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Abstract

The paper proposes with Davidson that the talk of metaontology is literally meaningless, but with Wittgenstein that it is so in a way that grants a unique type of insight. More specifically, it argues both that Davidson's arguments have a cogency that is hard to dismiss, and also that, since his own arguments are metaontological, they are self-referential, and consequently in turn undermine their own meaning as well. The paper argues further that metaontological statements cannot be avoided. Consequently, this kind of statement constitutes an unavoidable self-referential paradox that means what it also excludes as capable of meaning. The result is a reinstatement of the meaning of ontological insight and in fact, the paper argues, a deep enrichment and also a particularly cogent justification of it. In addition, the logical peculiarity of the paradox involved has further useful consequences for the outcome of this justification, including a mutually illuminating commonality with some versions of metaethics.

Davidson and a Twist of Wittgenstein:
Metaontology, Self-Canceling Paradox, and Settled Insight

Jeremy Barris

Where “ontology” is the study of the nature of reality, “metaontology” refers to the study of that study: that is, thoughtful statements about the nature of thoughtful statements about the nature of reality. There has been a recent revival of interest in metaontology that has taken the form of debates about or partly turning on the kind of meaning that metaontological statements can have—whether, for example, they have cognitive content or only pragmatic import—and exploring the consequences of the proposed answers for ontological issues.¹ These questions are typically approached by means of formal techniques, in particular those of formal semantics. While these questions are important, and these techniques indispensable for establishing the crux of many issues in these debates, I believe that giving them priority comes at the cost of missing the forest, or the fundamentals of the status of metaontology. I want to propose, instead, an approach based on a combination of Davidson and Wittgenstein. That is, I suggest that the very talk of metaontology is literally meaningless (the Davidsonian part), but in a way that grants a unique type of insight (the Wittgensteinian part). Further, I suggest that this is a type of insight that does justice to the profundity of both metaontology and ontology. This approach brings out, for example, the insufficiency of *any* language, formal or natural, to address the most fundamental questions and claims of ontology, and at the same time brings out what is successfully achieved in this respect by recognition of the precise character of that insufficiency itself.

So, for example, some of the representative essays in Chalmers et al (2009) try to sort out whether or not metaontological questions are inherently empty of cognitive content as Carnap argued (e.g., Eklund 2009); more particularly, some discuss whether, for instance, the expression “being” can be replaced by quantifier expressions such as “something” or “everything,” in this way eliminating the apparently deep questions seemingly evoked by talk of “being” (e.g., Inwagen 2009). Others explore whether ontological pluralism is intelligible and, if it is, how to understand it (e.g., Eklund 2009). In addition to directly addressing these kinds of issues, these essays are also representative in drawing and commenting on considerations such as whether ontologies speak past each other and so cannot genuinely conflict (Eklund 2009; Price 2009), or the ways in which one ontology may be taken as more or less impoverished than another with respect to the range of objects it includes (e.g., Chalmers 2009). What I shall argue is, first (with Davidson), that the problems with metaontological meaning apply to the meanings of any such arguments themselves, so that whatever conclusions these essays may draw on any of these issues lose their meaning; but, second, that this loss of meaning applies to that result too (since that argument too is about ontology, that is, it is metaontological itself), so that this loss of meaning is revoked and the original meaningfulness of the arguments and their conclusions is consequently reinstated;² and, third (with Wittgenstein), that, because of this interaction of meaning and loss of meaning, these conclusions function as a very different type of statement from the kind which offers stably formulable propositional meaning. This very different functioning of metaontological language, I shall argue, is what offers the unique kind of insight which Wittgenstein expresses as “see[ing] the world aright” (1961, 74, prop. 6.54). I shall show how this argument applies more particularly to these various issues explored in the metaontological literature as the discussion proceeds.

To return to the outline of my procedure, I shall argue, more specifically, both that Davidson's arguments have a cogency that is hard to dismiss, and also that, because metaontological discussion of the type in which his arguments consist by definition purports to cover the character of everything, it is self-referential, with the result that Davidsonian statements of the meaninglessness of this kind of talk undermine their own meaning as well. As a result, these statements themselves restore the possibility of this kind of talk's meaningfulness. I argue further, however, that even in the context of that recognition metaontological statements, whether Davidsonian or of some other kind, cannot be avoided. Consequently, this kind of statement constitutes an unavoidable self-referential paradox that means and requires, and so justifies, what it also excludes. The result is a reinstatement of ontological insight and, in fact, a deep enrichment and also a particularly cogent justification or grounding of it. Because this is a paradox, however, it maintains at different phases both the exclusion of ontological insight as meaningless and its especially cogently justified reinstatement as meaningful; but, I shall argue, it does so in ways that coordinate them manageably. It is this coordination that (paradoxically) provides the enrichment and the especially thorough justification of the meaningfulness of ontological and metaontological thought.

The logical peculiarity of the paradox that is involved has further useful consequences for the outcome of the justification and revised characterization of ontological insight, some of which I sketch. I conclude by suggesting a resulting possible meeting ground between metaontology and another, currently very divergent area of metareflective thought, that of some important versions of metaethics.

1. Davidson and His Critics

Davidson's view, while very influential, has also been strongly criticized. As I shall try to show in this section, both Davidson's case and those of his critics are cogent. I argue that this is not accidental, but follows from the nature of metaontological discussion. It is important that, as I shall also suggest, the same kind of difficulty of decision between opposing views occurs in the metaontological literature generally. I take this at least apparently infeasible state of disagreement, then, as a first indication of the logical peculiarity of metaontological talk. I then argue for that peculiarity (which I will ultimately argue has the character of a full-blown logical paradox) on the basis of characteristic features of this kind of talk, an argument for which Davidson's account serves as a helpful beginning point.

