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**What is an Ontological Category?**

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As names of divisions of philosophy go, ‘ontology’ is a rather new word. Although it is older than that terminological parvenu‘epistemology’, it is much newer than ‘metaphysics’ or ‘ethics’ or ‘logic’—and, of course, it is much newer than ‘philosophy’. But the word is as hard to define as any of her elder sisters. Within analytical philosophy[[1]](#endnote--1), one finds three understandings of the word ‘ontology’—or, if you like, three conceptions of ontology.

 One of them, the use of the word by Bergmann and his school, is that ontology is the study of the ontological structure of objects. For reasons that will become clear, I reject this conception of ontology. I reject it as provincial, as the identification of a kingdom with one of its provinces. (In my view—I defend this view in an unpublished companion piece to this paper entitled “Relational *vs*. Constitutent Ontologies”—that province is uninhabited. But I do not reject the Bergmanian conception of ontology on that ground alone: I contend that it is a provincial conception even if objects do have ontological structures.)

 There is, secondly, what I will call the “bare Quinean” conception of ontology. Quine has famously called the question ‘What is there?’ “the ontological question,” and one might incautiously infer from this label that he conceives of ontology as the attempt to answer the ontological question. But neither Quine nor anyone else would regard just any answer to the ontological question as the kind of answer a discipline called ontology might be expected to provide. Quine himself has observed that one correct answer to the ontological question is ‘Everything’—and we certainly do not need to turn to any science or discipline to satisfy ourselves that that answer *is* correct. Another sort of correct answer might well be of the following form: a very long conjunction of existential quantifications on “low-level” predicates, a conjunction that would perhaps read in part ‘. . . and there are bananas and there are electron neutrinos and there are protein molecules and there are locomotives . . . and there are colors and there are political parties and there are Abelian groups and there are non-linear third-order differential equations that are known to have solutions . . .’ . (Perhaps its final conjunct would be: ‘and there is nothing else’.) If the only answers (other than answers that involve the “everything trick,” answers like ‘Everything’ and ‘Locomotives and everything else’) that can be given to the ontological question are those provided by the investigative techniques native to everyday life and the special sciences, then all answers to the ontological question may well be of that sort. But if there is a philosophical discipline called ontology, it will attempt to give an answer to the ontological question that is in some sense more general, more abstract, more systematic than a long conjunction of existential quantifications on low-level predicates. And the “bare Quinean” will agree with this statement: on the bare Quinean conception of ontology, ontology is the discipline whose business it is to provide an abstract or general or systematic answer to the ontological question—answers that are less abstract and more informative than ‘Everything’ and less informative and more abstract than “long list” answers. The bare Quinean will, however, be happy to regard the ideas expressed by the words ‘general’, ‘abstract’, and ‘systematic’ as entirely subjective. On the bare Quinean conception of ontology, it is the business of the practitioners of ontology to produce and defend answers to the ontological question that—as one might say—*strike* them and their peers as “general” and “abstract” and “systematic,” answers that it *seems appropriate* to them toapply those terms to. If, for example, I say that there are abstract objects or sets or temporal parts of persisting objects, the bare Quineans will almost certainly recognize this as an assertion of the kind that characterizes ontology. But if I say that there are bananas or protein molecules or solutions to Einstein’s field equations that are without physical interest, these assertions will almost certainly seen by the bare Quineans as having a place in ontology only as examples that illustrate some much more general existential thesis or as premises of some argument for some much more general existential thesis. And they will offer no account of what it is for an existential thesis to be “much more general” than these theses. They will indeed insist that it would be a mistake to try to provide such an account owing to the fact that those words are no more than expressions of the subjective reactions of various philosophers to the degree of generality exhibited by various existential theses.[[2]](#endnote-0)

 The third conception of ontology—it is the conception I favor—rests on the conviction that the notion of a “general” or “abstract” or “systematic” answer to the ontological question *can* be given an objective sense. The third conception rests on the conviction that there are *ontological categories* and that it is the business of ontology to provide answers to the ontological question in terms of a specification of the ontological categories. I will attempt to give an account of the concept on which this conception of ontology rests, the concept of an ontological category.

