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Abstract	<p>Recently, J. Schaffer conspicuously defended the neo-Aristotelian view of metaphysics, which characterizes metaphysics as centered on what grounds what, as opposed to the Quinean view, on which the task of metaphysics is to say what exists.¹ In particular, he endorses the former coupled with a permissive stance on existence, according to which the Quinean existence questions are trivial. Against this claim, W. Swetly argues that they are not trivial at all, but they have substantial and informative contents, and cognitive significance.² In our opinion, however, this opposition is not a real one. This paper argues that Swetly's arguments fail, and that he misses the point of Schaffer's claim. Also, we suggest that the explication of this apparent disagreement sheds light on some important concepts of metaphysics.</p> <p>In what follows, first, we summarize Schaffer's general meta-metaphysical position and his argument for the triviality of existence questions (TEQ) (§1). Second, the core of the Swetly's arguments against TEQ is presented (§2). Third, the failure of them is shown and it is also shown that there is no real disagreement between Schaffer and Swetly (§3). Finally, we conclude with some clarification of how this explication and further considerations can elucidate the complicated matters in the neo-Aristotelian conception of metaphysics (§4).</p>
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The Triviality of Existence Questions: A Note on the Neo-Aristotelian Conception of Metaphysics

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Recently, J. Schaffer conspicuously defended the neo-Aristotelian view of metaphysics, which characterizes metaphysics as centered on *what grounds what*, as opposed to the Quinean view, on which the task of metaphysics is to say *what exists*.¹ In particular, he endorses the former coupled with a permissive stance on existence, according to which the Quinean existence questions are trivial. Against this claim, W. Swetly argues that they are not trivial at all, but they have substantial and informative contents, and cognitive significance.² In our opinion, however, this opposition is not a real one. This paper argues that Swetly's arguments fail, and that he misses the point of Schaffer's claim. Also, we suggest that the explication of this apparent disagreement sheds light on some important concepts of metaphysics.

In what follows, first, we summarize Schaffer's general meta-metaphysical position and his argument for the triviality of existence questions (TEQ) (§1). Second, the core of the Swetly's arguments against TEQ is presented (§2). Third, the failure of them is shown and it is also shown that there is no real disagreement between Schaffer and Swetly (§3). Finally, we conclude with some clarification of how this explication and further considerations

¹ Schaffer (2009).

² Swetly (2009).

can elucidate the complicated matters in the neo-Aristotelian conception of metaphysics (§4).

1. Schaffer's Argument: Permissivism and Grounding

Schaffer claims that contemporary existence questions such as whether there are numbers or properties are trivial. As to the question of whether numbers exist, the affirmative answer can be trivially justified by such an inference as:

- (1) There are prime numbers.
- (2) Therefore there are numbers.

Similarly, almost every existence question can be affirmatively answered with this type of inference. Thus it follows that these existence questions are trivial, and that almost everything exists (*permissivism*). Accordingly metaphysics should not be troubled about *what exists*, but instead tackle with the genuinely substantial question of *how* entities exist, or rather *what grounds what*.

This conception of metaphysics is plausibly rooted in Aristotle. When he presents a catalogue of types of entities such as substance, quantity and quality, he simply assumes that all such types of entities exist without any further discussion (1984: 4; *Cat.*1b25–7). Indeed in *Metaphysics*, when he considers the existence question concerning numbers, he immediately gives an affirmative answer: “Thus since it is true to say without qualification that not only things which are separable but also things which are inseparable exist ... it is true also to say, without qualification, that the objects of mathematics exist, and with the character ascribed to them by mathematicians” (1984: 1704; *Meta.*1077b31–3).

And also, in *Metaphysics*, Aristotle states that science of being *qua* being examines “not only substance but also their attributes, both those above named and what is prior and posterior, genus and species, whole and part, and the others of this sort” (1984; 1587; *Meta.*1005a14–17). He then characterizes his investigation as centered on substance: “Substance is the subject of our inquiry; for the principles and the causes we are seeking are those of

substance” (1984; 1688; *Meta.1069a18–20*). And he explicates his notion of substance as follows: “So if the primary substance did not exist it would be impossible for any of the other things to exist” (1984: 5; *Cat.2b6–7*). On the basis of these descriptions, Schaffer thinks that the core notion of substance is that of “*basic ultimate, fundamental unit of being*”.³ Thus, on Aristotle’s view, the task of metaphysics is to study substances and their modes and kinds, and its method is to deploy diagnosis for what entities are fundamental and what depends on them.

From these points of view, Schaffer reinterprets many central metaphysical debates. For instance, the controversy of realism and constructivism about the existence of numbers is taken to be one over whether numbers are independent of the mind, or based on our concepts, rather than whether we can accept the existence of numbers. In general, there is no dispute about what exists. It is the metaphysical status of entities, such as mind-dependence, fundamentality and priority, that metaphysical debates concern.⁴

2. Swetly’s Arguments: The Non-Triviality of Existence Questions

Swetly’s argument against TEQ has two points. First, (i) he points out that there is an example of existence questions which are *not trivial*.⁵ Second, (ii) he denies that we can distinguish existence questions concerned *solely* with the existence of some entities from those concerned with the existence of them *cum* grounding information about them and other entities.⁶

Starting with (i), he gives the questions of whether abstract objects exist as an example of existence questions which have a non-trivial answer. Let us consider the following inference:

³ Schaffer (2009), p.351, emphasis in original.