I will not attempt to do justice here to the subtlety of Davidson's thought on this issue; it is well-known, and for my purposes here the basic idea will do. In his case against "the very idea of a conceptual scheme" (Davidson 1984a), he runs several lines of argument, one way of expressing the gist of which is that it is incoherent to speak (and so to think) of a perspective on what we mean by reality in general or as a whole, since the idea of such a perspective entails the possibility of other perspectives on reality as a whole, the contrast with which allows us to identify our perspective as a particular perspective rather than just a record of the way things are; and the idea of more than one such perspective, in turn, is self-contradictory. (Davidson in fact makes his argument in terms of translation between contrasting natural languages, but as I shall discuss shortly below, the same case for incoherence and the same paradoxes I shall raise arise in both forms of expressing his argument.) We can have a conception of a contrasting perspective of this kind only on the basis of what we mean within our current perspective; and if these are different perspectives on reality taken comprehensively, as they purport to be, each perspective

by definition entirely excludes the vantage of the other, and the contrasting perspective can have no connection with reality *at all* for us. (This is not to say that there are no kinds of comprehensive perspectives that can have anything fundamental in common; but then these are not different perspectives on *reality itself as a whole*, which are the kinds of perspectives Davidson is concerned with: if they were different perspectives on reality itself, every aspect of reality in each would by definition differ from every aspect of reality in the other, and they could not have anything in common.) Consequently, the supposedly contrasting perspective can have no meaning for us at all, even as a “perspective.” In turn, then, we can have no conception of a “perspective on reality as a whole” that is our own, since there is no contrast with alternative equivalent “entities” to allow it to stand out as what in particular we are referring to.

As I noted above, Davidson makes his argument in terms of translation between contrasting natural languages, but he does so as “a way of focusing on criteria of identity for conceptual schemes” (184), and (as the discussion of his critics below will also help to make clear), the same case for incoherence and the same paradoxes I shall raise arise in both forms of expressing his argument. His case about languages refers to what is possible for any natural language at all, that is, for natural language in general, and so refers to natural language itself as a whole. In addition to referring to natural language as a whole, he has to *make the case* that this shift to talking in terms of natural languages is adequate to capture the issues of meaning that talk of concepts and perspectives captures: that is, he has to discuss the character of natural language in general and as a whole. And just as a perspective on reality as a whole leaves no room in what it covers for meaningful contrast with a different perspective on reality (since a perspective on reality as a whole includes the reality of all possible perspectives), natural

language taken in general and as a whole also leaves no room in what it covers for a contrasting natural language (since “natural language in general” includes all possible natural languages).

To return to his argument, then, if we are to refer meaningfully to points of view on (I have used “perspectives” for his “points of view”) or conceptual schemes of the world or of reality in general we need, as Davidson argues, “a ground for comparison of conceptual schemes” (195), one which will allow for “the clarity of contrasts between worlds” (187). Given the possibility of that kind of contrast, “different points of view make sense” (184). But this kind of contrast between points of view or perspectives is possible “only if there is a common coordinate system on which to plot them,” which “the claim of dramatic incomparability” does not allow (184).

To support and develop this argument, Davidson makes a similar point with respect to the closely related idea of separating “our scheme” from the content of the world that it organizes. This second idea is closely related to the idea of contrasting our scheme with other schemes because the comparison of our scheme with others necessarily presupposes that we can identify the schemes separately from their content, so as to compare the schemes themselves in particular. Davidson points out that the content of a world scheme cannot be specified separately from the scheme that purportedly gives it the sense it has, as to specify the content is already to take up its sense as established by the scheme. As a result, the content cannot be specified in a way that might “add a new entity to the universe against which to test conceptual schemes” (194) and so that might allow them to stand out in their particularity.

Davidson’s case has not gone unchallenged. To make what is at issue in these criticisms clear, it is useful to begin with an argument Winch makes against a position similar in illuminating ways to Davidson’s, although Winch is concerned here with the absence of a

conceivable alternative to our general standards of rationality rather than to our range of meanings.³ Winch argues that the inescapability for us of our own meanings or standards of sense “does not in fact show that our *own* standards of rationality occupy a peculiarly central position.” For, he notes, “a formally similar argument could be advanced in *any* language containing concepts playing a similar role in that language to those of ‘intelligibility’ and ‘rationality’ in ours” (1964, 318). Putnam makes a related case with respect to Davidson’s own argument about “radical interpretation” of other perspectives, pointing out that

if one recognizes that the radical interpreter himself may have more than one “home” conceptual scheme, and that “translation practice” may be governed by more than one set of constraints, then one sees that conceptual relativity does not disappear when we inquire into the “meanings” of the various conceptual alternatives: it simply reproduces itself at a meta-linguistic level! (1990, 104).

More simply, MacIntyre argues against the idea that if “two rival points of view are successful in understanding one another, it must be the case that they share standards of rational evaluation,” so that “translatability . . . entails commensurability” (1988, 371), since “just as a child does not learn its first language by matching sentences with sentences, since it initially possesses no set of sentences of its own, so an adult who has in this way become a child again does not either” (374). We can, he argues, learn a system of meanings that is not our own.

As the still ongoing debate illustrates, the issues are elusive and hard to resolve, and it seems likely that they are impossible to resolve clearly and definitively. I suggest that this is not accidental, but results from the nature of this kind of discussion, which, as reflection on ontology, consists in reflecting on the whole of reality or reality in general. This sort of discussion is therefore also a reflection on the whole of sense or sense in general, both because

sense is part of reality (or is itself something real) and because sense is constitutively tied to what is meant by reality (that is, as a term that has sense). On the one hand, one result is the kind of self-contradiction Davidson, in more elegant ways, points out: we are claiming to comment on the whole of sense from a position that by definition can only be within it. Less metaphorically, in referring to the whole of sense or to sense in general we are making no distinctions within it, and so including every proposition and its contradictory. That is, we are claiming to make a statement that by definition is not referring to anything in particular rather than its opposite or some other thing. On the other hand, however, another result of the nature of this kind of discussion as a reflection on the whole of sense is that this reflection bears on the statements that it itself makes in expressing its reflections, since they too bear sense. But when critics of the meaningfulness of metaontology such as Davidson argue their points about this kind of reflection on sense in general, they themselves are engaging in that kind of reflection: they are making a meta-point about what is possible with respect to sense in general. When their kind of metaontological reflection *successfully* results, then, in statements that this sort of reflection cannot express anything meaningful about reality in general, this result bears on these statements too, and eliminates *their* meaningfulness in turn.