**I**

I begin with the idea of a natural class. One of the assumptions on which the third conception of ontology rests is that natural classes are real. By this I do not necessarily mean that there are objects called ‘natural classes’, for an ontologian (why is there no such word?) may well deny that there are classes of any description. Indeed, anyone who did deny the existence of classes would *ipso facto* be engaged in ontology. What I mean by saying that there are natural classes is a consequence of the thesis that there are natural—non-conventional—lines of division among things. This assumption was famously rejected by Hobbes, and, following him, by Locke and the other empiricists. As Locke says (in the concluding passage of Chapter 3 of Book III of the *Essay*),

*Recapitulation*.—To conclude: This is that which in short I would say, viz., that all the great business of *genera* and *species*, and their essences, amounts to no more but this, that men making abstract ideas, and settling them in their minds, with names annexed to them, do thereby enable themselves to consider things, and discourse of them, as it were in bundles, for the easier and readier improvement and communication of their knowledge, which would advance but slowly, were their words and thoughts confined only to particulars.

I am not wholly convinced that what Locke says in this “recapitulation” is consistent with everything he says in the *Essay* (or even with everything he says in Chapter 3 of Book III), but, whether it will do as an unqualified statement of Locke’s views or not, it is a good statement of the point of view whose rejection is one of the assumptions on which the third conception of ontology rests. (From this point on, when I ascribe features to “ontology,” I shall be speaking from the point of view of the third conception—my own conception.) According to this anti-Lockean philosophy of classification, some sets, a minuscule proportion of them, correspond to real divisions among things: in each case, the real division between the things that are members of that set and those that are not.

 To say that there are real divisions among things implies the existence of natural classes, but this statement does not say enough to settle the question of what natural classes there are—not even to settle it in the rather abstract and uninformative way I want to settle it in this initial discussion of the natural classes. To show you what I mean by this statement, I’m going to ask you to consider two questions about the relation between the concepts “real division among things” and the concept “natural class.”

 I shall introduce the first of these two questions by the following example. Suppose that the line that marks the division between horses and non-horses is one of those real lines of division among things. Does it follow that “horse” is a natural class? Before you answer, consider *this* question: Does it follow that “non-horse” is a natural class? That “non-horse” is a natural class certainly doesn’t seem to be a thesis that should be true by definition. But the boundary of that class marks a real division among things. At any rate, it does if the boundary of “horse” marks a real division among things, since the two classes have the same boundary. We therefore don’t want to say that a class is a natural class given only that its boundary marks a real division among things.

 I think that the following statement is a more plausible candidate for what we want to say about the relation between “real division” and “natural class”:

For any class, if its boundary marks a real division among things, then either that class or its complement is a natural class—but not necessarily both.

If you ask me, “In such a case, how do we determine *which* of two complementary classes are natural classes?”, I’m afraid I don’t have any very informative answer. I could try this: The ones with “sufficient internal unity.” It does seem obvious to me that if the boundary between a class and its complement marks a real division among things, at least one of the two must exhibit sufficient internal unity for it to be called a natural class. If this thesis is granted, the existence of natural classes follows from the existence of real divisions among things. Nevertheless, the concept of “natural class” cannot be defined solely in terms the concept “real division.” We must also appeal to the concept of “sufficient internal unity” if we are to provide a full explanation of “natural class.” One might in fact plausibly suppose that, if we really *have* the concept “sufficient internal unity,” we could use it to define the concept “real division among things.” (Suppose a class exhibits “sufficient internal unity”; suppose its union with no unit class other than its unit subclasses has this feature; then its boundary marks a real division among things.) Why, then, have I assigned such a fundamental role to “real division” in my exposition of the concept “natural class”? Because, first, it seems to me that “real division” is a far easier idea to grasp than the idea “exhibits sufficient internal unity.” And because, secondly, in most interesting cases in which the boundary between two complementary classes marks a real division among things, it will be simply evident with respect to one of the two that—whatever internal unity may be—either one of them exhibits vastly more internal unity than the other or they both exhibit an approximately equal (and very high) degree of internal unity.

 Now the second question about the relation between “real division” and “natural class.” Consider the universal class. Is it a natural class? I propose to leave this an open question—to provide an account of “natural class” that leaves it an open question.[[3]](#endnote-1) Does what I have said have any implications for this question? The only relevant implication of what we have said is this: if the boundary of the universal class marks a real division among things, then either the universal class or the empty class is a natural class. Well, what *is* the boundary of the universal class? In one sense, it has no boundary—not if boundaries divide things from other things. But we might not insist that a boundary must divide things. (Suppose the universe is finite in extent; adopt a relational theory of space. Isn’t it reasonable to say that in that case the universe has a boundary, a boundary that nothing is outside?)

