1 Introduction

The basic question of ontology concerns what exists. For example, do composite objects (objects with parts) exist? Realists say yes, and anti-realists say no. For example, universalism is a form of realism according to which any two objects compose another thing (see Sider, 2001); and nihilism is a form of anti-realism according to which no two things ever compose another thing (see Sider, 2013). Answers intermediate between these two extremes are possible. For example, van Inwagen (1995) argues that only living beings have parts; and Markosian (1998) argues that, as a matter of brute, not further explicable fact, some pluralities compose another thing and others don’t.

The basic question of meta-ontology concerns whether there are determinate, mind-independent ontological facts. For example, is there a determinate, mind-independent fact with regard to the existence of composite objects? Again, realists say yes, and anti-realists say no. Recent debates in meta-ontology usually are in-house debates between realists of different stripes. Heavyweight realists, such as Sider (2011), think that ontological debates are deep, and answering ontological questions requires philosophical work. But lightweight realists, such as Hirsch (2011) and Thomasson (2015) think that ontological debates are misguided and the answers to ontological questions obvious. Here is a table, so some things are composite. 5 is a number, so there are numbers. And so on.
In this article, I provide an anti-realist alternative, and develop a version of *ontological expressivism*. Ethical expressivism is the view that utterances of normative sentences express non-cognitive mental states. Analogously, ontological expressivism is the view that ontological existence claims express non-cognitive mental states. An “ontological existence claim” is the utterance of a quantified sentence in the context of an ontological debate. The specific version of ontological expressivism that I will develop draws a distinction between *ontological* and *ordinary* existence claims. Ordinary existence claims are utterances of quantified sentences in non-philosophical contexts, and they express beliefs.

Lightweight realism is often motivated by the impression that something seems to be going wrong in ontological debates. For example, Hirsch (2011 (2008, p. 178)) says that he has an “immediate intuitive feeling that [certain ontological disputes are] not substantive, that [they are] in some sense merely verbal”.¹ Thomasson (2015, pp. 1-2) says in a similar spirit that, on the view of most philosophers throughout history, “many of the currently contested ontological questions, e.g. ‘Do tables, chairs, and persons exist?’ would have been thought far too obvious to be worth contesting”.

Ontological expressivists agree that something seems to be going wrong in ontological disagreements. However, they do not jump to the conclusion that ontological disagreements are pointless. They think that we rather need to re-consider what the point of these disagreements really is. According to ontological expressivists, ontological disagreements do not help to figure out some determinate, mind-independent fact; but they help to

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¹ I take this quotation from a passage where Hirsch discusses a particular disagreement between Locke and Butler about the identity of a tree. But Hirsch is clear that he means his view to generalize to many other ontological debates.
coordinate different speakers on accepting a common ontology.

That having said, I will in what follows focus on explaining a specific version of ontological expressivism and not argue much for the view. My strategy will be analogous to Gibbard’s strategy in *Thinking How to Live*, as he describes it in the following passage:

“By sheer stipulation [...] the meaning of this phrase ‘the thing to do’ is explained expressivistically: If I assert ‘Fleeing is the thing to do’, I thereby express a state of mind, deciding to flee. I then proceed to ask how language like this would work. In the back of my mind, of course, is the hypothesis that important parts of our actual language do work this way. Mostly, though, I don’t argue for this hypothesis; rather I ask whether the hypothesis is coherent and what its upshots would be”. (Gibbard, 2003, p. 8)

Gibbard wants to show that normative discourse *can* be analyzed along expressivist lines. To show how this analysis goes, he stipulates an expressivist-friendly meaning for the phrase ‘the thing to do’. Like Gibbard, I want to show that ontological disagreements *can* be analyzed along expressivist lines. To show how this analysis goes, I will stipulate an expressivist-friendly meaning for the sentence ‘some things are composite’, and draw out the upshots of this hypothesis.

My discussion will be organized as follows. I will develop a specific version of ontological expressivism that is modeled after Gibbard’s (2003) norm-expressivism. I begin by explaining the norm-expressivist template (§2), and the difficulties that a transfer of the norm-expressivist template to ontology poses (§3). I then develop ontological expressivism by discussing what the semantic contents of quantified sentences are (§4), which mental states utterances of quantified sentences express in the context of ontological disagreements (§5), and what the difference between ontological and ordinary existence claims is (§6).
then discuss the content and function of ontological disagreements (§7), explain the roots of ontological expressivism in the views of Carnap (§8), and conclude with a summary (§9).

Before I get started, I want to clarify some notational conventions: $p$ is a proposition, ‘$p$’ (in single quotation marks) is a sentence (whose semantic value is $p$), and “$p$” (in double quotation marks) is an utterance of the sentence ‘$p$’ in a context.

2 The Norm-Expressivist Template

There are many versions of meta-ethical expressivism. Some expressivists, such as Ayer (1971 (1936)), think that utterances of normative sentences do not express propositions but instead express non-cognitive mental states. On this view, normative sentences are distinguished by their lack of propositional content. However, proponents of such an approach are under pressure to provide a compositional semantics that explains which mental state a complex sentence expresses as a function of the mental states that its component parts express. Beginning with Geach (1965), many philosophers have doubted that this semantic program can be successfully executed. In particular, if the semantic values of normative terms are non-cognitive mental states, then it appears impossible to provide a unified semantics for languages that mix normative and descriptive terms.3

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2 In the words of Ayer (1971 (1936, p. 110): “if I say to someone, ‘You acted wrongly in stealing that money’, I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, ‘You stole that money’. In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it”.

3 See Schroeder (2009) for an evaluation of the semantic program of expressivism.
Norm-expressivists think that normative sentences do express propositional contents. They think of the expression of a mental state as an illocutionary act; something that we do when we utter sentences. They then argue that utterances of normative sentences perform a particular illocutionary act, which is the expression of a non-cognitive mental state. This approach has no problem with providing a unified semantics for both descriptive and normative language, since both descriptive and normative sentences express propositional contents. That’s why I will use norm-expressivism as the template for ontological expressivism.