⁴ Schaffer thinks that the best example of a neo-Aristotelian view is to be found in Fine’s “constitutional ontology” (Fine (1991)). He also finds examples of a hierarchical view of reality in such notions as Armstrong’s “ontological free lunch” (Armstrong (1997)) and Lewis’s “natural properties” (Lewis (1986)).

⁵ Swetly (2009), pp.71–73.

⁶ Swetly (2009), pp.74–87.

- (1) There are prime numbers.
- (2) Therefore there are numbers.
- (3) Therefore there are abstract objects.

Clearly (3) does not follow from (2), since it is plain that even though nominalists can admit that there are numbers by the trivial inference from (1), none of them can admit that numbers are abstract objects. Consequently the existence question about abstract objects qualifies as one that is *not trivial*.

Turning to (ii), Swetly presents the following argument:

- (P1) The meaning of “F” is determined by what it is to be an F, i.e., by its essence.
- (P2) Grounding information is indispensable to say what it is to be an F, what the essence of the Fs is.
- (C) So it is impossible to know what is asked with a question “Are there Fs?” without using grounding information.

From this argument, he concludes that there are no such questions as existence questions *per se*, namely those that *do not* pack grounding information into the description of the entities in question, and that it is nonsense to assume that one can answer an existence question without relying on grounding information.

3. The Failure of the Arguments against TEQ

As to the first argument against TEQ, neo-Aristotelians can reply simply that the question of whether abstract objects exist is *not* an existence question *per se*. Since abstractness of entities implies that they are not grounded in the concrete realm, the question of the existence of abstract objects *already packs grounding information*. Thus it is not plausible that any nominalist can agree that the existence of numbers vindicates the existence of abstract objects. Nevertheless, both realists and nominalists, in fact, agree to the former as the trivial affirmative answer to the existence questions *per se* about numbers, since it follows from the mathematical truism such as “there are prime

numbers between 1 and 9". In general, permissivists can concede that "if a candidate entity is described in such a way as to entail grounding information (e.g., "a Platonic number", understood as a transcendent substance) ... one need not remain permissive".⁷

Concerning the second argument against TEQ, neo-Aristotelians can accept (P1) and (P2) in one way but reject (C). Of course, grounding information contributes to saying what it is to be an F, but it is only indispensable to say *fully* what the essence of the Fs is. We can sometimes grasp *partially* what it is to be an F without relying on grounding information, since it is not only the properties concerning grounding information but also other properties that the essence of the Fs consists in.

For instance, it is *part* of essence of cats, whether they are mind-independent or not, that they have such-and-such zoological traits. So, we can meaningfully ask "Are there cats?" without relying on grounding information concerning mind-independence of the candidate entities. Another example is: it is *part* of essence of sets, whether or not they will turn out to be abstract objects, that they are supplied with the criterion of identity which states that for any sets A and B, they are the same sets if and only if they have exactly the same members. So, we can meaningfully ask "Are there sets?" without relying on grounding information concerning whether they are grounded in the concrete realm or they are residents of the real abstract realm.

Therefore, neo-Aristotelians can accept the indispensability of grounding information for capturing the essence of entities in the following way:

(P2') Grounding information is indispensable to say *fully* what it is to be an F, what the essence of the Fs is.

(C) does not follow from (P1) and (P2') since it is in fact possible to know what is asked with a question "Are there Fs?" by relying on some essential properties other than grounding information concerning fundamental categorical distinctions such as those between abstract and concrete entities.

It is now clear that Swetly's two arguments against TEQ fail. However,

⁷ Schaffer (2009), p. 359.

we suspect that there is no real disagreement between Schaffer and Swetly. Since neo-Aristotelians characterized by Schaffer do agree that capturing grounding information contributes, although partially, to saying what it is to be an F, and so they accept the restrictive variant of (P2), namely (P2'), there is no substantial disagreement between Schaffer and Swetly over the metaphysical status of grounding information. That is to say, they agree on the indispensability of grounding information for metaphysical inquiries. The only disagreement between them is one over the *degree* of the indispensability, since Swetly claims (P2), while Schaffer accepts its restrictive variant, (P2').

Then, how can we appreciate the point of claiming TEQ? The answer is: the point of claiming TEQ is the *special emphasis* on the importance of grounding information. Inasmuch as Schaffer's overall aim is to clarify the task of metaphysics and the crucial role in it of the very notion of grounding, he should make a clear distinction between existence questions *per se* and the question of what grounds what, and then stress the relevance of the latter to the specification of the task and the method of metaphysics. It is from such a meta-metaphysical methodological point of view that we can grasp the full implications of TEQ.

4. Concluding Remarks

We have shown that Swetly's arguments fail, and that he misses the point of Schaffer's claim. Now it is also clear that the notion of *essence* has several layers. It is not only grounding information, as we noted, but also other factors that the essence of entities consists in. The examples of those factors we have given are the property of being an instance of some natural kind (such as "cats"), the property of belonging to some narrower ontological category (such as "sets"), and the property of belonging to some broader ontological category (such as "abstract objects") which contains certain grounding information. However, it is far from clear how this complication of the notion of essence can be given a full clarification. And if the notion of essence has a key role in the neo-Aristotelian conception of metaphysics, such clarification must be given through much more elaborate considerations.⁸ They have to be done on another occasion.

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⁸. One of the leading philosophers who try to clarify the notion of essence and to characterize it as a key concept of metaphysics is J. Lowe. See for example Lowe (2006). See also Fine (1994).