(To be clear, it is not that one can never meaningfully reject or argue for some statements as meaningless: it is that one cannot meaningfully reject or argue for the meaningfulness of a kind of statement that happens to include under it the statements one makes in rejecting that kind and in pursuing the argument. This is what Davidson does in stating and arguing that statements about sense in general—or language in general—are meaningless: his own statements and arguments are about what is possible in reflecting on and discussing sense—or language—in general.)

Putnam, again, makes a similar point about the relation between a “conceptual scheme” and reality as a whole (that is, what Davidson discusses as the relation between the “scheme” and the content of the scheme, the world that it is understood to “organize”).⁴ Putnam writes,

if we agree that it is *unintelligible* to say, “We sometimes succeed in comparing our language and thought with reality as it is in itself,” then we should realize that it is also unintelligible to say “It is *impossible* to stand outside and compare our thought and the world.” . . . [I]n this case to say that it is impossible to do “*p*” . . . involves a “*p*” which is unintelligible (1994, 299).

In other words, the results of this kind of reflection also reestablish the possibility of the meanings they exclude.

For an example of this self-reflexion in metaontology, one common argument in these discussions is that if it is maintained that different ontological frameworks (or their equivalent) constitute all relevant meanings differently, then debate between these frameworks cannot be a debate over the same meanings, and so is not genuine debate at all. The statements on each side of the would-be debate pass each other by. Because, however, the frameworks this statement takes as its objects are comprehensive—that is, they cover all conceivable meanings—if this statement is true then its own meanings are subject to the constitution of those frameworks. As a result, that statement itself cannot be made independently of the different frameworks as a singly and coherently meaning statement. We cannot get as far as making it, let alone establishing it. Another example is the frequently found argument based on the idea that one ontology is impoverished or enriched relative to another. Again, the meanings of the statements asserting impoverishment or enrichment are themselves subject to the constitution of the ontological and

therefore comprehensive frameworks whose consequences they explore. The extra entities in one do not *count* as entities in the other.

One understandable response to this self-canceling outcome of metaontological statements is that it is a *reductio* that demonstrates the unintelligibility of those statements, and consequently shows that they should simply be avoided. Davidson himself recognizes this outcome and takes it as a *reductio* in this way. Discussing the idea of “a common scheme and ontology,” he notes that “if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are one” (1984a, 198) and, elsewhere, he draws the conclusion from a related discussion that “we must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases” (1986, 445-6). As Rorty comments, Davidson’s account of, for example, the relation between language in general and reality in general has the outcome that we should “stop trying to say *anything* general about the relation between language and reality . . . We should just refuse to discuss such topics as ‘the nature of reference’” (1998, 90, Rorty’s emphasis).

I think this objection is misleading. As I mentioned in introducing my topic, while I do think that metaontological thought is literally meaningless, I think that it is so in a way that grants insight, and in fact very important insight. Before I defend that thought, however, I should, since I claim a Wittgensteinian inspiration for seeing this self-canceling structure as offering insight, acknowledge that Wittgenstein is often read as supporting exactly the view Davidson and Rorty express, that we should simply avoid the kind of talk that leads to this sort of contradiction. Diamond, for example, argues that what Wittgenstein helps us to see is that “The very idea of the philosophical perspective from which we consider as sayable *or* as unsayable necessities that underlie ordinary being . . . : that very perspective itself is the illusion”

(1991, 197). The perspective from which this paradox arises does not meaningfully exist, and so there really is no paradox. (For further representatives of this view, known as the “resolute” reading of Wittgenstein, see, for example, Conant 1993; and a number of the contributions to Cray and Read 2000.) As I explain toward the end of the next section, however, I think that Wittgenstein and can and should be read differently.

2. Davidson and a Twist of Wittgenstein

I think that it is misleading to conclude that we should simply avoid the kind of talk that leads to this self-canceling structure, whether in Wittgenstein or metaontological thought. I think this for three reasons. First, I do not think it can be avoided. It seems to me that if we rely on ideas like those of being and sense, we need to be able to give some kind of account of them, even if this amounts to explaining why no such account is necessary. But we have no choice but to rely on these ideas. It is not that we can pick and choose whether to discuss this kind of issue, so that if we find it produces decisive logical difficulties we can choose to discuss something else instead. Ideas like being and sense are inherently presupposed in or internally relevant to any extended reflection on anything that we might undertake. This is a consequence of the same problem of comprehensive scope that I noted above in connection with metaontological reflection. It is true that, as the twentieth century history of attitudes towards metaontology illustrates, we can shelve reflection on those ideas and, as it were, section them off from what we do discuss. But this does not mean they are not relevant, only that we have decided not to give an account of their relevant role. And while we may have done so for the apparently plausible reason that their use is logically faulty, my point is that we nonetheless presuppose them, and presuppose them unavoidably, in a way that requires at least the demonstration that they are logically faulty with

the consequent appropriateness of sectioning them off. But in order to give even this kind of account of them as logically faulty, we need to be able to mention and identify those terms as the ones having the purported sense of which we are giving this account, otherwise we have presupposed our conclusion of their senselessness in advance of arguing our case. And mentioning those comprehensively relevant terms as still having possible meaning is already to talk in a way that has the self-reflexive structure we are discussing with respect to metaontology.

Differently expressed, it is not clear in advance that terms like being in general and sense in general are logically faulty and reduce to meaninglessness; this needs to be established. And since these terms are presupposed in any extended reflection we might undertake, we cannot permanently avoid the need to establish it. That is, our commitment to making sense itself requires us to establish the legitimacy of not discussing these terms. But to establish the legitimacy of not discussing these terms, we need to discuss them. We cannot, as Rorty proposes, “stop trying to say *anything* general about the relation between language and reality” and “just refuse to discuss such topics as ‘the nature of reference.’” Because these topics are variously presupposed in our discussion of any topics, they are not localized and so avoidable in that straightforward sense, but are present in all our reflections whether they are neutralized and sequestered or treated as meaningfully relevant. And if they are neutralized, that itself meaningfully raises the question of whether this has been done legitimately and successfully.

As Paul Livingston argues, although the self-reference involved in reflection on semantic or logical wholes, and which I am arguing is at issue in metaontological reflection, leads to the kinds of logical paradox established by Russell, Gödel, and Tarski, “the attempt to *prohibit* self-reference . . . is . . . quite at odds with the actual commitments of ordinary speech and discourse”

(2012, 30). We do, after all, naturally discuss truth in general, or our language as a whole, and it seems unlikely that we can show that these reflections are entirely without meaning (31-2).

