

# EXISTENCE

*Essays in Ontology*

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*Alston on ontological commitment*

I propose to discuss William P. Alston's classic 1958 essay, "Ontological Commitments."<sup>1</sup>

Philosophers, analytical philosophers at any rate, often engage in the practice of replacing sentences with paraphrases of those sentences. Alston's topic in "Ontological Commitments" is one special case of this practice – the case in which the original sentence is an explicitly existential sentence and the paraphrase is not. In such cases, Alston calls the paraphrase an "ontological reduction" of the original. Here is a well-known example of an ontological reduction – although it belongs to a later chapter in the history of analytical philosophy than Alston's essay:

The original sentence: There are three holes in this piece of cheese

Its ontological reduction: This piece of cheese is triply perforate.

"Ontological Commitments" is devoted to a question about ontological reductions: what is the point of formulating them – what does the philosopher who "paraphrases away" occurrences of explicitly existential vocabulary mean to accomplish? In the closing paragraphs of the essay he gives his own answer to this question. The body of the essay, however, is devoted to the refutation of a popular answer – perhaps the standard answer – to the question. And the popular or standard answer is this: the ontological reduction of an explicitly existential sentence enables those who endorse the reduction to avoid ontological commitment to entities of the sort asserted to exist by the original, unreduced sentence. In the case of our example: by replacing 'There are three holes in this piece of cheese' with 'This piece of cheese is triply perforate' we go at least some way toward avoiding ontological commitment both to holes in pieces of cheese and holes in general. (Of course to succeed fully in avoiding ontological

<sup>1</sup> *Philosophical Studies*, volume IX (1958), pp. 8–17.

commitment to holes, or even holes in pieces of cheese, we should no doubt have to find ontological reductions of many other sentences than that one – ‘There are exactly as many holes in that piece of cheese as there are crackers on that plate’, for example.)

Alston’s position is that this explanation of the point of ontological reduction is wholly unsatisfactory. In support of this position, he asks us to consider the following example of an existential reduction (it is taken from Morton White’s *Toward Reunion in Philosophy*):

1. There is a possibility that James will come.
2. The statement that James will come is not certainly false.

(White’s example could be improved. It is at least a defensible thesis that (2) logically implies ‘There is a statement that is not certainly false’, and I expect that many of the people who want to avoid ontological commitment to possibilities will also want to avoid ontological commitment to “statements.” A better reduction would have been, ‘It is not certainly false that James will come.’) And, according to the popular or standard explanation of the purpose of ontological reduction, the reason someone might offer (2) as a paraphrase of – an ontological reduction of – (1) is that doing so will enable him or her to “avoid ontological commitment to possibilities.” Alston confronts this explanation with a dilemma – Alston’s dilemma, I’ll call it. Here is my own statement of Alston’s dilemma:

Either (2) is an adequate translation of (1) into other language (language that is not explicitly existential) or it is not. If it is an adequate translation of (1) into other language – that is, if it says the same thing as (1) but in different words – then it must involve those who employ it as a vehicle of assertion in the same ontological commitments as (1) does. And in that case, of course, no ontological commitments are avoided. And if (2) is *not* an adequate translation of (1) into other language, then (2) is not an ontological reduction of (1). In neither case, therefore, can one avoid ontological commitment to possibilities by devising an ontological reduction of the sentence (1).

Alston concedes that a philosopher might simply *define* the idea of “ontological commitment” to entities of a certain sort in terms of one’s use of ‘there is’ and ‘exists’ in connection with those entities. He provides a “criterion of ontological commitment” that he supposes such a philosopher would find appealing:

One is ontologically committed to P’s if and only if he is unable to say what he wants to say without using a sentence of the form ‘There is (are) a P . . . (the P . . . , P’s . . . , etc.)’ or some other sentence that deviates from this form only by replacing ‘there is’ by some other expression with explicit

existential force or by replacing 'P' by a synonym (together with such grammatical changes as are required by these replacements, as in the change from 'There are some lions in this country' to 'Lions exist in this country').