In more detail, Gibbard (2003, p. 57) argues that the semantic contents of declarative sentences are not ordinary propositions but sets of fact-plan worlds. A fact-plan world is an ordered pair \((w, p)\), where \(w\) is a possible world and \(p\) is a hyperplan. A hyperplan is a function from “occasions for action” to sets of actions. An “occasion for action” is a possible situation in which one has a choice between various actions that one could perform, and can be modeled as a possible world \((w, x, t)\) that is centered on an agent \(x\) and a time \(t\) (Gibbard, 2003, p. 57). Given an occasion for action, a hyperplan returns a non-empty subset of the actions that are possible on that occasion, where this subset includes all action that are permitted on the occasion. Sets of fact plan worlds can equivalently be represented as functions from ordered pairs \((w, p)\) to truth-values.

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4 Yalcin (2018) provides a more detailed discussion of the difference between these two types of expressivism. Yalcin’s expressivism is different from the view I develop here, however, since Yalcin’s semantics brings in a new non-standard parameter, while my view brings in a new non-standard modality; see §7.

5 I.e., \(p\) is a function that maps each occasion for action in \(w\) to a set of actions that are permitted on that occasion.
According to Gibbard, the semantic content of any declarative sentence is a set of fact-plan worlds. There is a difference between normative and descriptive sentences, however. The semantic contents of descriptive sentences are functions from ordered pairs \((w, p)\) to truth-values where the hyperplan parameter does not matter; it is idle. But for normative sentences the hyperplan parameter does make a difference. Normative sentences express semantic contents whose truth-value depends on the nonstandard hyperplan parameter.\(^6\)

Gibbard goes on to argue that, because of the difference in the semantic contents of descriptive and of normative sentences, utterances of descriptive sentences express beliefs, but utterances of normative sentences express noncognitive mental states. Specifically, on Gibbard’s view, “murder is wrong” expresses the acceptance of a norm that prohibits murder. The attitude of norm-acceptance can be explained in more detail as follows. The semantic contents of normative sentences are sets of fact-plan worlds \(\{(w_n, p_m), \ldots\}\) and are true or false only relative to specific values of the hyperplan parameter \(p\). Specifically, if \(w_\@\) is the actual world, then \(\{(w_n, p_m), \ldots\}\) is true relative to \(p_n\) if and only if \((w_\@, p_n) \in \{(w_n, p_m), \ldots\}\). In order to assign a truth-value to the set \(\{(w_n, p_m), \ldots\}\), it thus has to be assessed relative to a specific value of the hyperplan parameter (or relative to certain range of values of

\(^6\) The fact that some expressivist views are built on relativistic foundations raises a question. What, fundamentally, is the difference between relativism and expressivism? I think this is a difficult question that I cannot fully answer here. MacFarlane (2014, p. 173) suggests the following. Consider the following two utterances:

(1) “He believes that murder is wrong.”

(2) “He believes that grass is green.”

According to MacFarlane, a truth-relativist would say that (1) and (2) are ascriptions of the very same mental state, while a norm-expressivist would say that (1) and (2) are ascriptions of fundamentally very different attitudes. Believing that murder is wrong fundamentally involves a non-cognitive attitude towards norms, i.e. norm-acceptance. Believing that grass is green involves no such attitude.
this parameters, that assign the same truth-value to the set \((w_n, p_m, \ldots)\). The acceptance of a norm \(n\) is a disposition to assess the semantic contents of normative sentences only relative to hyperplan parameters that model \(n\). For example, someone who accepts a utilitarian norm, represented by hyperplan \(p_U\), assesses the truth of sets of fact-plan worlds by considering whether they contain \((w_s, p_U)\) as element.

This explanation of the nature of norm-acceptance is not fully explicit in Gibbard’s text. But some of what he says points in the direction of this account. For example, Gibbard (2003, p. 91) says: “Hera accepts hyperplan \(p\). She thus regards an act \(a\) as okay to do in a situation \(s\) if and only if her plan \(p\) permits \(a\) in \(s\).” The acceptance of a plan, in Gibbard’s terminology, stands proxy for the acceptance of a norm. It is unclear, however, whether Gibbard intends this remark as a definition of norm-acceptance. Whether or not it was Gibbard intention to define norm-acceptance in this way, it is in any case possible to understand the acceptance of a norm \(n\) as a disposition to assess the truth of semantic contents only relative to hyperplan parameters that model \(n\).

This discussion of norm-expressivism gives us a template to match. Norm-expressivists think that both normative and descriptive sentences express propositional contents. However, normative sentences express contents that are in a sense standpoint-dependent; their truth depends on the value of a non-standard hyperplan parameter. Because of this difference, utterances of normative sentences express non-cognitive mental states while utterances of descriptive sentences express beliefs. In the next section, I will begin to discuss how this template can be transferred to ontology.
3 Transferring the Template

Norm-expressivism, as explained in the last section, draws a distinction between two different kinds of speech acts: utterances that express beliefs, and utterances that express non-cognitive mental states. This distinction is furthermore reflected on the sentential level as a distinction between descriptive and normative sentences; and on the propositional level as a distinction between two kinds of propositions (those whose truth-value depends on the hyperplan parameter $p$ and those whose truth-value is insensitive). This distinction is very important. Not all utterances express non-cognitive mental states, and we need a systematic explanation for which utterances do and which ones don’t.

Ontological expressivists need an analogous distinction. Consider the utterance “Some prime number is greater than $7$”. In the context of a philosophical discussion, this utterance can be understood as the affirmation of a Platonist ontology. Let’s call these kinds of utterances “ordinary existence claims”. Ontological expressivists think that ontological existence claims express non-cognitive mental states. But in a mathematical context, the very same utterance can be understood as the description of a mathematical fact. Let’s call these kinds of utterances “ontological existence claims”. Ordinary existence claims expresses a belief.