 The simplest way to leave it an open question whether the universal class is a natural class is to stipulate that it has no boundary (in which case our principle says nothing about whether it is a natural class). We say, that is, that a class has a boundary if (and only if) both that class and its complement are non-empty. Those who want to say that the universal class is a natural class—or that it is not—must defend their thesis on some ground that does not involve the properties of its boundary (perhaps on the ground of its “internal unity” or lack thereof). It will be observed that, in virtue of this stipulation, we have left it an open question whether the empty class is a natural class. (I shall later stipulate that the empty class is *not* a natural class—but for no profound reason; whether the empty class is a natural class seems to be one of those “don’t care” questions, one of those questions that can properly be settled by stipulation, and stipulating that it is not a natural class simplifies some of my definitions and the statements of some of my theses.)

 *Are* there any natural classes? Well, it seems plausible to suppose so. The class or set of electrons is a plausible candidate for the office “natural class”—as plausible a candidate as there could be, in my view. [[4]](#endnote-2) (The boundary between electrons and non-electrons is certainly a plausible candidate for the office “boundary that marks a real division among things,” and it seems evident that the class of electrons exhibits vastly more internal unity than the class of non-electrons.) The class of horses (members of the species *Equus caballus*) would be a rather more controversial but still reasonably plausible example.

 Whether there are natural classes or not, it is one of the assumptions of ontology that there are. (If there are no natural classes, ontology is like astrology: a science that rests on a false assumption.) It is, moreover, one of the assumptions of ontology that, although some pairs of natural classes may have non-empty intersections otherwise than by one’s being a subclass of the other, there are nested sequences of natural classes—sequences ordered by the subclass relation. The class of electrons, class of set of leptons, and the class of fermions provide a plausible example of such a sequence. The class of horses, the class of mammals, and the class of chordates would (again) be a rather more controversial but still reasonably plausible example.

 One could, however, affirm the existence of natural classes and of nested sequences of natural classes without involving oneself in ontology—or in any other part of philosophy. Suppose, for example, that Alice maintains that the largest natural classes are the class of bosons and the class of fermions and that every natural class is a subclass of one of these two non-overlapping classes. And suppose that she also maintains that (in some sense) only a very small proportion of the things that there are are bosons or fermions. We might, for example, imagine that she supposes that, for any *x*s, the mereological sum of the *x*s exists, and that among these sums are to be found atoms and molecules and cats and locomotives and galaxies and most of the tangible or visible things that we unreflectively believe in. (And, of course, Alice believes that there are a vast number of convoluted gerrymanders most of which are not—considered individually—possible objects of human thought.) The class of cats, Alice contends, is not a natural class: the vague and imperfect boundary we have drawn around the cats is a mere product of convention and fails to reflect a real division among things, unlike the boundary we have drawn around the bosons. And the same goes for the locomotives and the galaxies. (Of course most classes of sums are cognitively inaccessible to us, but, says Alice, if, per impossibile, we *were* to draw boundaries around any of these classes, those boundaries *would be* merely conventional—and with a vengeance.) And, of course, she maintains that the class of things that are neither bosons nor fermions is, as one might say, radically deficient in internal unity and is not a natural class.

 If Alice is right, ontology is, again, like astrology: a science that rests on a false assumption. For one of the assumptions on which ontology rests is this: that membership in the natural classes is not restricted to any such minuscule proportion of the things that there are as Alice supposes it to be.

 It is an assumption of ontology that there are natural classes whose membership comprises a really significant proportion of the things that there are. I am acutely aware that the idea of a class whose membership comprises a really significant proportion of the things that there are is an idea that it is hard to give any precise sense to. But it does not seem to me to be an obviously meaningless or entirely vacuous idea. Take our friend Alice. In her view there are certainly a lot more things—even a lot more concrete things—than there are things that are members of some natural class. If, for example, there are 10 exp 80 bosons and fermions, then there are, abstractions aside, 2 exp (10 exp 80) -1 things: there are 10 exp 80 things that belong to some natural class and ((2 exp (10 exp 80) – 1) – 10 exp 80 things that belong to no natural class, and the latter number is *inconceivably* larger than the former. (The ratio of the latter to the former can be described this way. Think of the number that is expressed by a ‘1’ followed by seventy-nine zeros. The ratio of the number of things that belong to no natural class to the number of things that belong to some natural class is a number that can be expressed by a ‘1’ followed by—approximately—three times *that many* zeros.) Or if the number of bosons and fermions is denumerably infinite, then the number of (concrete) things that belong to no natural class is indenumerably infinite.

