

John Heil. Symposium on his ontological point of view

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Michael Esfeld

Introduction

Michael Esfeld

Fifty years after Willard Van Orman Quine published *From a logical point of view* (1953), John Heil brought out his book *From an ontological point of view* (2003). The title expresses the shift in contemporary philosophy from logical and epistemological concerns that were at the centre of the debate between logical empiricism and its critics to metaphysics. In that respect, Heil's book is a milestone in current philosophy, because it urges us to avoid loose talk, putting our ontological cards on the table. There is a lot of philosophers' shop-talk today in terms of, for instance, thinking subjects standing in relations to propositions, or facts being out there in the world, or second-order properties being realized by first-order properties, etc. If one uses such concepts – or whatever other concepts – in conceiving and expressing one's beliefs, one has to spell out what it is that makes true the beliefs that one holds true. That's what being ontologically serious means. "Truth making" stands in Heil's book simply for the commitment to make explicit what grounds the truth of a belief, for any belief that one holds true. Heil does not enter into a detailed theory of what truth making consists in, accepting truth making in that sense as a primitive notion.

Of course, being ontologically serious does not mean that one can or should compare one's beliefs to what there is in the world. It is a truism that one can only seek to achieve a comprehensive and coherent system of beliefs. However, that truism does not amount to putting epistemology before metaphysics. This system includes beliefs about the nature of beliefs. That truism does therefore not prevent the question of what is a belief (or a text, or a discourse to use more fashionable terms) from being a sensible one, indeed the first question to be asked and answered about beliefs, thus establishing the project of a metaphysics of mind and cognition as a central philosophical topic among others. In short, in doing philosophy, in whatever area of philosophy, one cannot but put metaphysics first.

The content of Heil's metaphysics is built around two theses: the first one is the rejection of levels of being and, consequently, the commitment to a sort of ontological reductionism. The second one is the view that each property is both categorical (or qualitative) and dispositional. The distinction between "categorical" and "dispositional" concerns predicates, not properties. Each property makes true categorical and dispositional descriptions.

The first thesis puts Heil in opposition to mainstream functionalism. In that respect, Heil's position is close to the reductive physicalism of David Lewis, or Jaegwon Kim, although Heil subscribes neither to the type identity thesis nor to epistemological reductionism (theory reduction). Moreover, Heil, in contrast to Lewis, is not a Humean. The second thesis puts him in the camp of those who seek to rehabilitate a metaphysics of dispositions or powers against the mainstream broadly Humean current as regards laws, causation, and dispositions. Both mainstream functionalism and mainstream Humeanism about laws, causation, and dispositions have come under a forceful attack in the last decade or so. The debate on these issues is again open. Heil's book is a major contribution to that debate, seeking to move contemporary metaphysics into the direction of ontological reductionism and the conception of powerful properties.

The contributions to the present symposium on *John Heil's ontological point of view* mainly focus on these fundamental issues, but also consider some of the applications, notably in the philosophy of mind. In his introductory paper, *John Heil* sums up what the attitude of ontological seriousness amounts to, distinguishing that attitude from the one that takes the analysis of language as the guide to ontology. The paper by *Simon Friederich & Giovanni Tuzet* scrutinizes Heil's methodology of tying ontological seriousness to truth making, questioning the rationale of a primitive notion of truth making. The following three papers are devoted to the topic of levels of being and reductionism: *Jens Harbecke* argues against Heil that levels of being have to be acknowledged if Heil is to avoid the charge of eliminativism. *Vera Hoffmann* does not go as far as Jens Harbecke in her criticism of Heil, but maintains that it is not clear how complex properties can be vindicated within Heil's metaphysics. *Christian Sachse*, by contrast, accepts Heil's ontological reductionism and goes beyond Heil, linking ontological reductionism with epistemological reductionism (theory reduction). He sets out a proposal in that respect that is intended to avoid the objection from multiple realizability.

The following five papers discuss Heil's theory of properties. *Vincent Lam* argues that Heil's commitment to the fundamental physical properties being intrinsic properties is unjustified in the light of contemporary physics. He makes a case for structural realism, arguing against Heil that we have good reasons for believing that our world is a world made up only of relations. *Georg Sparber* seeks to rehabilitate the conditional analysis of disposition ascriptions against Martin's and Heil's arguments that are based on finkish dispositions. Against that background, he envisages adopting an eliminativist attitude towards dispositions. *Laurent Freland* claims that Heil's view of properties being both categorical and dispositional is incoherent: "categorical" and "dispositional" are descriptions that exclude each other. If both are considered as applying to the same property, we have to introduce the notion of conceptual schemes. Consequently, Heil's realism is compromised. *Flavia Padovani* considers the view of laws of nature that Heil should adopt, comparing this view to the one of Nancy Cartwright. *Michael Esfeld* seeks to combine Heil's ontological reductionism with his theory of properties, arguing that the latter opens up the perspective of a conservative reductionism in contrast to an eliminativist one.

The last two papers consider the application of Heil's ontology of properties to the philosophy of mind: *Michael Sollberger* challenges Heil's arguments in favour of intrinsic, non-representational qualia and wonders whether the admission of such qualia fits into Heil's theory of properties. *Marc Aurel Hunziker* points out that Heil's conception of intentionality wavers between the position that intentionality is the mark of mental, representational states and the view according to which there is a sort of natural intentionality characteristic of all dispositions. He argues in favour of acknowledging unconscious representational states.