(In a footnote to this statement of a criterion of ontological commitment, he says,

This criterion could be further made precise by making more explicit the scope of the 'etc.' Not any phrase containing 'possibility' can be combined with a 'there is' to produce a sentence which would normally be used to assert the existence of possibilities. Consider, for example, 'There is a man who is holding open some good possibilities for you.' More generally, what is required is that 'P' falls within the scope of the existential expression. This of course needs further clarification.)

In the body of the text, he goes on to say that the criterion he has formulated is "by a not so fortuitous circumstance . . . substantially equivalent to Quine's famous criterion of ontological commitment." He takes the following two quotations from Quine to be definitive statements of "Quine's criterion of ontological commitment":

We are convicted of a particular ontological presupposition if, and only if, the alleged presuppositum has to be reckoned among the entities over which our variables range in order to render one of our affirmations true.

An entity is assumed by a theory if and only if it must be counted among the values of the variables in order that the statements affirmed in the theory be true.<sup>2</sup>

The criterion Alston has formulated has the form of a general statement about the results of combining words and phrases according to a specified rule. Since this statement was composed in the 1950s by someone other than Quine, we can expect it to be replete with use-mention confusions, and our expectation will be right. I'll present a revised version that is free from use-mention confusions. I confess that this revision of Alston's criterion doesn't really have much to do with Alston's substantive points – but one never knows whether an author's use-mention confusions serve to cover some substantive weakness in his or her argument till one has removed them and examined the result.

My revised statement is in the form of a schema. Instances of the schema are produced as follows: in the schema, uniformly replace occurrences of the symbol 'Ps' with occurrences of some plural count phrase (e.g. 'lions',

<sup>2</sup> Both quotations are from *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953). The first occurs on p. 13, the second on p. 103.

‘animals that have been killed by a lion’); uniformly replace the symbol ‘Q’ with occurrences of the quotation name of the phrase with which ‘Ps’ has been replaced; uniformly replace the symbol ‘Q-sing’ with occurrences of the quotation name of the singular form of the phrase with which ‘Ps’ has been replaced. To accept the criterion is to endorse the schema. To endorse the schema is to affirm the thesis that all its instances are true.

And the schema is:

One is ontologically committed to Ps if and only if one is unable to say what one wants to say without using the sentence that is obtained by placing Q after the words ‘there are’ or the sentence that is obtained by placing Q-sing after the words ‘there is a’ or a sentence that is obtained from those two sentences by replacing ‘there are’ or ‘there is’ with some other expression with explicit existential force or by replacing Q and Q-sing with synonyms (together with such grammatical changes as are required by these replacements).

One instance of the schema is

One is ontologically committed to lions if and only if one is unable to say what one wants to say without using the sentence that is obtained by placing the word ‘lions’ after the words ‘there are’ or the sentence that is obtained by placing the word ‘lion’ after the words ‘there is a’ or a sentence that is obtained from those two sentences by replacing ‘there are’ or ‘there is’ by some other expression with explicit existential force or by replacing ‘lions’ and ‘lion’ with synonyms (together with such grammatical changes as are required by these replacements),

or, equivalently,

One is ontologically committed to lions if and only if one is unable to say what one wants to say without using the sentence ‘There are lions’ or the sentence ‘There is a lion’ or a sentence that is obtained from those two sentences by replacing ‘there are’ or ‘there is’ by some other expression with explicit existential force or by replacing ‘lions’ and ‘lion’ with synonyms (together with such grammatical changes as are required by these replacements).

There are various objections that might be brought against this way of formulating a “criterion of ontological commitment.” One might for example charge that the criterion is parochial in that it seems to imply that only sentences of English carry ontological commitment. Or one might wonder whether one might be committed to the existence of lions even if one could say what one wanted to say without using sentences like ‘There are lions’ and ‘At least one lion exists’ – in virtue of the fact that the sentences one needed to say what one wanted to say *logically implied* ‘There are lions’

without actually including that sentence or any equivalent sentence in their number. (One might, for example, assert 'If there are any carnivores at all, there are lions' and 'If there are herbivores, there are carnivores' and 'There are two gazelles in the Bronx Zoo' and 'All gazelles are herbivores' – and assert nothing else relevant to the existence of lions.)