Part of the force of the subtradition of ordinary language philosophy, for example, is that it embodies the consideration that formal logical considerations do not automatically trump the insights expressed in natural language. This is right because, among other reasons, the meaning or purport of formal considerations cannot be expressed wholly independently of natural language and so cannot wholly override the claims natural language endorses. Another reason is that the choice between formal languages and techniques over against intuitive insights itself evidently has the same troublesome self-referential semantic and logical structure as the meta-reflections Livingston mentions and the metaontological case I am discussing. Consequently, it is far from definitive. In this ordinary language connection, Thomas Nagel offers the more intuitive argument that we do “step back to find that [our] whole system of justification and criticism . . . rests on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity, and to which we shall continue to adhere even after they are called into question” (1979, 15, my insertion). He supports the legitimate sense of this possibility through the analogy of epistemological skepticism, where

the final, philosophical doubt is not contrasted with any unchallenged certainties [that is, we do not have the kind of contrast Davidson insists is necessary for meaning here], though it is arrived at by extrapolation from examples of doubt within the system of evidence or justification, where a contrast with other certainties *is* implied. . . . [O]ur limitedness joins with a capacity to transcend those limitations in thought (thus seeing them as limitations, and as inescapable) (18, my insertion).

Livingston, in addition to arguing for the inescapability of paradox-producing self-reference, draws on an argument by Graham Priest to point out that the conflict that Gödel and Tarski variously demonstrate between the logical consistency and the completeness of a system which includes self-referring statements cannot automatically be decided in favor of consistency without begging the question. Instead, these demonstrations “face us with a choice, *between* incompleteness and inconsistency” (2012, 33). There is in fact a growing literature defending the logical admissibility of contextualized contradiction or inconsistency in both formal and informal contexts (for example, Bremer 2005; Johnstone 1978, e.g., 45; Priest 2001, 2002). That paradoxes of the kind which characterizes metaontological reflection involve ineliminable contradictions, then, does not definitively show that we can dismiss the issues that lead to those paradoxes, and so does not give us sufficient justification simply and summarily to avoid them. And although, as I argue, these contradictions cancel the meaning of these paradoxes, their self-referential character also in turn restores that meaning; consequently the issues leading to these contradictions cannot be dismissed on the grounds of resulting in sheer meaninglessness either.

In fact, Priest has argued at length for the logical legitimacy as well as the unavoidability of exactly the kind of paradox which I have put forward as characterizing metaontological discussion. I have described this kind of discussion as involving a reflection on the whole of sense, and so as occurring from a position that is independent of and so, as it were, outside sense, while it necessarily can only have sense within the whole it reflects on. Priest, similarly, argues that thought as a whole has limits on which we nonetheless can and are required to reflect, so that “the limits of thought are boundaries which cannot be crossed, but yet which are crossed.” As a result, these limits are the locus of “true contradictions” (2002, 3). He characterizes the structure of this paradox as having the shape of what he calls the “Inclosure Schema,” which

formulates the idea that “there is a totality (of all things expressible, describable, etc.) and an appropriate operation that generates an object that is both within and without the totality” (3-4). He identifies this structure in accounts of ontology offered through the history of both Western and Eastern philosophy: that is, in exactly the kinds of account on which metaontology reflects.

Since Priest argues that this paradox is logically legitimate as it stands, he does not think it involves a loss of sense, and consequently he does not endorse what I argue here is its ultimate self-cancellation and resulting reinstatement of straightforward sense. But because my own argument turns on the contradictory character of the paradox, and Priest himself endorses that contradictory character, his argument that the contradiction is legitimate as it stands does not affect my claims about the subsequent consequences of its character as a contradiction. It is true that his argument for its legitimacy does reject a particular consequence of contradiction, that it entails explosion into the admissibility of all possible propositions; but, as I shall clarify a little below in this section, my own account contextualizes contradiction so that it also does not entail this kind of explosion. Priest’s defense of the legitimacy of the contradictory character of this paradox, on the other hand, does positively support taking this paradox as a legitimate starting point for arguing to further conclusions, rather than taking its contradictory character as requiring us, *reductio*-style, to dismiss both its legitimacy and that of the considerations that result in it.

Finally, I think we cannot avoid these issues because even if the purported *reductio* does succeed in establishing that these issues are literally without meaning, then, as Putnam’s criticism of Davidsonian views above suggests, it also establishes that the argument that made use of the relevant terms to establish this result is literally without meaning too. Consequently, at that point there is no meaningful argument for the meaninglessness of these issues that can be conceived, referred to, borne in mind, or relied upon on future occasions. Since these issues, if

they are meaningful, are in one way or another ubiquitous, and since if the demonstration of their meaninglessness is successful it collapses under its own success, in this case the issues constantly meaningfully re-arise.

The second reason I think it is misleading to conclude that, even if we could, we should simply avoid the kind of talk that cancels itself in this way involves a feature of some of the arguments for the first reason. Because this kind of structure cancels its own intelligibility and not just isolable features of its content, it is not a simple contradiction but a self-reflexive paradox, along the lines, for example, of the arguably valid liar's paradox (on the validity of this kind of paradox see, again, Priest 2002; Sainsbury 1995). The self-reference of metaontological statements undermines their sense only if they are true in the first place, and in order for them to be taken as true and, further, to be applied as referring to themselves, they need to be taken as meaningful by that argument itself. And, as I argued just above, once the relevant statement is established as unintelligible the case for its unintelligibility is also eliminated, so that it is no longer clearly meaningless. This structure, then, is not a simple contradiction but a self-reflexive paradox.