Many meta-ontologists draw a related distinction between two kinds of existence claims. For example, Fine (2009) distinguishes between “ontological” and “quantificational” questions; the former concern what’s metaphysically real and are expressed using
universal quantifiers, the latter merely concern what exists and are expressed using existential quantifiers. As a second example, Thomasson (2015) (inspired by Carnap (1950)) distinguishes between “internal” and “external” existence claims; the former are made using an interpreted language, while the latter are not properly meaningful. So, it is not a distinctive feature of ontological expressivism that the view distinguishes between two kinds of existence claims. What’s distinctive is how the distinction is drawn: ordinary existence claims express beliefs while ontological existence claims express non-cognitive mental states.

Given that ontological expressivists distinguish between ontological and ordinary existence claims, they are confronted with a question. When does the utterance of a sentence express a non-cognitive mental state, and when does it express a belief? What really is the difference between the two kinds of existence claims? Unlike norm-expressivists, ontological expressivists cannot draw the distinction at the sentential level. As the above example illustrates, utterances of one and the same sentence (“some prime number is greater than seven”) can in some contexts express a belief and in other contexts express a non-cognitive mental state. Furthermore, the kind of distinction that norm-expressivists draw at the propositional level is not easily replicated in the ontological case.

In more detail, Gibbard’s distinction between worlds and hyperplans is an instance of a more general distinction between a perspective-independent, or nonconventional “substratum” (in this case: a world) and a “carving” (in this case: a hyperplan) which in
some way depends on a perspective or is conventional. For example, in each world \( w \), and at each occasion for action in \( w \), a certain range of actions (which could be a unique action) maximize utility. This is how worlds provide a perspective-independent substratum. A hyperplan is a function that maps each world \( w \) and each occasion for action in \( w \) to a set of actions that can permissibly be performed on that occasion. For instance, a hyperplan that represents a utilitarian norm maps each world \( w \) and each occasion for action in \( w \) to the set of actions that maximize utility on that occasion. Hyperplans thereby carve a conventional, normative structure into the non-conventional substratum provided by the descriptive facts that hold at a world.

It appears impossible to reproduce an analogous distinction in the ontological case. To see this point, it may be helpful to consider a proposal due to Chalmers (2009, §9). Chalmers suggests representing ontologies by means “furnishing functions” that map worlds to domains of quantification. He then argues that the semantic contents of quantified sentences are sets of pairs \((w, f(w))\), where \( w \) is a world and \( f \) is a furnishing function. If successful, one could then use this construction in order to transfer the norm-expressivist template to ontology. However, I am skeptical of this strategy. In particular, it is not clear what a world \( \text{minus} \) a domain of quantification is. Once one subtracts a domain from a world, there seems nothing left that is recognizably a world. It hence seems that the distinction between worlds and domains is not well-defined, and it is therefore unclear what the parameter \( f \) is supposed to represent.

To illustrate the difficulty, it may help to consider the case of mereology. Mereological

\[\text{7 The terminology is due to Einheuser (2006).}\]
\[\text{8 Thanks to Agustín Rayo for raising this point.}\]
nihilists think that only simple objects exist, universalists think that any two things compose a third, and proponents of van Inwagen’s (1995) “organicist” view think that a plurality of things \(xx\) compose some object \(y\) only if the plurality \(xx\) makes up a living being. It is tempting to think that simple objects provide a sort of substratum onto which the various mereological views impose different carvings. But this view amounts to saying that there really are only simples. Composite objects are not genuine constituents of reality but conventionally imposed. Rather than providing for a sense in which composition facts are perspective-dependent, this view amounts to a vindication of nihilism. Because of this difficulty, it is better to develop ontological expressivism without the distinction between a substratum and a carving.\(^9\)

In sum, ontological expressivists need an explanation for why some utterances of quantified sentences express beliefs and others express non-cognitive mental states, and it is hard to see how this explanation might go. In the next section, I will propose a solution.

### 4 Objective and Non-Objective Propositions

Norm-expressivists think that normative propositions are standpoint-dependent, and descriptive propositions are not. Norm-expressivists then formally account for this sort of standpoint-dependence by arguing that the truth-value of normative propositions depends on the value of the hyperplan parameter. We can transfer the norm-expressivist template to

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\(^9\) A form of norm-expressivism can in principle be recovered as a special instance of ontological expressivism. On this approach, normative sentences express non-objective propositions; or candidate actual worlds differ with regard to the normative propositions that are true at them. This point shows that the distinction between worlds and hyperplan is in fact an inessential component of norm-expressivism.
ontology by formally accounting for standpoint-dependence, not as a sort of relative truth, but as a form of modal contingency.

In more detail, suppose that propositions are sets of worlds. The standard view is that a unique world is actual, and that a proposition is true iff the actual world is one of its elements. I think that ontological expressivists need to revise this standard conception, and instead say that multiple worlds are candidates for being actual.\(^\text{10}\) We can then say that a proposition is objective iff it is true at all worlds that are candidates for being actual, and non-objective (or standpoint-dependent) iff it is true at only some of the worlds that are candidates for being actual. For example, applied to the case of composition, the view is this: multiple worlds are candidates for being actual, some of which contain composite objects and some of which don’t contain composite objects. The proposition that some things have parts is therefore non-objective. However, the various candidate actual worlds also agree in many aspects. For example, they all agree that Barack Obama was the 44\(^{th}\) US president. If a proposition p is objective if and only if p is true at all worlds that are candidates for being actual, then we can use modal operators to reason about objectivity.

Let \(A = \{w_{\#1}, w_{\#2}, w_{\#3}, \ldots\}\) be the set of candidate actual worlds, and let the box ‘\(\Box\)’ express objectivity. Then ‘\(\Box p\)’ is true if and only if p is true at each world in the set A. Objectivity, on this view, is a form of necessity, and non-objectivity a form of modal contingency.