There are, moreover, serious difficulties with Alston's contention that his criterion is "substantially equivalent" to Quine's. Consider, for example, the second difficulty I noted with the criterion. And consider Quine's statement:

An entity is assumed by a theory if and only if it must be counted among the values of the variables in order that the statements affirmed in the theory be true.

This statement does not face the "logical implication" difficulty, since a theory, as Quine understands the term, is closed under logical consequence: a theory "affirms" all sentences that are logical consequences of any set of sentences it affirms. (Alston gives an argument that purports to show that his criterion and Quine's are, as he says, substantially equivalent. But that argument does not take into account the consideration that there is no reason to suppose that the class of all sentences that one would need to say "what one wants to say" was closed under logical consequence.)

A second problem for the thesis that Alston's criterion is substantially equivalent to Quine's is posed by the fact that, according to Alston's criterion, 'is ontologically committed to . . . s' is an intensional context. Suppose, for example, that the sentence 'Alicia is ontologically committed to animals with hearts' expresses a truth. The set of animals with hearts is identical with the set of animals with kidneys, but it does not follow that the sentence 'Alicia is ontologically committed to animals with kidneys' is true – for Alicia may never have heard of these "kidneys" that some animals supposedly have, and she may therefore be able to say what she wants to say without using any sentence that contains such phrases as 'animal with kidneys' or 'renate animal'. The statements Alston quotes from Quine, however, involve only extensional contexts. Note, for example, that animals with kidneys – some of them, at any rate – have "to be reckoned among the entities over which" the variable in 'x is an animal with a heart' ranges if '∃x x is an animal with a heart' is to be "rendered true." I would suggest, in fact, that Quine has never provided a "criterion of ontological commitment" – or not if a criterion of ontological commitment is supposed to provide a rule for applying predicates formed from the schema 'is ontologically committed to Ps' (where 'Ps' is to be replaced by a plural

count phrase) either to persons or to theories. (In a classic paper, Church took Quine to task for not having provided such a criterion and undertook to provide one himself.)<sup>3</sup>

Still, these difficulties with Alston's proposed criterion of ontological commitment being noted, it seems that "Alston's dilemma" is untouched. There may be difficulties with the way he has formulated the criterion, but it does seem indisputable that there are philosophers who have tried to avoid committing themselves to the existence of entities of certain sorts by recourse to the kind of paraphrase Alston has called ontological reduction. And Alston's dilemma seems to show that this simply can't be done; if the paraphrase is a correct paraphrase, it will have all the same existential implications as the original, and if it isn't a correct paraphrase – well, it isn't a correct paraphrase.

What shall we say about Alston's dilemma? Well, here's what it occurs to me to say. It seems to me that it is one of those pieces of very general reasoning that look more plausible when considered in the abstract than when considered in relation to particular cases. Let us consider a particular case or two. Start with this one. A certain philosopher, Albert, is a staunch materialist – a staunch advocate of the thesis that everything is material. One day he says to his friend Belinda (who does not share his enthusiasm for materialism), "I bought this carpet only last Tuesday, and look – there's already a hole in it." Belinda replies, "You see – you can't consistently maintain your materialism outside the philosopher's study. If there's a hole in your carpet, there's a hole full stop. And no hole is a material thing. A material thing, after all, is a thing made of matter, and a hole results from an absence of matter. (Some holes occupy regions of space in which there is no matter at all.) If, therefore, there's a hole in your carpet, then not everything is material. That is to say, it follows from what you said about the carpet that materialism is false."