 There are various ways in which there might be natural classes whose membership comprised “a really significant proportion of the things that there are.” (Let us call such a class “large.”) One of them is this: the class of *all* things (which would of course have to be a virtual class if the classes of which we speak are anything like sets) is a natural class—for the membership of a class is certainly a “significant proportion” of itself.

 Here is another way. It may be that, although the class of all things, the universal class, is not a natural class, it is the union of a small number of natural classes. (A “small” number would be a number like 2 or 6 or 19. And what do I mean by ‘a number like’? You may well ask. But if you want a definition of ‘small number’, I offer the following. A number *n* is small in just this case: if a class is the union of *n* subclasses, the membership at least one of them must comprise a really significant proportion of the membership of that class.)

 And here is a third. Say that a natural class is “high” if is not a proper subclass of any natural class. At least one high natural class is large—although some things belong to *no* natural class. (Suppose, for example, that God exists and that a vast number of creatures exist and that everything is either God or a creature. Suppose that God belongs to no natural class—and hence that the universal class is not a natural class—and that the class of creatures is a natural class.)

 Note that the assumption we are considering is not that *every* high class is large. That assumption is too strong. And it is not the assumption that the membership of the union of all high classes is large. That assumption is too weak. (It is, for example, consistent with the thesis that there are an infinite number of things and that all natural classes are finite.) The assumption is that *at least one* natural class is large. Our assumption is therefore consistent with the following threefold thesis: everything is either a substance or (exclusive) an attribute; “substance” and “attribute” are both natural classes and every natural class is a subclass of one or the other; there are finitely many substances and too many attributes to be numbered even by a transfinite number. In this case, only an insignificant proportion of the things that there are belong to the class “substance” (and, therefore, to such natural classes as may be subclasses of “substance”). But practically everything belongs to the class “attribute.”

 We may now define “ontological category.” Let us say, first, that a natural class *x* is a *primary* ontological categor*y* just in the case that

—there are large natural classes

—*x* is a high class.

Suppose, for example, that there are both substances and attributes, that everything is either a substance or (exclusive) an attribute, that “substance” and “attribute” are both natural classes, that no natural class contains both substances and attributes, that “practically everything” is an attribute (and that, therefore, only an insignificant proportion of the things that there are are substances). Then “substance” and “attribute” are primary ontological categories—are *the* primary ontological categories.[[5]](#endnote-3)

 The primary ontological categories are the highest links in the great chains of classification—the great chains of non-arbitrary classification, of not-merely-a-matter-of-convention classification. But remember that the highest links in the great chains of classification are primary ontological categories only if primary ontological categories exist—just as the highest buildings are skyscrapers only if skyscrapers exist. If our friend Alice is right about what natural classes there are, the highest natural classes are not primary ontological categories. (If she is right, the highest natural class, the class of elementary particles, is not an ontological category, since there are no large natural classes.) Her world corresponds, in the analogy, to a world in which the highest buildings are three stories high: highest buildings but no skyscrapers.

 Having defined ‘primary ontological category’, we may proceed to define ‘secondary ontological category’, ‘tertiary ontological category’, and so on, by repeated applications of essentially the same device. We say that *x* is a *natural subclass* of *y* if *x* is a subclass of *y* and *x* is a natural class. We say that *x* is a *large* subclass of *y* if *x* is a subclass of *y* and *x* comprises a significant proportion of the members of *y*. We say that *x* is a *high* subclass of *y* if *x* is a natural proper subclass of *y* and is a proper subclass of no natural proper subclass of *y*. Then, a natural class *x* is a *secondary* ontological category if

There is a primary ontological category *y* such that

—*y* has large natural proper subclasses

—*x* is a high subclass of *y*.