If multiple worlds are candidates for being actual, when is a proposition true? This

\(^{10}\) Barnes and Williams (2011) also suggest that there multiple actualized worlds and use this notion to develop a theory of metaphysical indeterminacy.
question can be answered in two ways. On a relativist approach, propositions are fundamentally true or false only relative to a world. However, on an alternative, absolutist approach, truth fundamentally is a monadic property, and agents are located at a world depending on the kind of ontology that they accept. On the absolutist approach, speakers who accept different ontologies are like the inhabitants of different worlds. The proposition that some things are composite is “true for” a universalist and “false for” and absolutists; just as the proposition that Hillary Clinton is the 45th US present is false “for you” but “true for” your counterpart in a nearby possible world. But truth is absolute. My sympathies are with the absolutist approach, but nothing in what follows depends on this choice.\footnote{For more on the difference between absolutism and relativism, see Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009).}

How could multiple worlds be candidates for being actual? First, let’s talk about what worlds are. According to modal realists, such as Lewis (1986), worlds are like physical universes. Arguing that multiple worlds are candidates for being actual then amounts to arguing that multiple physical universes are candidates for being actual. This is very implausible. However, according to abstractionist accounts, worlds are abstract objects that represent classically complete ways things might be. Three parts of this conception are important: worlds are abstract (and not concrete, as a modal realist would say). Second, worlds represent ways things might be. In particular, worlds represent ways the actual physical universe we live in might be. If a world represents how things actually are, then it is a candidate actual world. Third, worlds are classically complete. That means that, for
each way things might be, a world either rules it in or rules it out.\textsuperscript{12}

This gives us a certain three-layered picture: (1) things are a certain way; (2) Worlds represent classically complete ways things might be; (3) A proposition $p$ is a set of worlds and true at a world $w$ if and only if $w \in p$.\textsuperscript{13}

Given an abstractionist account, arguing that multiple worlds are candidates for being actual amounts to arguing that no world is the uniquely correct abstract representation of how things are. Multiple worlds represent how things are equally well.

We can spell out this idea in various ways. On a metaphysical version of the view, things are genuinely indeterminate, which is why various worlds represent how things are equally well.\textsuperscript{14} Another conception has to do with the metaphysics of representation. Many philosophers are drawn towards views on which representation is not a fundamental

\textsuperscript{12}This abstractionist view can be further fleshed out in various ways. For instance, a popular conception takes abstract states of affairs as fundamental and conceives of possible worlds as classically complete states of affairs, so that, for each state of affairs, a world either rules it in or rules it out. See Menzel (2017, §2.2) for an overview and references. The details won’t matter in what follows.

\textsuperscript{13}My distinction between “ways things might be” and worlds understood as abstract objects resembles Chalmers’ (2009, §8) distinction between two senses of ‘world’: the world understood as “the huge concrete reality within which we live” and worlds understood as abstract objects that are stipulatively defined as coming with built-in domains. However, Chalmers and I make different uses of this distinction. Chalmers thinks that “the huge concrete reality within which we live” can be “furnished” in different ways and introduces the notion of a “furnished world”.

\textsuperscript{14}This view would need to be supplemented with certain epistemological principles, however. In more detail, the following view creates a problem for ontological expressivists: if things are genuinely indeterminate, then the best ontology is one that represents them as indeterminate. For example, if the existence of numbers is a genuinely indeterminate matter, then the best ontology is one that represents the existence of numbers as an indeterminate matter. But then it seems that a speaker who assesses the truth of propositions by considering only worlds at which numbers exist makes a factual mistake. (Likewise for a speaker who assesses the truth of propositions by considering only worlds at which numbers do not exist.) In order to avoid this conclusion, proponents of ontological expressivism need to supplement their view with certain epistemological principles, according to which speakers are epistemically speaking permitted to resolve indeterminacy in how things are one way or another. Thanks to Justin Clarke-Doane for helpful discussions of this point.
relation but is grounded in something else, such as speakers’ activities or attitudes. For example, on one version of this view, a drawing of something (e.g., of Obama) represents its object only because speakers interpret it as a representation (of Obama). One might argue that there are at least two different representation relations, $R_1$ and $R_2$, and at least two worlds, $w_1$ and $w_2$, so that $w_1$ best represents how things are, while $w_2$ best represents how things are. Both of these worlds are actualized. A third conception is more directly epistemological. On this view, there might be a unique world that is the best abstract representation of how things are. However, even if there is such a world, we cannot know which one it is. My sympathies are with the representationalist account, but nothing in what follows will depend on this choice.

Which propositions are non-objective? Well, the ones under discussion in ontology. This answer is in a way circular, since the difference between ontological and ordinary existence claims is that ontological existence claims concern non-objective propositions. However, this circularity is not a problem but part of the approach. As I said in the introduction, the goal here is to show that ontological disagreements can be analyzed along expressivist lines. I assume that we have a pre-theoretic grasp on which disagreements are ontological, and offer an expressivist account of these disagreements.

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15 See e.g. Jones (2019, §IV) for a discussion.
16 Here is a possible line of argument: Knowledge of which world best represents how things are requires knowledge of how things are. I.e., one can know which world is the best abstract representation of how things are only if one is able to compare the various worlds with what they represent; and this comparison requires knowledge of how things are. But knowledge is a propositional attitude. The objects of knowledge are not things but propositions. For this reason, it is in principle impossible for us to know how things are. This is why we cannot know which world is the best representation of how things are. For this reason, there is a range of distinct actualized worlds that constitute equally acceptable circumstances of evaluation for assessing the truth of propositions.
5 Which Mental State?

Norm-expressivists think that “murder is wrong” expresses the acceptance of a norm that prohibits murder. As discussed in section 2, this attitude can be understood as a disposition to assess the truth of propositions in a particular way. The acceptance of a norm $n$ that prohibits murder is a disposition to assess the truth of propositions only relative to hyperplan parameters that model $n$. We can now transfer this view to ontology. On my view, ontological existence claims express a disposition to assess the truth of propositions in a particular way.