This bit of dialogue is, of course, supposed to be a "toy" example of a kind of exchange more serious versions of which actually occur in real philosophical disputes. (It is modeled on one of the exchanges in a justly famed toy philosophical dispute.) My second example is an exchange that is similar in its logical structure to the first, but is somewhat more realistic. Norma the nominalist denies the existence of abstract objects. In her much-anthologized essay "Against Platonism" she has written, "Although there are sentences that appear both to be true and to imply the existence of abstract objects, this fact merely illustrates the truism that appearances

<sup>3</sup> "Ontological Commitment," *Journal of Philosophy* 55 (1958): 1008–1014.



can be deceptive. Every sentence that appears to have both these features is in reality either not true or fails to imply the existence of abstract objects.” Percival the platonist, however, first made his name by publishing the following reflection on Norma’s statement: “If there are true sentences that appear to imply the existence of abstract objects, then there are sentences. It is, moreover, clear from the context that by ‘sentence’ Norma means ‘sentence-type’. And sentence-types are abstract objects. Nominalism is therefore tacitly rejected even by its supporters – of whom Norma is typical. In the very act of defending nominalism, she has affirmed a thesis that implies the falsity of nominalism. And all nominalists are in the same awkward situation. They all say things – perhaps not in every case in the course of defending nominalism – that logically imply the falsity of nominalism.”

If Albert and Norma are typical analytical philosophers who find themselves in dialectical situations like the ones I have imagined, they will respond by producing paraphrases of their apparently existential sentences that are of exactly the sort that Alston has called ontological reductions. I should in fact like to see Norma’s paraphrase. It’s too bad she’s a creature of fiction and can provide only such paraphrases as I, her creator, am able to put in her mouth. And I have none to offer her. Paraphrases of the sort Albert requires, however, are easy enough to come by. This one will do: paraphrase ‘there is a hole in *x*’ as ‘*x* is perforate’. Advocates of this paraphrase will contend that ‘*x* is perforate’ is a shape predicate (in that respect, it is comparable to ‘*x* is rectangular’, although it is topologically richer). They will contend that ‘That carpet is perforate’ implies the existence of a perforate carpet, but does not imply the existence of anything that is not a carpet – or at any rate implies the existence only of perforate carpets and things whose existence would also be implied by the existence of imperforate carpets. (Just as ‘That carpet is rectangular’ implies the existence of a rectangular carpet but does not imply the existence of anything that is not a carpet – or at any rate implies the existence only of rectangular carpets and things whose existence would also be implied by the existence of nonrectangular carpets.)

Let us imagine that Albert is a typical analytical philosopher and that he has responded to Belinda’s challenge by offering an “ontological reduction” of his original statement about the carpet, and that this ontological reduction (this paraphrase) is precisely the one I have imagined. And let us further imagine that Belinda, having read her Alston, responds in these words:

But Albert, either the sentence ‘That carpet is perforate’ has the same meaning as the sentence ‘There is a hole in that carpet’ or it doesn’t. If it

doesn't, you're not restating what you had said in different words, you're simply making a different statement, saying a different thing. And if the two sentences do have the same meaning, then 'That carpet is perforate' implies that a hole exists if 'There is a hole in that carpet' implies a hole exists. In the former case, you may be avoiding commitment to holes, but you're not doing it by paraphrasing your original statement; you're doing it by withdrawing your original statement and replacing with a new statement, one that doesn't have the unwanted existential implication. In the latter case, you've employed an ontological reduction all right, but it doesn't release you from any ontological commitment your original statement involved you in. In neither case have you avoided an ontological commitment by offering an ontological reduction of some sentence.

Now there is a rather obvious rejoinder to the supposed dilemma with which Belinda has confronted Albert. Let us imagine that he makes this obvious rejoinder, and that he formulates it as follows. (I'm sorry, but, as you are about to discover, Albert is rather long-winded.)