It is important to note, and will help to make clear my third reason for not simply avoiding metaontological talk and, as well, to make clear the metaontological proposal I am working toward, that this paradox does not mean that talk of being or sense in general is shown not to be unintelligible after all. The paradox consists precisely in that, in this context of comprehensive reference or meaning, this talk is successfully shown to be entirely (or comprehensively) meaningless, and that this complete meaninglessness in turn eliminates the force of the demonstration and so reinstates meaning. (And, again, this contradiction cannot be avoided, because, as I have argued, it is the commitment to making sense itself that produces this

elimination of sense and with it, in turn, produces its reemergence.) In other words, the unintelligibility here does not undo itself by showing itself never really or entirely to have been the case, but instead undoes itself in virtue precisely of being and always having been complete unintelligibility. More accurately, in undoing itself it also retroactively reconstitutes or “rewrites” the meaning of what it has been: at that point it cannot be meaningfully said that the relevant terms ever were unintelligible; but in keeping with the comprehensive character of the contradiction in which this kind of paradox consists, it reconstitutes that meaning in this way only in virtue of the unreconstituted meaning that it now wholly excludes. That is, once the conclusion is established, then the relevant talk turns out to have been meaningful all along; but only then does that result apply. And then, but only then, it applies retroactively.⁵ In the case of the self-canceling character of the meaning of this kind of comprehensive talk, then, there is a reemergence of elements of sense and coherence, but not in a way that qualifies the equally legitimate assertion of this talk’s complete meaninglessness. I propose below a way of conceptualizing this comprehensive contradiction that this kind of paradox involves.⁶

It is because this self-canceling structure is not straightforwardly contradictory but has this comprehensively oscillating, or, rather, comprehensively self-reconstituting or “self-rewriting” character, that I have said it is misleading rather than simply wrong to conclude that we should avoid the kind of talk that leads to it. In fact, the third reason I believe it is misleading to conclude we should avoid it is that in eliminating its own meaning it *does* require us to avoid it as part of meaningful reflection, but that precisely in doing so it reinstates its meaning—and does so in a way that both resolves the problems it raises and offers solutions or insights that would not be available without first having recognized and taken those problems into account. In other words, the self-cancellation of metaontological talk means we *should* avoid it, but the

comprehensive semantic scope of that avoidance is reflexive on the grounds and meaning of that avoidance itself, and so, as it were, catapults us back into metaontological talk, but now with what I am about to argue are helpful consequences of having been through that logical (or perhaps, rather, paralogical) process.

I am proposing, then, a version of the arguably legitimate inconsistency for which Livingston argues, at the self-reflexive level of metaontological discussion. But because inconsistency in these contexts occurs at the comprehensive level of all relevant meanings, that is, with respect to logical or semantic wholes, it is an inconsistency between no meaning at all and meaning for which the issue of unintelligibility in turn is equally, because also comprehensively, meaningless. In other words, it is an inconsistency between complete meaninglessness and unquestionable meaningfulness. This kind of entirely settled meaningfulness is, I think, what Wittgenstein points to when he says, “the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear” (1958, 51e). And, as he argues, we get this clarity by first undergoing failures of sense: “The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery” (48e).

Because of the comprehensiveness of the paradox, then, it functions to resolve itself even as a paradox: it renders the terms in which it is couched meaningless, so that the argument that produces the paradox itself loses any meaning. It altogether removes itself for us, inconsistencies and all; but in doing so it consequently also restores the meaning of the talk that led to it as though it (the paradox) had never been. That is, it restores unparadoxical, settled intelligibility. It eliminates itself in a way that, as it were, deposits us in an unequivocally clear conceptual state.

It is arriving at that clarity through this process that grants the unique metaontological insight I have referred to. Metaontological reflection establishes its own meaninglessness; that is, it establishes the meaninglessness of questions about ontology. Consequently, however, it *establishes* any ontology we might ask about as without qualification by meaningful questions beyond its own internal criteria for justification. In other words, by undergoing this self-cancellation it *justifies* any self-consistent ontology we might ask about. (But how can it do so, if it is now entirely meaningless in the context of that ontology, or with respect to that ontology's internal meanings? I address this below.) If, as I hope to show, this is a meaningful claim, then this form of justification is especially cogent, because it is unqualified or absolute. It is unqualified because it covers the relevant meanings and issues comprehensively or exhaustively, and because, further, it eliminates even its own meaning and so its relevance as the vehicle of justification, with the result that there is nothing remaining outside or beyond the meanings of the particular ontology, not even anything needed for justification, with respect to which those meanings might be relative and so with respect to which they might be questioned.

That is, this process that metontology undergoes (and, in fact, in which it consists) leaves only the ontology, justified in referring to nothing beyond itself. As Davidson expresses this, when we give up the idea of explaining the familiar world in terms of anything beyond it, whether conceptual scheme or foundational, “uninterpreted reality, something outside all schemes and science, we do not relinquish the notion of objective truth—quite the contrary. . . . [W]e . . . re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false” (1984a, 198). And he argues that this is not only objective but absolute truth (e.g., 1984b, 216). My point, however, is that Davidson fails to take into account that, in order to make his case, he had to discuss the metaontological issues he has

shown we can absolutely disregard, and he could only succeed in making his case for their meaninglessness through the medium of their meaning. Wittgenstein, I suggest, sees more clearly:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright (1961, 74, prop. 6.54).

Wittgenstein here uses “nonsensical” to mean “empty of sense, not saying anything” (in this case because the relevant propositions are tautological) rather than “incoherent,” but the point with respect to these propositions’ viability and function in allowing ontological and metaontological insight is the same.

Wittgenstein, I think for similar reasons to Davidson’s, also suggests that ordinary, familiar truths can be unqualified, absolute: “‘Put it here’—indicating the place with one’s finger—that is giving an *absolute* spatial position” (1967, 123e).