It may help to begin by illustrating this idea with a nontechnical example. Here is the example. Teachers often use grading scales when they assess the work of students. For example, suppose that Alyssa and Brianna are the teaching assistants for a course on ancient philosophy and are jointly grading a stack of exams. They have assigned points on a scale from 0 to 100 to each exam and are about to assign a letter grade to each student on the basis of the number of points that they achieved in the exam. Cameron got 95 points. Alyssa looks at her grading scale, according to which 95 points are sufficient for an A, and says:

**Alyssa:** “Cameron achieved an A.”

Alyssa can be seen as using her grading scale as a rule for assessing the truth of the proposition that Cameron achieved an A in the exam, which she affirms. We can now distinguish between two different contexts. First, in contexts where Alyssa and Brianna have agreed on a grading scale, Alyssa’s utterance expresses her belief that, according to the established grading scale, Cameron achieved an A in the exam. But in contexts where
Alyssa and Brianna have not yet agreed on a grading scale, Alyssa’s utterance rather expresses her acceptance of a grading scale that would result in the assignment of an A to Cameron’s exam.

Back now to ontology. I think that ontological existence claims express similar dispositions. For example, the utterance “Numbers exist” in the context of an ontological disagreement expresses a noncognitive disposition to assess the truth of propositions in a particular way. Often, these dispositions are related to assumptions that speakers make, background beliefs on which they rely, or methodologies and heuristics which they employ. For example, speakers may be convinced that there are no abstract objects at all and (based on this background belief) conclude that numbers do not exist. Or speakers might assume that one should accept all and only the existence of entities that are required for the truth of our best scientific theories, and then assess whether numbers exist by consider whether they are dispensable (as Field (1980) does). Or speakers might take it for granted that five is a number and use this assumption to infer that numbers exist (as Thomasson (2015)) does. In all these cases, speakers make use of a variety of rules that guide their assessment of whether numbers exist.

As the foregoing examples show, speakers’ behavior is messy. Different speakers assess the truth of propositions in various ways. This observation raises a challenge. How can we develop a unified model that covers all the different cases? What, in general, does it mean to follow a rule of assessment? I will answer this question using the notion of a circumstance of evaluation, due to Kaplan (1989). Roughly, my proposal is that to follow a certain rule of assessment means to be disposed to consider only certain circumstances of
evaluation when one assesses the truth of propositions. I'll first explain what circumstances of evaluation are, and then explain the role that it plays.

Kaplan (1989) models the truth-conditions of declarative sentences by means of two sequences of parameters, *context* and *index* parameters. Context-parameters are needed to account for the context sensitivity of certain expressions, such as indexicals. For example, when Ida says on March 11, 2018, “I was in Berlin yesterday”, she says that Ida was in Berlin on March 10, 2018. What is said by Ida’s utterance depends on the context of utterance, which includes a speaker and a time. Context parameters model this sort of context sensitivity. Index-parameters, in contrast, are needed to model the circumstances of evaluation of a proposition. The circumstances of evaluation of a proposition are the circumstances that determine its truth-value. For example, the circumstances of evaluation of the proposition that Ida was in Berlin on March 10, 2018 are Ida’s whereabouts on that day. Modal operators shift the relevant circumstances of evaluation. For example, when we ask whether it is possible that Ida was in Berlin on March 10, 2018, we evaluate whether Ida’s possible whereabouts on March 10, 2018, include Berlin. Modal operators thus “shift” the circumstances of evaluation, and index parameters are needed to model this shiftiness. I will in what follows set aside context parameters, since context-sensitivity plays no distinctive role in my view. Index parameters play an important role, however.

For Kaplan’s (1989), circumstances of evaluation play a purely semantic role: they

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Kaplan (1989, p. 494) justifies the distinction between context and index parameters in brief as follows: “given a use of [an] expression, we may ask of what has been said whether it would have been true or false in various counterfactual circumstances.”
determine the truth-value and the modal profile\(^{18}\) of propositions. However, I think that circumstances of evaluation moreover play a certain \textit{psychological} role: speakers so to speak “look at” or consider circumstances of evaluation when they assess the truth of propositions. This take on Kaplan’s framework does not conflict with common interpretations; it constitutes a natural extension. Kaplanian characters, which are functions from contexts of use to semantic contents, are often described as “rules of use” that tell speakers what a given sentence can be used to say depending on the context of utterance (see e.g. Ninan, 2010, §2). I here suggest to analogously gloss semantic contents, which are functions from circumstances of evaluation to truth-values, as \textit{rules of assessment}. A speaker who considers only circumstances of evaluation of a certain kind effectively follows a particular rule of assessment. This gets us to what speakers express when they make ontological claims: they express a disposition to follow particular rules of assessment. For example, “numbers exist”, uttered in the context of an ontological disagreement, expresses a noncognitive disposition to assess the truth of propositions by considering only circumstances of evaluation that contain numbers.

The conception of propositions as sets of worlds yields a specific version of ontological expressivism.\(^{19}\) If propositions are sets of worlds, they can be evaluated at different worlds. The conception of propositions as sets of worlds hence results in a version of ontological expressivism according to which “Numbers exist” expresses a noncognitive disposition to assess the truth of propositions by considering only worlds at which numbers exist.

\(^{18}\) I.e., a proposition that is true at all worlds is necessary and a propositions that is true at some worlds is possible.

\(^{19}\) Kaplan (1989, p. 494) thought that \textit{what is said} by a declarative sentence is a structured proposition that mirrors the structure of the sentence by which it is expressed.
In what sense is this disposition “noncognitive”? I here assume a rough-and-ready definition of ‘noncognitive’ according to which a mental state is noncognitive if and only if it is neither true nor false. For example, beliefs are cognitive mental states since they are true or false. Distaste for cilantro is a noncognitive mental state, however. Someone who does not like cilantro does not make a factual mistake. Now, philosophers often assume that each proposition has a unique actual circumstance of evaluation that determines its truth-value. However, as discussed in section 4, ontological expressivists reject this assumption. They think that, for at least some propositions, multiple circumstances of evaluation are candidates for being actual. For example, the proposition that some things are composite can be evaluated either by considering worlds that contain things with part, or by considering worlds that do not contain things with parts. When speakers assess the truth of the proposition that some things have parts, they have a choice with regard to which of these circumstances they consider, or “look at”. This choice is a noncognitive choice, and a subsequent disposition to only look at circumstances of evaluation that contain composite objects therefore is a noncognitive disposition (in a derivative sense).