And so for tertiary ontological category, quaternary ontological category, . . . .

 And, finally, an *ontological category* (simpliciter) is a class that, for some *n*, is an *n*-ary ontological category.[[6]](#endnote-4)

 One might wonder whether this account of “ontological category” has the consequence that this concept is “entirely subjective”—and thus wonder whether the account of ontology that I am proposing in the end reduces to the “bare Quinean” conception of ontology. It is certainly true that it the account depends essentially on certain *vague* terms. (For example, ‘the membership of *x* comprises a significant proportion of the membership of *y*’.) I would contend, however, that the vague is not the same as the subjective. For example, ‘delicious’ is a subjective term, in contrast to ‘edible’ and ‘nutritious’, which are merely vague. I would also point out that there can be perfectly clear cases of objects that fall under vague terms, and that this account, when applied to a particular metaphysic may yield determinate answers to the question, ‘What, according to that metaphysic, are the ontological categories?’ It may be obvious, for example, that according to Albert’s metaphysic, there are no secondary ontological categories, since all his primary categories have infinitely many members and all other natural classes have only finitely many members—which entails that none of Albert’s primary categories have large natural subsets.

 Assuming that the “subjectivity” worry has been adequately answered, is the above account of “ontological category” satisfactory? I am inclined to think that this account is incomplete I am inclined to think that there should be a further condition on what an “ontological category” is, a modal condition. I think this because what I have so far said allows ontological categories to be rather fragile, modally speaking, much more fragile than I’m comfortable with their being. One kind of example that makes me uneasy is this: it is consistent with this account that the natural class “dog” (let’s assume that this *is* a natural class) turn out to be, oh, let’s say, a 23-ary ontological category. And this result seems wrong to me—and not because I have anything against either dogs or allowing the science of biology to have implications for ontology. It seems wrong to me because the fact that there *is* such a natural class as “dog” is—no doubt—radically contingent. Very small changes in the world of a hundred million years ago—changes local to the surface of the earth—would have resulted in there never having been any such class. And it seems evident to me that a satisfactory account of “ontological category” should not allow the list of ontological categories to be dependent on the contingencies of history to that extent. But to what extent might the list be a matter of contingency? I don’t want to say that an ontological category must be, by definition, necessarily existent (that is, represented in every possible world). If some school of metaphysicians proposes “contingent thing” as an ontological category, I don’t think that that proposal should commit them to the proposition that there are, of necessity, contingent things—although it should commit them to the proposition that, of necessity, *if* there are contingent things they form or constitute an ontological category.

 The example I have said makes me uneasy might be “handled” by some sort of restriction on the ‘*n*’ in “*n*-ary ontological category”—say, by insisting that the lowest ontological categories are the quaternary categories. (Someone might be happy to suppose that “you’d have to get down into the twenties” before things you were calling ontological categories became objectionably dependent on the contingencies of history.) This idea is, obviously, attended by all manner of difficulties, but there is no point in trying to solve them, because there are imaginable cases of “modally fragile” primary and secondary categories. Consider, for example, Bertram, who, like Alice, believes that the highest natural classes are “boson” and “fermion.” But—unlike Alice—Bertram is a mereological nihilist (and a nominalist to boot): he believes that *everything* is either a boson or a fermion. By the above definition, then it follows from these beliefs of his that “boson” and “fermion” are primary ontological categories. So far forth, this might not be objectionable. But suppose Bertram also believes that the physical economy of most possible worlds is radically different from the physical economy of the actual world. Suppose he believes that there are non-arbitrary measures of the sizes many sets of possible worlds (the measure of the whole of logical space being 1), and that the measure of the set of worlds that contains bosons and fermions is [insert here a decimal point and a string of sixty zeros]13—or believes that the measure is infinitesimal or even 0. In that case, I think it would be just wrong to say that it follows from his beliefs that “boson” and “fermion” are ontological categories. It seems to me to be wrong to call a natural class an ontological category if it exists in “hardly any” possible worlds.

 I am inclined to think, therefore, that the account of “ontological category” that I have given needs to be supplemented by a clause to the effect that an ontological category must in some sense be “modally robust”—but almost certainly not so robust that an ontological category must, by definition, exist in all possible worlds. I leave for another occasion the problem of spelling out what this means—and the question whether my modal scruples as regards ontological categories are justified.