At the end of the first section, I mentioned the “resolute” reading of Wittgenstein, which argues that the conclusion that reflection on sense is a form of nonsense, far from producing a self-canceling paradox, simply means that we come to recognize that we have not been saying anything at all. The resulting lesson is therefore the proposition with which Wittgenstein concludes his comment about throwing away his ladder of nonsense: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (1961, 74, prop. 7). That is, we should simply stop talking about these issues. (As I discussed above, this is also the view of these issues that Davidson and Rorty hold.) As I have argued in this section, however, we can only get to the point of

recognizing the legitimacy of silence on these issues by justifying and establishing it, so that we cannot rightly simply go ahead and resort to silence upon first encountering these issues. We need to get to the legitimacy of silence in this context by talking or reflecting. And even after we are there, it is always a potentially legitimate request to justify this insight, and this means returning to discuss the things we are supposed to be silent about. (The request to justify it will, perhaps, in fact turn out not to be legitimate after all; but, without begging the question, this can only emerge as a result of and so after discussing it.) I have also argued that we cannot legitimately simply avoid the issues which lead to the metareflection on sense, and so which motivate the question as to whether we should be silent and with this question motivate the need to justify the answer. Instead, these issues necessarily arise as part of our general commitment to making sense, while the contradictions in which they result do not uncontroversially constitute a *reductio* of their legitimacy. One of the reasons, I have argued, they do not constitute a *reductio* is that, because these contradictions are self-referential, they do not result in straightforward and so simply dismissible nonsense, but instead constitute an arguably legitimate paradox along the lines of the liar's paradox. What is more, as part of the logic of this paradox, these contradictions, in one phase of their self-referential effects, cancel their own meaning as the basis for finding the sense of this kind of reflection on sense questionable in the first place, and so as a justification for the appropriateness of silence on these issues.

In the next section, I shall try to clarify how we can conceptualize the interaction of sense and nonsense in this paradox.

That said, let me return to the thread of my argument. The point of metaontology, then, is not, for example, to fix the sense of ontological terms, or to decide between ontologies, but to come to understand ontologies for the unqualified sense they have as *ontologies*, that is, in the

old-fashioned sense, as articulations of or references to reality as such and things as real. In other words, the point is precisely not to consider them as alternative ontologies (even with respect to possible worlds), since this would relativize them and so qualify their meaning as expressions of what defines reality as such: that is, as expressions of what by definition does not have alternatives to its reality, in comparison with which, for example, it might not be reality after all. Instead, the point of metaontology is to come to appreciate an ontology as a legitimate, self-aware articulation of what is: as a successful establishing that we are “seeing the world aright.” (As I shall explain below, we can in fact do this with different ontologies, but independently of and without reference to each other.) The significance of “self-aware” in this formulation is that, in addition to establishing “unmediated touch with the familiar objects” in our lives as Davidson argues it does, an ontological account is precisely the deliberate attempt to establish that what we are in touch with truly is real objects, and so inherently includes an awareness of the fact of the reality of the objects itself. As a result, it allows an appreciation of the significance or meaningfulness of that fact.

Differently expressed, metaontological thought allows us to engage our sense of reality, or to appreciate the reality of things and of the world. It allows us to be struck by and appreciate, for example, that there is something rather than nothing (Leibniz 1973, 199). For a less diaphanous example (although “diaphanous” here describes what is also nonetheless massively concrete), it allows us to appreciate in its distinct significance that we, and others, are alive, and to do justice to that momentous, and otherwise uncognizable, fact. (There are of course other senses of the fact that we are alive that we can readily cognize in the ordinary ways of approaching things; but that is the point: an appreciation of the being of life in what I am arguing

is the properly ontological sense cannot be conveyed in and is missed by the terms appropriate to those other senses.)

3. How We Can Conceptualize the Contradiction in This Paradox

How do we conceptualize this comprehensive contradiction in which sense purportedly eliminates itself altogether without eliminating itself at all, and in which the one outcome instates the other while also being completely without meaning or relevance for it? I suggest we can do so as follows.

The paradox reduces itself to complete unintelligibility, which means that the comprehensive level of reflection has collapsed and that we (or our statements) have, as it were, been deposited elsewhere, where that comprehensive level of reflection no longer has meaning. As a result, we (or our statements) are now in a semantic locus where there is no reason to question the meaningfulness of pursuing our ontology. What is more, because we have been through this process which establishes that reflection on our ontology is meaningless, we are definitively justified in pursuing it without reflecting on it or questioning it. In other words, our pursuing it is justified without qualification.

It is true that this establishing of the meaninglessness of reflection on our ontology is itself now entirely meaningless, since it concerns a now meaningless content. But it can still play this role of justification, because insofar as we recognize its meaninglessness we are in fact still inhabiting or reinhabiting the level of metaontological reflection: we are, as it were, at the knot of the paradox and inhabiting both the semantic locus of its meaningful progress and the semantic locus of its meaningless result. This is perfectly conceivable (or, rather, given that we are dealing precisely with a paradox of conceivability, it is imperfectly conceivable, but

nonetheless conceivable): if we can understand the liar's paradox, in which one term logically implies a term it logically excludes, then we can conceive simultaneously grasping the meaningfulness and meaninglessness of the same term. The logical difficulty of intelligibility is the same in both cases.

Once we are simply pursuing our ontology, that is, once we are in the course of our everyday business and established technical practice, there is no reason to raise metaontological questions. (For an extended argument to this effect in the context of epistemology, see Williams 1996.) As Socrates points out in the *Republic*, we in the cave of everyday awareness need some kind of provocation if we are to conceive of reflecting on that awareness itself and its legitimacy (Plato 1961, 514A-517B). This provocation may, for example, take the form of our becoming aware of contradictions that (and this Socrates does not say, but his practice in Plato's dialogues bears it out) cannot be resolved by relying on our usual resources for understanding the nature or sense of things (521C-524D). Or, as Plato's dialogues also illustrate, the provocation to metareflection may come through our encountering a very different general position from our own.

On the other hand, once and whenever we are simply pursuing our ontology without further reflection, the grounds for the unintelligibility of metaontological reflection and with them also the process and fact of establishing that unintelligibility simply have no meaning. As a result, the intelligibility of metaontological reflection is reinstated, and, when the course of our familiar dealings becomes troubled in a way that gives us reason to raise the metaontological issues, and therefore prompts us to conceive of doing so, we are then free and in fact required to raise them again. In conceiving these issues, we are again inhabiting the comprehensive level of reflection. This comprehensive and therefore self-reflexive level of thought then in turn reduces

itself to meaninglessness and so returns us to our ontology, and once more does so with the gain of a justified and renewed sense of “this is the world seen aright.”

This, I think, is how we can conceptualize the mutual instatement, despite the complete mutual irrelevance, of these states of meaninglessness and settled meaning, and consequently how we can conceptualize the way in which the self-canceling process of which they are elements allows an appreciation of reality or, as it is traditionally said, of reality as such.