6 Ontological vs. Ordinary Existence Claims

I have proposed an expressivist analysis of ontological existence claims, which (in my view)

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20 In more detail, asking whether a disposition is true or false may appears like a category mistake. Dispositions are not the sort of thing that could be true or false. However, dispositions may be based on choices, and may inherit a noncognitive status from the noncognitive choices on which they are based. In particular, on my view, dispositions to assess the truth of propositions in particular ways may be based on choices that are neither true nor false, and may therefore be themselves noncognitive in a derivative sense. Thanks to David Chalmers for helpful discussions of this point.
express dispositions to assess propositions in particular ways. Next, I will go on to present a contextualist account of the difference between ordinary and ontological existence claims. Sentences with a given semantic content can, in my view, be used to express either an ordinary or an ontological existence claim, depending on the context in which they are used. For example, the sentence ‘some things are composite’ has a specific semantic content (which is a proposition) and an utterance of this sentence can be used to express either an ordinary or an ontological existence claim, depending on the context.\(^{21}\) To explain this view, I begin by discussing how utterances express mental states.

Meta-ethical expressivists commonly rely on a minimal characterization of the expression relation.\(^{22}\) According to this minimal conception, utterances of normative sentences express noncognitive mental states in the same way that descriptive sentences express beliefs. Consider, for instance, the utterance “grass is green”. This utterance does not \textit{assert} that the speaker believes that grass is green, but nevertheless \textit{expresses} the speaker’s belief that grass is green. Meta-ethical expressivists think that utterances of normative sentences express noncognitive mental states in just the same way. For example, “murder is wrong” does not \textit{assert} that the speaker disapproves of murder but nevertheless \textit{expresses} the speaker’s disapproval of murder. Meta-ethical expressivists often do not

\(^{21}\) The sort of context-sensitivity that is relevant here is not ordinary context-sensitivity. Ordinary context-sensitivity is a kind of dependence of what is said by the utterance of a sentence on the context in which it is used. For example, ‘I am in Berlin’ asserts different propositions depending on the speaker. This kind of context-sensitivity can be ignored for present purposes. The sort of context-sensitivity in which I am interested concerns the illocutionary act performed by the utterance of a sentence in a context.

\(^{22}\) See Fogal et al. (2018, §1.4) for a general discussion of what could be meant by the expression of a mental state by a sentence.
provide a more detailed account of the expression relation. However, more can be said.

A theory of the expression relation is best developed against the backdrop of a general theory of speech acts and communication. I here assume a broadly Stalnakerian background theory.\(^{23, 24}\) The central concept in Stalnaker’s (1970, 1999 (1978), 2002, 2014) theory of communication is the concept of the \textit{common ground of a conversation}. The basic thought is that the participants in a conversation share certain common presuppositions, which constitute their common ground. The nature of these presuppositions can be explained in various ways. According to Stalnaker’s (2002, p. 704) conception, the common ground of a conversation is a collection of \textit{common beliefs}.\(^{25}\) He defines: “a proposition \(\varphi\) is common belief of a group of believers if and only if all in the group believe that \(\varphi\), all believe that all believe it, all believe that all believe that all believe it, etc.”.\(^{26, 27}\) Speech acts, from a Stalnakerian perspective, essentially are attempts at influencing the common ground of a conversation. A sentence ‘\(p\)’ is associated with a certain dynamic update potential. For instance, declarative sentences have the potential to make a proposition commonly believed. The essential effect of uttering “\(p\)” is to realize this update potential in the context

\(^{23}\) Gibbard (1990) relies on a broadly Gricean theory. See van Roojen (1996), Schroeder (2015 (2008) and Schroeder (2008, Ch. 2) for criticisms of this view.

\(^{24}\) See, however, Harris (2019) for a criticism of common ground theories of communication.

\(^{25}\) In contrast, Yalcin (2018) proposes to simply postulate a basic mental state – “call it \textit{presupposition}, or the \textit{conversational state}” – to play the needed role. Furthermore, there is pressure from various directions to include more structure in a model of the common ground of a conversation. For instance, Roberts (2012) argues that the common ground of a conversation also includes \textit{questions}, and Yalcin (2012) argues that the common ground of a conversation includes probabilistic structure.

\(^{26}\) The iteration in this definition is needed to account for the requirement that elements of the common ground be truly public. If participants in a conversation are uncertain about whether the belief in \(p\) is iterated, then they won’t have reason to believe that everyone will act as though \(p\) is commonly believed. See Lederman (2017, p. 3) for a good illustration and explanation of this point. See Lederman (2018) for a criticism of the iterative conception of the common ground of a conversation. Thanks to Matt Mandelkern for a helpful discussion.

\(^{27}\) Propositions in the common ground of a conversation need not \textit{actually} be commonly believed; it is sufficient that every member in the conversation treat them as such.
of the conversation. For example, the essential effect of an utterance of “The sun is shining” is to make it commonly believed that the sun is shining. This utterance successfully communicates that the sun is shining only if, as an effect of this utterance, it becomes commonly believed that the sun is shining. Communicative success, in this view, requires that speakers coordinate their mental states and converge on a certain class of commonly held beliefs.

Ontological expressivism is a view about the function of certain sorts of communicative exchanges. Ontological disagreements, according to ontological expressivists, do not concern matters of fact. Rather, ontological disagreements serve the purpose of coordinating speakers on a certain range of noncognitive dispositions. Stalnaker’s account, according to which the essential effect of utterances is to update the common ground of a conversation, fits extremely well with this view. As just explained, updating the common ground of a conversation is a matter of coordinating the mental states of speakers. Ontological expressivism can be seen as a special instance of this more general thesis: the essential effect of ontological existence claims is to update the common ground of a conversation by adding a noncognitive mental state. However, some important adjustments to the standard Stalnakerian framework need to be made before to spell this out, since we need to explain the difference between ordinary and ontological existence claims.