 Let us now return to the concept of ontology. Ontology, as I see ontology, rests on the following assumption: there *are* ontological categories. We may, in fact, define ontology as the discipline whose business is to specify the ontological categories. Remember that the empty set or class is not to count as a natural class, and it is therefore true by definition that all ontological categories are non-empty. To specify the ontological categories is therefore to make an existential statement—even if one regards the categories themselves as virtual classes and thus as not really “there.” If for example, one says that “substance” is an ontological category, this statement implies that there are substances. The goal of ontology is to provide an answer to the ontological question in the form of a specification of the ontological categories.

 It is a commonplace that the word ‘ontology’ is used both as a mass term and a count-noun. (The word is obviously a count-noun in my title, since it is there pluralized.) When it is used as a mass term, it denotes a certain discipline, a certain sub-field of philosophy or of metaphysics—just that discipline that I have been attempting to give an account of. When it is used as a count-noun, it is used to refer to certain philosophically interesting answers to the ontological question. If my account of ontology is right, *an* ontology is *a* specification of the ontological categories.

 One might, for example, describe the Meinongian ontology in these terms. The universal class, the class of “objects” or the realm of *Sosein* divides into the two ontological categories the concrete and the abstract (I don’t mean to imply that those two terms are actually used by Meinongians). The category “the concrete” divides into the two categories “the existent” and “the (concrete but) non-existent,” and the category “the abstract” divides into the two categories “the subsistent” and “the (abstract but) non-subsistent.” The union of the existent and the subsistent is itself an ontological category, the category of *Sein*, and the complement of that category is a category, the category *Nichtsein*.[[7]](#endnote-5) If *Sosein* is not a natural class, then the abstract, the concrete, *Sein*, and *Nichtsein* are primary categories and the categories that pertain to existence and subsistence are secondary categories. (Meinongians will no doubt object to my use of the terms ‘the Meinongian ontology’ and ‘ontological category’ in my description of their position—since, of course ‘*to on*’ means ‘being’. And, of course, they will say that providing an answer to the question, ‘What is there?’ is only one small part of their project. Well, let them find their own terminology. This is mine.)

 Let me say something to connect the definition of ontology I have given with an ancient and important definition of ontology.

The definition I am thinking of derives from one of Aristotle’s definitions of ‘first philosophy’ in *Metaphysics*: Ontology is the science of being as such or being *qua* being. In my view, this Aristotelian definition of ontology is, if not entirely satisfactory, not wholly wrong either. I would defend this position as follows. The universal class, the class of all things, is either the class of all beings—the class who membership is just exactly the things that there are—, or else it is the class that comprises both all beings *and* all non-beings. (Or, as a Meinongian might prefer to say, the universal class, the “realm” of *Sosein*, comprises two non-overlapping realms, the realm of being and the realm of non-being.) In the former case, being is what is common to the members of all ontological categories, and, if there is something common to all the ontological categories, it seems plausible to say that a science or discipline whose business is to specify the ontology categories should have as one of its first orders of business to say what this “something” is. In the latter case, being and non-being are the two of the highest ontological categories (perhaps *Sosein* is the highest category) and, if there is such a category as non-being, the task of explaining what being is and the task of explaining what non-being is can be divorced from each other only by an act of severe abstraction: if those tasks are in any sense “two,” they must nevertheless be seen as two sub-tasks of one task. If I reject the Aristotelian definition of ontology, it is not because I deny that the question ‘What is being?’ is one of the questions that ontology must answer. I reject it because I deny that it is the primary ontological question, the question that defines the business of ontology.

 A word on terminology. In other discussions of ontology, I’ve said that ontology divides into meta-ontology and ontology proper. Ontology proper, I said, is the investigation of what there is, and meta-ontology addresses the two questions, What does ‘there is’ mean? and What methods should be employed in the investigation of what there is? But here I have defined ontology as the discipline that attempts to specify the ontological categories. Does this definition not identify ontology (ontology *simpliciter*) with “ontology proper”? My earlier characterization of ontology and the present characterization can be reconciled if we adopt a sufficiently liberal understanding of ‘specify the ontological categories’: to specify the ontological categories is not merely to set out a list of categories; specifying the ontological categories also involves explaining the concept of an ontological category and describing the relations between the categories and attempting to answer any philosophical questions that may arise in the course of doing this. One of these philosophical questions will be the question of the nature of being—which is essentially the question, What is it for a category to be non-empty? (So, at any rate, we anti-Meinongians say. I leave it to the Meinongians explain in terms they find satisfactory what it is for a category to be non-empty.) We may say then that “ontology proper” is the attempt to set out a satisfactory list of ontological categories; everything else in ontology belongs to meta-ontology.

