

Ontological Expressivism

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Many debates in contemporary ontology appear to have a less than straightforwardly factual subject matter. Do some objects have parts, or is everything simple? Do numbers exist? Do only present objects exist, or do past and future objects exist as well? Debates about these and similar questions do not proceed in the same way as scientific debates. Often there appears to be little or no progress, and it is unclear how one should arbitrate between conflicting answers to ontological questions. Philosophers therefore often dismiss ontological debates as pointless or merely verbal. However, in this article I propose an alternative, expressivist analysis, according to which utterances of quantified sentences in the context of ontological debates express noncognitive mental states. Starting from this idea, I develop a version of ontological expressivism in more detail that relies on the notion of a "rule of assessment". On this view, when speakers assess whether composite objects exist (for instance), they rely on assumptions with regard to what is required for composition to occur. These assumptions guide their assessment, similar to how the rules of soccer guide a soccer game. Against this backdrop, I argue that "some objects have parts", uttered in the context of an ontological disagreement, expresses a noncognitive disposition to assess the truth of propositions by using only rules according to which the proposition that some objects have parts is to be evaluated as true.