Stalnaker’s framework incorporates a distinction between two closely related notions: semantic contents and update potentials. A sentence with semantic content $p$ has the potential to add a mental state with content $p$ to the common ground. For example, the semantic content of ‘grass is green’ is the proposition that grass is green, and this sentence has the potential to add the belief that grass is green to the common ground of a
conversation. The abstract representation of the common ground of a conversation as a set of propositions obliterates the distinction between semantic contents and update potentials. If the semantic content of a sentence is a proposition, then its update potential is likewise represented by a proposition. In reality however, the sentence has the potential to update the common ground of a conversation by a belief in \( p \).

I think that we need to draw a further distinction, and distinguish the essential effect of an utterance “\( p \)” from the actual constraint that this utterance imposes on a particular conversation. The essential effect of uttering “\( p \)” is closely related to the update potential of the sentence ‘\( p \)’. If the update potential of the sentence ‘\( p \)’ is to add \( p \) to the common ground, then the essential effect of uttering “\( p \)” is to add the belief that \( p \) to the common ground. In other words, the essential effect of “\( p \)” is to realize ‘\( p \)’s update potential. However, the actual constraints that an utterance “\( p \)” imposes on the common ground of a conversation are the actual changes that need to take place so that the essential effect of “\( p \)” becomes realized. For example, the essential effect of an utterance of “The sun is shining” is to make it commonly believed that the sun is shining. However, in a context where it is already commonly believed that the sun is shining, no change needs to take place in order for this utterance to realize its essential effect. Uttering “the sun is shining” imposes no constraints on the common ground in this scenario, which shows that essential effects and actual constraints may come apart.

I will use this machinery to explain how utterances of sentences express mental states. By the “expression of a mental state”, I mean the imposition of an actual constraint on the common ground of a conversation. This is a stipulative definition of what I mean by the
expression of a mental state for the purposes of my theory. The account does not cover all cases that are ordinarily regarded as expressions of mental states. For instance, it does not readily explain how an utterance of “ouch” expresses pain. One can successfully express that one is in pain with an utterance of “ouch” without inflicting pain on anyone else, or making pain commonly felt. However, the account works well for the kinds of cases that Ontological Expressivists aim to explain. These are cases in which mental states are expressed with the goal of coordinating with other speakers on a common mental state, which isn’t true in the pain case. Furthermore, my account of the expression relation is especially well suited for explaining the difference between ontological and ordinary existence claims, as I will go on to argue.

An important feature of this account of the expression relation is that it results in a form of contextualism. An utterance “p” of a sentence ‘p’ may impose a variety of different constraints on the common ground of a conversation, depending on the context in which it is used. For example, suppose that it is commonly believed in a context that Donald Trump is president of the United States but some people are confused on who is the House Speaker. In this context, the communicative success of “Trump is president and Pelosi is House Speaker” requires that some speakers adopt the belief that Nancy Pelosi is the House Speaker. In this context, the utterance expresses the belief that Nancy Pelosi is House Speaker. However, consider a context in which it is commonly believed that Pelosi is the House Speaker, but some speakers are unclear on who is president. In this context, the communicative success of “Trump is president and Pelosi is House Speaker” requires that some speakers adopt the belief that Trump is president. In this context, the same utterance
therefore expresses the belief that Trump is president. So, if the expression of a mental state is the imposition of a constraint on the common ground of a conversation, then an utterance “p” of a sentence ‘p’ may express a variety of different mental states, depending on the context in which it is used. This is the case even if ‘p’ does not contain indexicals and is otherwise context-insensitive.

This observation puts me in a position to explain the difference between *ontological* and *ordinary* existence claims. I think that an utterance “p” of a context-insensitive sentence ‘p’ may express either ordinary or ontological existence claims, depending on the context in which it is used. To illustrate, consider the following utterance:

(1) “Some things are composite.”

In general, an utterance like (1) could take place in contexts of two different kinds:

(i) either in a context in which all speakers assess propositions in a way that results in the assignment of the same truth-value to the proposition that some things are composite, or

(ii) in a context in which some of the speakers assess propositions in ways that result in the assignment of different truth-values to the proposition that some things are composite.

Suppose (3) takes place in a context of the first kind (i). In this context, there are no relevant differences among the speakers with regard to how they assess propositions. The dynamic change that needs to take place in order to achieve agreement among the speakers at
most requires that some speakers acquire a belief. The constraint that (3) imposes on such a context is an ordinary factual belief. In a context of this kind, an utterance of (3) expresses an ordinary existence claims. Suppose, however, that (3) takes place in a context of the second kind (ii). In such a context, there are relevant differences among the speakers with regard to how they assess the truth of propositions. The dynamic change that needs to take place in order to achieve agreement among the speakers is a change in how some of the speakers assess the truth of propositions. The constraint that (3) imposes on such a context is a disposition to assess the truth of propositions in a particular way. In a context of this kind, an utterance of (3) expresses an ontological existence claim.

7 Ontological Disagreements

Ontological expressivists think that ontological debates concern whether one should accept a certain non-objective proposition. For example, the debate on whether objects with parts exist concerns whether to accept the proposition that some objects have parts, and this proposition is non-objective. In order to come to an agreement in these debates, philosophers have to coordinate how they assess the truth of propositions. For example, they need to coordinate their assumptions with regard to what is required for composition to occur. However, if that’s right, what reasons do we have for engaging in ontological disagreement? Aren’t these disagreements just as pointless on my view as on the anti-metaphysical views of Hirsch (2011) and Thomasson (2015)?

According to ontological expressivists, reality is in a sense standpoint dependent.
Specifically, let a fact be a true proposition, and let reality be the totality of facts. We can then distinguish between two sorts of reality: objective reality, which is the totality of all objective propositions; and standpoint-dependent realities, which are determined by the totality of all objective propositions plus an ontology. Objective reality leaves the truth of some propositions undecided. Standpoint-dependent realities include, for each proposition \( p \), either \( p \) or not-\( p \). By changing which ontology they accept, speakers leave objective reality untouched; but they change their individual standpoint-dependent reality.