Actually, when I spoke the words "There's already a hole in it," it wasn't entirely clear what I did mean by them. Not *entirely* clear: my words certainly enjoyed a degree of clarity appropriate to the everyday context in which I spoke them. If I had known that your practice was to subject people's innocent quotidian utterances to the sort of dialectical pressure you subjected that one to – if I had known that you were going to treat an everyday assertion as if it were a premise in a metaphysical argument – I'd have used words designed to withstand such pressure. That is to say, I'd have said that the carpet was already perforate. Here's an analogy. Copernicus incautiously says that it's cooler now that the sun has moved behind the elms, and you tell him that he can't consistently adhere to his thesis that the sun does not move when he emerges from the observatory and re-enters everyday life. If he responds to the dialectical pressure you have subjected his statement to by saying something along the lines of, "Well, I only meant that the turning earth had carried the elms into a region of space that lies between us and the sun," will you respond by saying that this "kinetic reduction" either has the same "kinetic implications" as his original statement or else is not a correct paraphrase of the original? If you do say that, I think you'll find that you're well on the way to becoming a figure of fun. If you don't, then I'd like to know why you're treating Copernicus and me differently. Our cases certainly *seem* to be similar. Copernicus (in my story) employs a "kinetic reduction" to avoid an unwanted *apparent* "kinetic commitment," and I've employed an ontological reduction to

avoid an unwanted *apparent* ontological commitment. The keyword here, as my use of italics no doubt indicates, is 'apparent'. When I utter sentences like 'There is a hole in that carpet', the presence and placement of the words 'there is' in that sentence gives it the appearance – the wholly superficial appearance – of a sentence that expresses a truth if and only if the open sentences ' $x$  is a hole' and ' $x$  is in that carpet' have overlapping extensions. Or we might say that when someone uses a sentence that consists of 'there is a(n)' followed by a singular count phrase, that use constitutes a prima facie case for the thesis that there exist objects that the phrase applies to. In many instances, the appearance is so easily seen through (or the prima facie case so easily answered) that it would be absurd to call attention to the appearance (or the case). Some instances, however, are more serious. (Consider, for example, my well-known colleague Norma the Nominalist and the sentence from her writings that her critic Percival has alleged implies the existence of sentence-types. That sentence really does seem to be such that it can be true only if the open sentence ' $x$  is a sentence-type' has a nonempty extension.) In such cases, paraphrase or ontological reduction is in order. I concede that if one succeeds in finding an appropriate ontological reduction of the sentence with the apparent and unwanted ontological implications, the paraphrase will not have the same meaning as the original sentence. (It's true that it can be a vexed question whether two sentences have the same meaning, but I do think that that, however we understand the concept of sameness of meaning, it would be hard to maintain that 'there's a hole in  $x$ ' and ' $x$  is perforate' mean the same thing. *I'm* certainly not going to try to maintain it.)

Let's consider this sentence: 'There are exactly two holes in that carpet'. And let's consider its relation to the three sentences that follow. (The second and third are ontological reductions of 'There are exactly two holes in that carpet'; the first is an attempt to make the "apparent" or "prima facie" existential implications of 'There are exactly two holes in that carpet' explicit and, as one might say, undeniable.)

Exactly two objects of the kind "hole" bear the relation "being in" to that carpet

That carpet is doubly perforate

There is a hole-lining  $x$  that is a part of that carpet, and there is a hole-lining  $y$  that is a part of that carpet, and  $x$  and  $y$  are not co-perforate, and every hole-lining that is a part of that carpet is co-perforate either with  $x$  or with  $y$ .

(Historians of late-twentieth-century analytical metaphysics will recognize the ideas on display in the third of these sentences.)<sup>4</sup> One might well say – and I will take this position – that, insofar as a precise meaning can be assigned to the “everyday” sentence ‘There are exactly two holes in that carpet’, it is equivalent to the disjunction of these three sentences – or perhaps to some longer disjunction of which that disjunction is but a part. Each of these three sentences is (if we leave their unfamiliar vocabulary and the unwieldiness of the first and third out of consideration) interchangeable with ‘There are exactly two holes in that carpet’ for any everyday, practical purposes. (And they are interchangeable with one another for any practical purposes.) Nevertheless, metaphysicians of the kind who employ ontological reductions will see them as very different. Consider the second sentence, for example. Suppose that Minnie the Metaphysician regards this sentence as an acceptable ontological reduction of ‘There are exactly two holes in that carpet’. And suppose that she is trying to find an ontological reduction – vis-à-vis holes, not chairs – of ‘There are exactly as many chairs in this room as there are holes in that carpet’. The idea behind the second sentence permits only something along these lines: ‘For some number  $n$ , there are  $n$  chairs in this room and that carpet is  $n$ -ly perforate’. All very well if Minnie doesn’t mind affirming the sentence ‘There are numbers’, which is a logical consequence of the reduction in question – but she might mind doing that. (Her friend Norma would.) And – as those historians of late-twentieth-century analytical metaphysics to whom I alluded a moment ago will be aware – the ideas on display in the *third* sentence will provide those who want to affirm neither ‘There are holes’ nor ‘There are numbers’ with an ontological reduction of ‘There are exactly as many chairs in this room as there are holes in that carpet’ that has neither of those two sentences as a logical consequence.