 I have given one example of an ontology. I will give a second, the ontology I myself favor. According to this ontology, there are two primary categories, substance and relation. (Unless the universal class is a natural class, in which case it is the primary category, and substance and relation are the two secondary categories. I have no firm opinion about whether the universal class—I suppose the best name for it would be “being” if it is thought of as a category—is a natural class and therefore a category.

 The category “relation” subsumes propositions (0-adic relations) and attributes (monadic relations).

 The category “substance” goes by two other names, “concrete thing” and “individual (thing).”[[8]](#endnote-6) Similarly, the category “relation” is also called “abstract thing” and “universal.” It is not my position that that, e.g., ‘substance’ and ‘individual’ are synonymous. Although I say that all substances are individual things and all individual things are substances, I regard this as a substantive thesis, one of the component propositions of my ontology that requires a philosophical defense. And the same goes for the pairs ‘substance’ and ‘concrete thing’, ‘concrete thing’ and ‘particular’, ‘relation’ and ‘abstract thing’, ‘abstract thing’ and ‘universal’, and ‘universal’ and ‘relation’. I contend only that the extensions of each pair are the same.

1. The existential-phenomenological conception of ontology. [↑](#endnote-ref--1)
2. I present “bare Quineanism” as a possible conception of ontology. I have not said that Quine or anyone else *is* a bare Quinean. I suspect, however, that Quine would at the very least find bare Quineanism an attractive formulation of the nature of ontology. [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
3. Suppose that Meinong was wrong and that one name for the universal class is “being.” Aristotle held that “being” was not a category. On the account of “ontological category” I shall propose—and given that Meinong was wrong—, “being” will be a category if it’s a natural class. I don’t want to give an account of “natural class” that will imply either the truth or the falsity of Aristotle’s thesis. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. Again, when I speak of sets or classes, I am not necessarily speaking of objects: the sets or classes I am speaking of may be virtual—that is, I state the first assumption of ontology in terms of sets or classes as a mere matter of linguistic convenience. And when I speak of natural classes I mean these to be non-empty: I will not count the empty set or class, real or virtual, as a natural class.

Modal problems with treating classes as sets. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. Note that the definition does not rule out overlapping primary ontological categories. Suppose, for example, that Phoebe maintains that “abstract” and “concrete” are the primary ontological categories. She may consistently go on to maintain that the proposition that Socrates was a philosopher is abstract (in virtue of being a proposition) *and* concrete (in virtue of having a certain concrete object, Socrates, as an ontological constituent). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
6. Note that this definition allows ontological categories to overlap. Suppose that everything is either an A or a B, that A and B are natural classes, and that neither is a proper subclass of any natural class. Then A and B are primary ontological categories. But nothing we have said implies that A and B do not overlap. (Cf. n. 4 **note number**). Suppose further that they do overlap and that their intersection is a natural class that is not a proper subclass of any natural class. Then their intersection is also a primary ontological category. Or suppose that A and B do not overlap, and that A can be partitioned into two subclasses C and D, each of which is a natural class and that B can be partitioned into two subclasses E and F, each of which is a natural class. Suppose that the union of C and E is a natural class that is a proper subclass of no natural class. Then the union of C and E is a primary ontological category that overlaps both the primary categories A and B and the secondary categories C and E. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
7. Assuming that “the concrete,” “the abstract,” “the existent,” “the subsistent,” “the non-existent,” “the non-subsistent,” *Sein*, and *Nichtsein* are all natural classes. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
8. Or “particular (thing).” As I use the words, ‘individual’ and ‘particular’ are synonyms. (Some writers give different senses to these two words.) I use ‘thing’ as the most general count-noun: everything is a thing; ‘every thing’ and ‘everything’ are synonyms; a “thing” is anything that can be the referent of a pronoun. I use such words as ‘object’, ‘entity’ and ‘item’ in the same sense. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)