Through ontological disagreements, speakers do two things. For one, they try to influence other speakers to accept a specific ontology. Furthermore, speakers who are not yet sold on a specific ontology use ontological disagreements to clarify which reasons speak for specific ontologies. They thereby try to figure out which ontology they should accept.

We can now distinguish between two questions. First, what reasons do we have for trying to figure out whether we should accept a specific non-objective proposition? It is very hard to give a general answer to this question. As a matter of fact, many people already care about non-objective question. For example, many philosophers wonder whether numbers exist, or whether there are past or future objects. These philosophers already have reasons for trying to figure out whether they should accept certain non-objective questions, and no further argument is needed. But it is hard to offer reasons to someone who is not already engaged in questions concerning non-objective matters for why they should care. Perhaps there just are no general reasons to care about non-objective questions (and this is why it is often hard to explain to non-philosophers why they should care about philosophy).

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28 See Rayo (2017) for a defense of the view that reality is the totality of facts, not of things.
Second, what reasons could convince someone to accept or reject a specific non-objective proposition? In general, the key question is whether acceptance of the proposition would make for an overall better standpoint-dependent reality. But this question raises a further issue: when is a specific standpoint-dependent reality better than another? Here a variety of arguments may play a role. A pipe wrench is not “in itself” better than a toothbrush, though a pipe wrench is better suited for wrenching a pipe than a toothbrush. Similarly, no standpoint-dependent reality is “in itself” better than another, though some standpoint-dependent realities may be better for certain purposes than others. One such purpose could be the purpose of doing science. From this viewpoint, acceptable standpoint-dependent reality should contain all and only entities that are required for the truth of our best scientific theories. This particular heuristic in any case is often employed by philosophers, such as Field (1980), when they consider whether to accept a specific ontology.

8 Historical Background

The version of ontological expressivism which I have developed in this article is inspired by Carnap’s (1956 (1950)) influential views on ontology. Carnap argues that metaphysicians debate misguided questions. He thinks that ontological questions, such as the question of whether numbers exist, can be understood in two ways. First, this question can be understood as internal to the framework of mathematics. Understood in this way, its answer is “yes”. This answer can, moreover, be trivially read off the “rules of the framework” and is therefore analytic (p. 209). Ontologists presumably do not mean to debate this trivial question. Alternatively, ontologists could be asking whether numbers exist in an external
sense of this question, where what is at stake is the existence of numbers in a framework-independent sense (p. 209). But, Carnap argues, this external question would be “non-cognitive” (p. 210). Either way, there is no philosophically interesting question with regard to the existence of numbers. However, even though something about what Carnap says seems to be deeply and importantly correct, “it all seems to vanish when one tries to get clear just what it is” (Field, 1984, p. 662).

According to my interpretation (Flocke, forthcoming), Carnap should be interpreted literally: a certain subclass of external statements is “noncognitive” because statements in this class express noncognitive mental states. In more detail, Carnap distinguishes between purely external statements, which are independent from all frameworks, and pragmatic external statements, which concern which framework one should adopt. I argue that the latter express noncognitive mental states. Specifically, I propose that Carnapian “frameworks” are systems of rules for the assessment of “statements”, which are utterances of ordinary language sentences. Pragmatic external statements express noncognitive dispositions to follow only certain such rules of assessment. For instance, “numbers exist” understood as a pragmatic external statement expresses a disposition to assess statements using only rules according to which this statement is to be assessed as correct. This disposition is “noncognitive” since the relevant rules have no descriptive content.

The non-cognitivist interpretation contrasts with “language-pluralist” accounts, as endorsed by Yablo (1998), Price (2009), Hirsch (2011), Thomasson (2015), Eklund (2016), and others, according to which frameworks simply are interpreted languages. According to this interpretation, the main difference between internal and external statements is that
internal statements are meaningful while external statements are meaningless.

Language pluralist interpretations often are taken to inspire lightweight realist positions in meta-ontology. Hirsch’s (2011) “quantifier variance” view and Thomasson’s (2015) “easy ontology” view are two examples. On Hirsch’s view, “frameworks” are languages, and ontologists of seemingly different viewpoints accept different frameworks, which means that they speak different languages. On Thomasson’s view, ordinary language provides us with a “framework”. Only existence questions asked using ordinary language are meaningful, and those questions can be answered “easily”.

However, I think that language pluralist interpretations are mistaken, (see Flocke, forthcoming), and that Carnap’s actual views should rather be taken as inspiration for an expressivist analysis of ontological debates. But my view is not just Carnap’s.

For one, on Carnap’s view, purely external statement—utterances made in contexts where speakers follow different rules of assessment but are not aware of this fact—are simply meaningless. Since metaphysicians typically debate purely external statements, on Carnap’s view, metaphysicians typically make meaningless utterances. I agree that sometimes speakers don’t realize that they follow different rules of assessment, and this ignorance may result in confusions and frustrating discussions. But I don’t think that this ignorance makes their utterances meaningless. On my view, typical utterances by metaphysicians are not meaningless; their semantic contents are propositions and they express noncognitive mental states. Furthermore, on Carnap’s view, framework rules are rules for the assessment of utterances, which are physical events that can be experienced.
This view was presumably at least in part motivated by Carnap’s empiricism. However, ontological expressivism as developed in this article is not motivated by empiricism, and I think that the relevant rules are rules for the assessment of propositions (or of what is said) by the utterance of a declarative sentence.

9 Conclusion

My goal in this article was to provide a possibility proof. I wanted to show that a coherent version of expressivism about ontological discourse can be had. To provide this possibility proof, I have developed a specific version of ontological expressivism. According to this version of ontological expressivism, “numbers exist” expresses a noncognitive disposition to assess the truth of propositions by considering only circumstances of evaluation at which numbers exist. On my view, this disposition is noncognitive because speakers have a choice between alternative circumstances of evaluation, only some of which contain numbers. Whichever way they decide, they do not make a factual mistake. However, not all utterances of quantified sentences express noncognitive mental states; some express beliefs. To explain the difference, I have distinguished between objective and non-objective propositions, and suggested that only utterances of quantified sentences whose semantic content is a non-objective proposition express noncognitive mental states.29

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