The paraphrastic technique illustrated by the third sentence, it should be noted, is without its own metaphysical commitments: the third sentence is – if it is true – indeed a nominalistically acceptable ontological reduction of an “original” that prima facie implies the existence of holes; but it is true only on the assumption that both the Principle of Universal Mercological Summation and the Doctrine of Arbitrary Undetached Parts are true. If you don’t know what those are – much less why ontological reductions of the kind illustrated by the third sentence presuppose them – it doesn’t much matter. The important thing is that some metaphysicians won’t mind using

<sup>4</sup> These historians will of course be familiar with “Holes” by David and Stephanie Lewis (*Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 48 (1970): 206–212).

a technique of paraphrase that presupposes them, and some will mind it very much indeed. (David Lewis – I can't speak for Stephanie Lewis on this point – not only didn't mind, he gloried in it; I should mind very much indeed.)

All this is by way of providing some examples of the ways in which some sentences that are interchangeable in dealing with the matters of everyday, practical life are by no means interchangeable in the rarefied air of the philosophy room, to borrow a phrase of Lewis's – although in this context, it might be better to say the ontology room.

I might put my general point by saying that the everyday sentence is neutral with respect to metaphysics or ontology. It either has no metaphysical implications or has only such metaphysical implications as would be accepted by every nonrevisionary metaphysician – that is, by every metaphysician who is willing to say that when one makes assertions in everyday situations by using sentences like 'There are exactly two holes in that carpet', one generally says something true. (Nowadays, one might say something like: by everyone who does not endorse an *error theory* of "hole" language – or of number language or of attribute language . . .) I would say further that each of the ontological reductions on display in my extended example represents a thesis that has the same implications for everyday action in the human *Lebenswelt* as the sentence of which it is a reduction, and is stated in terms demonstrably consistent with the ontology of those who offer it as "all they really meant to say," when a critic has subjected the original sentence to dialectical pressures of kinds that are appropriate only in a discussion of metaphysics.

Here endeth Albert's speech – as I said, rather a long-winded one. It was in fact so long that many of my readers will no doubt have lost track of the fact that for some time now the words they have been reading have been the words of my creature Albert and not my own. If so, no real harm done, for by and large I agree with him. If a summary of his point is wanted, I think the following will do.

Alston defends the conclusion that one cannot avoid ontological commitment by recourse to the kind of paraphrase he calls ontological reduction. And this is because the reduction one offers will either mean the same as the original sentence, in which case it will have the same ontological commitments, or it will not mean the same, in which case one will no longer be saying what one originally said. In the former case, one does not avoid any ontological commitments, and hence does not avoid any ontological commitments by the method of ontological reduction. In the latter case, one will avoid ontological commitments, but not by the method of

ontological reduction. Hence, in neither case does one avoid any ontological commitments by paraphrase – and each of those two cases is the logical contradictory of the other. And, taken in the most wooden and literal sense possible, this conclusion is true and the argument by which it is proved is sound. I concede, therefore, that avoiding ontological commitment by the method of ontological reduction is something that can't be done. What can be done, however, is to remove merely *apparent* ontological commitments by paraphrase. One will succeed in this endeavor if (a) the original sentence seems to imply the existence of so-and-so's (which, for one reason or another, one wishes not to affirm the existence of), (b) it is evident that the paraphrase does not imply the existence of so-and-so's (and hence does not mean the same as the original), and (c) the ontological reduction could (in principle) be used for all the same purposes as the original in the business of everyday life.