4. Some Further Useful Consequences of This Paradox

More than this—if appreciating the world and the reality of its particulars is not enough—metaontological reflection understood in this way also allows us to conceive the possibility of and to come to understand ontologies other than our own and, through an analogous self-canceling process in each case, to recognize the same absoluteness or legitimately unqualified character of reality in each of their cases too. Metaontology, then, serves as a kind of switchpoint between different ontological tracks, and it can do so because it is not itself a self-consistent, stably meaningful track, or because it becomes retroactively rewritten and canceled as such a track. Metaontology understood in this way also allows the possibility of negotiating clashes between such ontologies where their differences produce lived or conceptual difficulties for us. In addition, it allows the possibility of coordinating different ontologies in giving an account of an issue (for example, physicalist and mentalist accounts of mind).

We cannot find other ontologies meaningful while we are simply inhabiting our own, but we can do so when we engage the comprehensive perspective or level again, as it becomes relevant to do so in the face of claims to alternative ontologies. This level gives us access to conceiving the alternative ontologies, and this then allows us to learn their concepts in their

context. We can then, as MacIntyre points out in the analogous context of comprehensive difference of cultural meanings, inhabit different “languages” simultaneously (1988, 374).

Though we are inhabiting them both, however, each is still meaningless in the terms of the other, so that we cannot understand how to reconcile them. But in “simply inhabiting” or “getting on” with both of them we mostly do not have to reconcile them, until they noticeably clash. As Winch argues, building on a point of Wittgenstein’s, contradictions need not be relevant or pressing in most of the circumstances of the activity or form of life in which they can be found (1964, 314).

At the point at which the ontologies noticeably clash, however, we do need to understand how to reconcile them. They cannot directly clash with each other, as they are unintelligible to each other; but their differences do involve differences in how we conduct our lives and work with our concepts, and those differences can and do produce conflicts, not directly between the different concepts themselves, but between some of their respective consequences in thought and action. At that point of conflict between the ontologies, however, we are not simply inhabiting them any longer but, insofar as we recognize the clash between them, we are at the level of the comprehensive perspective (or simultaneous incompatible perspectives) on them. And this perspective or level, being self-canceling, then allows us to negotiate their incompatible and yet exhaustive meanings. Because this self-canceling type of thought involves elements and moments of meaninglessness or incoherence (which in turn, however, ultimately resolve themselves by canceling themselves), there is no formulable procedure or any possible set of stably coherent criteria on whose basis we can conduct this negotiation. We can, instead, however, negotiate its contents, structure, and process in the creative and fumbling ways humans

do when, for example, undergoing deep personal or cultural crises of meaning, and when in what Kuhn (1970) calls revolutionary times of scientific paradigm shift.

Finally, I suggest that metaontological reflection understood in this way also allows us to conceptualize the sense and legitimacy of bringing incompatible ontologies or partial ontologies simultaneously to bear in giving an account of a single issue. For example (to take one of Davidson's concerns), we can understand reasons as both external causes and internal grounds, not simply under different descriptions, but in ways in which these features interact with each other. I suggest that the incoherence of this kind of interaction between different conceptual orders takes the form, as in the case of reflecting on incompatible general ontologies, of a self-canceling "switchpoint" moment, coordinating complete incoherence with settled and established sense.

5. A Meeting of Metaontology and Metaethics

Raimond Gaita (2004) makes a case for conflicting but nonetheless absolute ethical evaluations, on the grounds, very roughly, that the concept of a deep ethical response excludes evaluative comparison with conflicting possible ethical responses, so that the conflict is never a meaningful theme for thought or discussion. For example, he points out that if one wonders whether it is morally good to try to save the drowning person in front of one, one is already morally deficient. As a result, the conflict never arises except for a theoretical, non-ethically committed reflection on the choices. And since this kind of uncommitted comparison is specifically excluded from the concept of a deep ethical response, a type of reflection that makes these comparisons fails by definition to grasp what is specifically ethical about these kinds of choices. It is consequently simply a confusion to try to undertake that reflection in the first place as a way of understanding

what these choices involve and consequently as a way of understanding what might give them their authority.

To be clear, this is not a matter of being dogmatically committed to one's ethical intuitions. On the contrary, Gaita's point is that in this context, properly understood, the concept of justification cannot arise, whether to be addressed or dogmatically bypassed. The ethical response is not only a reaction to a potential ethical demand, but is itself part of what brings out, in the first place, what the ethical reality is that it responds to. For instance, what allows us to see people of other races as being people rather than subhuman, and so to see that they must be treated as such, is not a rational argument based on the facts of their make-up or experience, but instead is partly our response to them as people that is already in place. First, if we have to consider the matter for a while without (so as not to prejudice the matter) regarding them as people, we are in that act treating them as possibly subhuman, and so we have very plainly already committed a terrible injustice against them. Second, it is notoriously the case that no such argument can bring about the felt response to them as essentially "like us" as human beings and to their experience as essentially "like ours." On the contrary, if we are in fact regarding them as people, then we have already responded to them morally as people: that constellation of moral responses is part of our recognition that they are people. Gaita writes, "Love is conditioned by its object, but love also yields its object" (2004, 122).

The concept of justification, then, has no meaning in relation to deep ethical responses, so that the request for justification in fact betrays a failure to grasp their meaning. In this context, the request for justification is not an expression of responsibility, but of sheer failure to understand what is at issue. Further, any explanation of the merit of a properly ethical response is dependent on having had the response in the first place, because without that response neither the

merit nor the explanation can be grasped as meaningfully applicable at all: Gaita argues that they belong to a conceptual domain to which there is no independent (and so relativizing) equivalent.

This does not, however, mean that we cannot in any way explain our moral responses, or be brought to see mistakes in them and to see the virtues of alternative responses. But, Gaita argues, we can only be brought to these insights on the basis of having the relevant responses evoked in us, and this happens not through justification based (as justification must be) on a source that is independent of the response it justifies, but when we recognize the authenticity of the response itself as we witness it in others. That is, it happens as our response to what makes itself felt as the sincerity and the respectable experience in the person who gives us the new insight into the rightness of a response or of a nuance of a response that we had not grasped before. This is why it is hard to take seriously the advice of someone who has never been through the relevant experiences—say, of having a child, or facing death—even if their advice is otherwise thoroughly informed and expressed in exactly the same sentences as the advice of an experienced person who has sincerely faced and assimilated her experience. “The epistemic grammar of moral descriptions,” Gaita writes, “involves what I have been calling ‘authoritative disclosure,’ as . . . in the example of the woman whose love for her unborn child had the authority to reveal to another what it would be to have an abortion. . . . We learn by being moved and we learn, or try to learn, when we may trust what moves us and ourselves in being moved” (2004, 140).

