**Are there tables?**

Working out what really exists

*By*[David Papineau](https://www.the-tls.co.uk/authors/david-papineau/)



"Cold Dark Matter: An exploded view" by Cornelia Parker, on display at Tate Britain, 2022|© Malcolm Park/Alamy Live News

*June 30, 2023*

BEING

A study in ontology  
320pp. Oxford University Press. £72 (US $95).

Peter van Inwagen

Peter van Inwagen, John Cardinal O’Hara Professor Emeritus at the University of Notre Dame, is a distinguished philosopher who has written widely on fundamental metaphysical issues. He is perhaps best known for his views on inanimate objects, free will and the resurrection of the body.

His view of inanimate objects is that there aren’t any. When does an assemblage of physical parts add up to an inanimate object, he asks? Why does my garden table count as an object, but the woodpile next to it not? In his *Material Beings*(1990), van Inwagen despairs of any satisfactory answers and so concludes that there are in fact no inanimate objects, no tables or houses or mountains, just physical atoms arranged in various ways. Only living beings, he maintains, add up to real wholes that are more than their parts.

His view of free will is that it’s a mystery. Many philosophers hope to show that free will is compatible with determinism. Van Inwagen counters with his well-known “consequence argument”. If determinism is true, then our actions are a consequence of the past and the laws of nature; but we do not control the past or the laws of nature; so we do not control our own actions. At the same time, van Inwagen allows, indeterminism also threatens to rule out free will; acting randomly seems a pretty poor kind of freedom. Since he remains convinced that free will exists, he ends up regarding it as a conundrum that has yet to be solved.

His view of the resurrection is that it’s another mystery. Van Inwagen is a Christian who believes that on the last day our bodies will be resurrected. But he also regards this as incompatible with our bodies decaying away when we die. Even if God could reassemble the atoms that once composed a human body, he argues, that wouldn’t recreate the same person, any more than a perfect simulacrum of a lost painting by Raphael would recreate the original. In his earliest work on this topic he concluded that God must spirit our dead bodies away before they disintegrate and keep them safe somewhere until the Day of Judgement. But he now views this particular explanation as unlikely, and contents himself with the thought that God must somehow preserve our original bodies, even if exactly how the trick is done transcends our understanding.

As it happens, none of these signature doctrines features prominently in van Inwagen’s new book, *Being*. Still, the book is curious in another way. As the author explains in his preface, this is in effect a historical document. He started writing a book about ontology in the 1980s, and a partial draft led to a publication contract with Oxford University Press in 1994. But, as is often the way, completion was repeatedly delayed by other writing commitments. Indeed, the planned first chapter of the book had taken on a life of its own, expanding into*Material Beings*. By the time van Inwagen was able to clear the decks his original thoughts were starting to look dated. Younger scholars were advocating new approaches and reaching their own conclusions. Even so, he tells us, he hadn’t really changed his mind, so he resolved to publish the book more or less as originally planned, without engaging with any of the more recent debates. While extra material was needed to complete his partial draft, he testifies that everything he added could well have been written by him back in the 1990s.

Van Inwagen distinguishes first-order questions of ontology – that is, what exists? – from questions of “meta-ontology”: how should we decide what exists? On the former he is always interesting. He considers fictional characters such as Sherlock Holmes (and says they exist), possibilities such as the French winning the Battle of Waterloo (don’t exist), properties such as humility (do exist) and natural numbers such as seven (it’s complicated). Recent treatments by other philosophers have cast some of these questions in a new light, but in general van Inwagen’s analyses hold up well and he not infrequently anticipates and rebuts points that are nowadays taken to count against his favoured views.

When it comes to meta-ontology, however, his stance is starting to look decidedly threadbare. As he explains, his meta-ontology is “deeply Quinean”. According to W. V. O. Quine, the dominant American philosopher of the twentieth century, questions of existence are best answered by considering the implications of other claims that we accept. For example, if we accept that there are two tables in the dining room, then we are committed to the existence of tables. As Quine would have put it, you cannot consistently “quantify over tables” by saying there are some, yet deny that tables exist. You would simply be contradicting yourself.

At first pass this might seem to rule out the kind of table-denying that van Inwagen himself goes in for. But there is a way out. While he will no doubt be happy to tell his furniture movers that “there are two tables in the dining room”, he can explain that, from a philosophical point of view, these words don’t mean what they seem to mean. When he says “there are two tables”, he doesn’t mean there are two *tables*, but rather that there are two regions of his dining room in which matter is arranged table-wise. The Quinean threat of contradiction is avoided by paraphrasing away the awkward quantification over tables.

So far, so uncontroversial, says van Inwagen, and I agree. What is not so clear, however, is how far these Quinean strictures amount to an effective method for deciding questions of existence. In the introduction to this book van Inwagen quotes the late Ernest Gellner explaining his own “nominalist” rejection of properties and other abstract objects:

The dreadful thing is, I haven’t even tried to be a serious, card-carrying nominalist. I have never tried to eliminate “quantification” over abstract objects from my discourse. I shamelessly “quantify over” abstract objects *and*deny their existence!

Van Inwagen’s response to this is interesting. He allows that flouting Quine in this way might be all right for Gellner, who after all was more of a political theorist than a philosopher. But it won’t do for professional ontologists. An amateur such as Gellner might reasonably take the view that, while there is no doubt some fancy paraphrase that will avoid quantification over properties and abstract objects, it’s not his job to find it. However, according to van Inwagen, it’s not open to working ontologists to pass the buck like that. They are the ones who are supposed to produce the paraphrases. So they aren’t entitled to deny that properties exist, he insists, until they can come up with some way of rewriting claims such as “There are two significant properties that distinguish Rishi Sunak from Boris Johnson” to eliminate the quantification over properties.

Van Inwagen might insist, but why should working ontologists listen to him? It is a substantial challenge to devise a property-free version of that prime ministerial sentence. So, if at first you don’t succeed, why not try again, rather than concede to van Inwagen that properties must exist? In the end I didn’t see why even professional existence-deniers shouldn’t sometimes be allowed to follow Gellner and say that, while a paraphrase is no doubt possible, they haven’t managed to figure one out yet.

This stance is now standard in the philosophy of mathematics. Many philosophers view the complex numbers, transfinite sets and other creations of pure mathematics as unreal constructions that serve merely to simplify our descriptions of the concrete world. In line with this they don’t literally believe any scientific claims that refer to pure mathematical entities. Yet they don’t therefore agree that they need to rewrite all of science to eliminate such references. The technical challenges are too great. As they see it, our inability to overcome these challenges testifies only to the limitations of our intellect, not to the reality of pure mathematical entities.

While van Inwagen makes much of his Quinean meta-ontology, it is not clear that it is really doing much work in his arguments. When we get down to details his views of existence seem to come first and his conclusions about paraphrases second. For example, in defending his realism about fictional characters and properties, he expresses doubts about paraphrasing away apparent references to them, but he gives no principled argument that it can’t be done. And on possibilities – where he goes the other eliminativist way – it is clearly his prior scepticism about real possibilities that is driving the argument. The alternative paraphrase he offers is ingenious, but highly unlikely to recommend itself to anybody who isn’t already convinced that possibilities don’t exist.

It is of course doublethink to deny the existence of things you believe in. But there is no quick way to read ontological conclusions off from this Quinean dictum. Arguments about existence have many moving parts, and this creates plenty of room for both sides to avoid inconsistency. Quinean analysis might once have promised a cure for all ontological ills, but that was back in the last century and the debate has now moved on.

***David Papineau****’s most recent book is*The Metaphysics of Sensory Experience*, 2021*