Perhaps the reservations that lie behind the parenthetical qualification 'in principle' are worth a brief digression. What I have in mind are considerations of the kind I was gesturing at when I used the words 'unfamiliar vocabulary and unwieldiness'. Let me give an example of two sentences that could be used for all the same purposes in everyday life – but for the fact that one of them involves vocabulary that is unfamiliar to most people, and complex and unwieldy to boot:

The twenty-six standing stones form a circle about 110 meters in diameter near the center of the Wallachian Plain

The twenty-six standing stones are so arranged that (a) each of them is approximately equidistant from its two nearest neighbors, and (b) there is a point near the center of the Wallachian Plain such that each of them is about 55 meters from that point.

I think it is obvious that there is a sense in which these two sentences can, as one might say, "in principle" be used for all the same practical purposes, although it might be that one would face certain difficulties of "unfamiliar vocabulary and unwieldiness" if one attempted to use the latter sentence in the world as we find it. (End of brief digression.)

To return to our summary – and to summarize it in turn – Alston's dilemma has two false presuppositions: that the purpose of ontological reduction is to remove real (as opposed to apparent) ontological commitments, and that the reduction is required to mean the same thing as the original.

I will close with some remarks about what Alston thinks the real purpose of ontological reduction is – for he does think it has a place in philosophy.

The place he finds for it is astonishingly Wittgensteinian; at least it's astonishing if we are categorizing him as "William P. Alston" and not as, say, "analytical philosopher writing in the late 1950s." He asks us to consider several pairs of sentences, including this one:

There is a fruit that James will eat

There is a possibility that James will come.

He proceeds to call our attention to the "strong verbal similarity" between these two sentences. Now at this point I must leave the task of exposition for a moment and make a small correction to Alston's argument. It's clear from the later parts of the argument that by "strong verbal similarity" Alston means "strong grammatical similarity." And these two sentences are not grammatically similar at all. In the first sentence, the word 'that' is a relative pronoun, and in the second, 'that' is, well, it's whatever 'that' is when it's forming what philosophers call "'that' clauses." I'm not sure whether any of the traditional grammatical categories fits it very well. Whatever it is, it certainly isn't a relative pronoun. We shall do better justice to Alston's argument if we replace this sentence with a sentence that purports to be about a possibility and really is grammatically parallel to 'There is a fruit that James will eat'. This one will do as well as any:

There is a possibility that James will consider.

Now to resume the argument: the grammatical similarity of the two sentences 'There is a fruit that James will eat' and 'There is a possibility that James will consider' seduces us into thinking that we can ask the same kinds of questions about fruits and possibilities – or if not precisely the same kinds, then questions that are at any rate in some way parallel or analogous. Because, for example, every fruit has a location, one who has been seduced by the grammatical similarity of our two sentences may be tempted to ask, if not where the possibility that James will consider is, perhaps rather something like what its ontological locus is. (He remarks parenthetically, "See Whitehead on God as the locus of 'eternal objects'.") And more or less the same goes for all sorts of abstract objects. Seduced by the grammatical similarity of 'There are propositions he doesn't accept' and 'There are chairs he doesn't own', the philosopher asks whether propositions have parts and, if so, what sorts of thing those parts are. (After all, chairs have parts.)

The result of the grammatical parallel between existential sentences about “familiar” objects (fruits and chairs and so on) and existential sentences about quite different sorts of things (possibilities and propositions) is that philosophers ask meaningless questions about those “quite different sorts of things” and propound theories about them that are wholly inappropriate to the kinds of thing they are – being misled by grammar into supposing that possibilities and propositions (or numbers or attributes or relations . . .) have features that are at least analogous to various salient features of “familiar” objects.