Like moral response generally, then, moral correction and growth too involve coming to inhabit conceptual spaces that are meaningful only in the terms of those conceptual spaces themselves. And this development happens not by persuasion on the basis of existing concepts—by definition, it cannot happen in that way—but by something like conversion to an

unprecedented sense of things. To say that it is something like a conversion, however, is not to say that is irrational, but that it sets up new forms of insight not available to one's current resources for rationality. That is, far from being irrational, it expands rationality, operating at its foundations as a setting up and inhabiting of conditions (or a setting up of conditions in inhabiting them) for new concepts that allow new domains of rationality, new forms of insight and recognition.

As in the case of the transitions I have discussed between what are nonetheless mutually inaccessible ontologies, Gaita's view of ethics does not deny our experience of reflectively considering and coming to accept alternative moral standpoints. In both cases, there is no disagreement that we do in fact consider these alternatives and make these transitions; the issue is to understand what is happening when we do so. I have argued in the case of metaontology, and Gaita argues in the case of ethics, that what happens is logically much more complicated than we usually take it to be. I have argued that it involves the paradoxes inherent in successfully invoking in the same breath what are nonetheless wholly mutually exclusive contexts of sense, literally meaningless to each other. But the other side of that paradoxical coin is that the meaning given in each context is, within its conceptual reach, given the fullest possible due: the (ultimately self-canceling) recognition of the comprehensive incompatibility of meaning and so of the irrelevance of the other, purportedly competing alternative establishes that within its own conceptual domain the soundness of each is not meaningfully questionable or, otherwise said, each is legitimately absolute.

In this section I am proposing that Gaita's articulation of metaethics and this double-sided outcome of what I have argued is a self-canceling paradox support, illuminate, and supplement each other.

It is true that, as part of his case, Gaita argues that ontology should be avoided, since he sees ontological reflection as endorsing comparison between different occasions, which would then be addressed as different instances falling under a general conception of reality instead of being discussed in the necessary context of ethically engaged response. He writes, for example:

If someone were to say that I should . . . declare whether I believe evil to be a reality or whether I do not, then I would say . . . [t]here cannot be an independent metaphysical inquiry into the ‘reality’ of good and evil which would underwrite or undermine the most serious of our ways of speaking. I would say: now you may see why someone should speak of the reality of evil, and now you may see why the same person might say that Good is the only reality. We are likely to misunderstand . . . if we try to press him into acknowledging that he is contradicting himself. It would be better, at least in ethics, to banish the word ‘ontology’ (2004, 190).

There is, however, clearly an analogy between Gaita’s case for the conceptually mistaken character of ethical metareflection and Davidson’s case for the rejection of ontological metareflection, which I have argued cancels itself into nonetheless also allowing a certain kind of talk of ontology. One difference which aligns Gaita’s position more closely with the one I have defended, is that Gaita endorses the kind of talk that would allow us to register incompatibly different absolute senses of ethical reality, even while it would not allow us to compare them. Although he does so by eschewing ontology, the conception of metaontology I propose here allows us to “switch” ontologies or senses of reality in a way that in fact endorses the kind of insight that Gaita defends.

Gaita works within an important tradition of Wittgenstein-informed metaethics whose representatives include Anscombe (e.g., 2005), Rhees (e.g., 1999), Holland (1980), and Winch

(e.g., 1972). While Gaita's unique contribution is substantial, there is a great deal of common ground among these various thinkers, in particular with respect to the issue of the unqualified character of ethical response as Gaita articulates it. I suggest, then, that the conception of metaontology that I propose would allow a meeting and with it a sharing of the conceptual resources of these two currently radically divergent forms of metareflective thought, metaontology and an important subtradition of metaethics.

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Notes

¹ See, for example, the collection of essays in Chalmers et al (2009).

² It looks as though this reinstatement cannot happen, as once meaning is lost there is simply nothing meaningful to work with any longer. It also looks as though my statement should be more precisely worded, so as not to say that the meaning of these arguments is lost, but that they turn out never to have had meaning at all. I think these objections are only partly right, however, and I shall defend this view in discussing the “resolute reading” of Wittgenstein toward the end of section 2 below.

³ The position Winch is responding to is one argued by Alasdair MacIntyre early in his career. He argues for the idea that, in evaluating the rationality of “primitive societies,” we cannot help but take recourse to and so come “to recognize the appropriateness of scientific criteria of judgment from our standpoint” (1970, 67; previously published in Hick 1964). We are brought to recognize that there are no other conceivable criteria for rationality, and so “our” criteria are not meaningfully described as “ours,” either: they are not culturally specific and so imposed by us; they are simply the criteria for rationality, not “ours,” not specifiable as “these” criteria rather than “those.” (A little below in the text I quote MacIntyre’s later criticism of the Davidsonian position his early argument endorsed!) Winch’s response, given more fully than in the text above, is that “his argument . . . does not in fact show that our *own* standards of rationality occupy a peculiarly central position. The appearance to the contrary is an optical illusion engendered by the fact that MacIntyre’s case has been advanced in the English language and in the context of 20th Century European culture. But a formally similar argument could be advanced in *any* language containing concepts playing a similar role in that language to those of ‘intelligibility’ and ‘rationality’ in ours” (1964, 318).

⁴ Putnam is in fact discussing Richard Rorty's view here, but it is a view that, as Putnam discusses (1994, 300), Rorty argues is the same as Davidson's; and although Putnam reads Davidson differently in important respects from the way Rorty does, the problem he identifies clearly applies to the aspects of Davidson's view that I have been discussing. The logic of the relevant issue is the same.

⁵ Dupuy (2000) offers a technical defense of the intelligibility and legitimacy of this kind of retroactive shift of truth over time, in the context of "backward induction" in rational choice theory.

⁶ I discuss the sense and legitimacy of this paradox in more detail in Barris (2012) and at length in Barris (2015).