exists” is true iff Mary believes an “8 exists”-appropriate sense.

Belief

Russellianism

- Names refer to individuals in any context.

Gappy-Content Strategy

- “Mary is rationally required to believe that 8 exists” is true iff Mary is rationally required to believe the content “ $\exists x(x = \{\})$ ”.
- As “8 exists” and “Santa exists” incur the **same commitments**, “8 exists” commits us to the existence of Santa.
- **Hidden-indexical theory might work.** Mary is rationally required to believe the content “ $\exists x(x = \{\})$ ” relative to an “8 exists”-appropriate propositional guise.

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Hyperintensionality

- An ***operator*** O is hyperintensional iff there are a pair of sentences S and S^* such that S and S^* are necessarily equivalent but OS and OS^* are not.
- Generalizing, *ontological commitment* is hyperintensional iff there is a pair of names or predicates $P1$ and $P2$ and a sentence S such that $P1$ and $P2$ are necessarily co-extensional but “ S commits us to $P1$ ” is not necessarily equivalent to “ S commits us to $P2$ ”.
- *Ontological commitment* is hyperintensional. Suppose necessarily, there are no numbers. Then “8” and “9” are necessarily co-extensional. But “8 exists” commits us only to the existence of 8.

Hyperintensionality

- The ontological commitment relation is ***not a relation between a sentence and a class of things.***
- The OC relation is a ***relation between an intentional act and a hyperintension*** (i.e., narrow concept or sense).

Hyperintensionality

- “ Accepting ‘Hesperus exists’ rationally requires us to believe **Hesperus** exists” (imagine a theory in ancient Greece).
- Does accepting “Phosphorus exists” rationally require us to believe **Phosphorus** exists?
- Are you ***rationally required to believe all consequences of what you are rationally required to believe?***
- **No** → **Not** (necessarily) intersubstitutable. Ontological commitment is ***agent-relative***.
- **Yes** → “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” are intersubstitutable. Ontological commitment ***agent-neutral***.

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Consequences

Substitutional quantification

- “ $\exists x(Fx)$ ” is truth-conditionally equivalent to an infinitary ***disjunction*** of all “ $F(t)$ ”s, where ‘t’ is any ***closed term*** in the English language.
- Standard line: ‘There are fictional mice that talk’ does not commit us to fictional mice that talk.
- ***If we accept ‘there are fictional mice that talk’ we ought to believe that there are fictional mice that talk.***
- Substitutional quantification is ***ontologically committal.***

Consequences

Objectual Quantification with *substitutional meta-language:*

- ***Objectual quantifiers:*** ‘ $\exists xFx$ ’ is true iff there is at least one object in the range of the variables that satisfies ‘ Fx ’.
- ***Meta-language*** ‘there is’ is substitutional.
- ***Yet ontologically committal***

Consequences

Truth-Maker Account of Ontological
Dispute:

Nihilist: 'There are chairs' is *made true* by collections of atoms arranged chair-wise. So, there are chairs but this **does not commit me** to chairs (as opposed to collections of atoms arranged chair-wide).

WON'T WORK

Consequences

Predicate View of Commitment:

' $\exists xFx$ ' is not ontologically committing, but ' $\exists x(Fx \ \& \ Px)$ ' is, where 'P' is a predicate of your choice (instantiated by all and only objects that exist in the substantial sense), ***e.g. 'concrete', 'ontologically independent', 'present'.***

WON'T WORK

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Conclusion

- Ontological Commitment is best understood in terms of what we are rationally required to believe.
- The OC relation is a relation between an intentional act and a hyperintension.
- Ontological commitment talk is cheap

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