And what is the remedy for this unfortunate state of affairs? Why, ontological reduction! To counteract the illusions by which these theorists are afflicted, subject them to the following Wittgensteinian therapy: continually place before them pairs of sentences like:

1. There is a possibility that James will come

and

2. It is not certainly false that James will come.

and they'll sooner or later stop asking meaningless questions and propounding inappropriate theories about possibilities and other “abstract” objects (and perhaps about many other sorts of things: holes and round squares and temporal parts and pains and regions of space . . .). This is the point of ontological reduction: although these two sentences mean exactly the same thing, it's only the former that has the power to confuse philosophers. Alston puts the point this way:

the point of translating (1) into (2) lies in the fact that once anyone sees that what he says when he uses (1) can be just as well said by using (2), the power of the grammatical lure will be broken.

(It's hard to believe, but I don't think that the phrase ‘the power of the grammatical lure will be broken’ occurs in *Philosophical Investigations*.)

I have to say that I don't find Alston's therapeutic proposal very promising. Suppose, for the moment, that sentences like ‘There is a possibility that James will come’ have indeed seduced various philosophers into believing that possibilities, like fruits, have locations – at least in some rarefied metaphysical sense if not in the literal sense in which fruits do. If that sentence has that seductive power, then I'm pretty sure that more complex existential sentences like the ones that make up this piece of discourse

Some of the possibilities of nuclear catastrophe Professor Fleming has cited in his report are considered by the committee to be so remote that it would



not be a good use of the company's resources to guard against them. Others, however, seem to the committee to be very real. Some of the possibilities in the latter class have been called to the committee's attention by other investigators, but there are several that only Professor Fleming has noticed.

have it also. And such sentences as these are very difficult to find paraphrases of. It looks to me as if Alston's therapeutic project will be a success only with patients who have encountered a very limited class of sentences involving apparent quantification over possibilities.

Secondly, consider this proposition:

( $\forall$ ) The following is true of everything: for every property, it has either that property or its negation.

The proposition ( $\forall$ ) implies, for example, that the Taj Mahal has either the property of having been proved to exist in a famous theorem of David Hilbert or the property of not having been proved to exist in a famous theorem of David Hilbert. The latter, I'd judge.

Let us consider the implications of ( $\forall$ ) for the question whether the possibility that James will come has a metaphysical locus. Note that if ( $\forall$ ) is true, no questions about the properties of the possibility that James will come are meaningless – other than those that are meaningless because they include language that would be meaningless if it were applied to fruits or to chairs or to anything else.

If the possibility that James will come exists (and Alston doesn't deny that it does), it either has some sort of metaphysical locus or it doesn't – provided, of course, that there is such a thing as "having a metaphysical locus." That is to say, the possibility that James will come either has or lacks the property of having a metaphysical locus *provided* that the words 'has a metaphysical locus' are meaningful. Of course, those words may well not mean anything. I'm certainly inclined to think that they don't. In that case, the words 'having a metaphysical locus' do not denote a property, since, being meaningless, they don't denote anything. But if they are meaningful, I would suggest, the best way to establish their lack of meaning would be to challenge the philosopher who uses them to explain their meaning and to subject such attempts at explanation as may ensue to critical scrutiny and dialectical pressure.

But suppose that the words 'has a metaphysical locus' do mean something. (If they do, what that meaning is is opaque to me – but the meaning of the words 'In actual calculations, the counterterms introduced to cancel the divergences in Feynman diagram calculations beyond tree level must be fixed using a set of renormalization conditions' is opaque to me, and I have

it on good authority that these words have a meaning, and a very precise meaning at that.) Then there is no need for Wittgensteinian therapy. If there is such a property as "having a metaphysical locus," then possibilities (always assuming there to be such things as possibilities) have it or they don't. And we metaphysicians can meaningfully ask whether they have it. The answer may be as obvious as the answer to, "Does the Taj Mahal have the property of having been proved to exist in a famous theorem of David Hilbert?," or as unobvious as the answer to, "Does the phrase 'yields a false sentence when appended to its own quotation name' have the property of yielding a false sentence when appended to its own quotation name?" But the answer, obvious or unobvious, must exist.