

Ontological Nihilism and Existential Commitment

Common sense views the world as containing individual objects, ranging from trees, tables, and turnips to the electrons, protons, and neutrons of classical physics. Recently, however, challenges have arisen to this view from quantum mechanics and metaphysics. Critics call into question ontological individualism, according to which the basic building blocks of the world are individual objects ('individuals'). My dissertation develops and defends a form of anti-individualism called 'ontological nihilism.'

There are two initial motivations for ontological nihilism. The first argument, drawing on Locke, questions whether anything can play the intuitive role of substances. The second motivation is provided by the concerns of ontic structural realists, who claim that we should be realists only about the structural claim of scientific theories but not about the objects these theories posit. In my view, there are strong reasons in support of ontic structural realism (OSR), but its proponents have had difficulty in explaining their positive view. Ontological nihilism proposes a better account.

In the first half of the dissertation, I confront the main challenges in formulating an ontologically nihilist view: whether an adequate, nihilist language and logic can be constructed and whether such a view would be unacceptably revisionary. Chapter 1, "From English to Nihilese: Feature-Placing Language," begins to develop a language suitable for ontological nihilism. I take feature-placing constructions in natural language such as 'it is raining' or 'it is misty' and then expand this language and introduce more complex feature-placing resources that nevertheless avoid predicational structure and with it—I argue—ontological commitment.

Chapter 2, "Saving the Appearances: The Problem of Linguistic Revisionism" investigates the options for the nihilist in accounting for our everyday, object-committal assertions and argues that error-theoretic strategies provide an attractive strategy for the nihilist. In particular, I defend such accounts against Amie Thomasson's (2014) account of the function of referential terms.

Chapter 3, "Logic for the Nihilist," concludes my account of how the nihilist can provide an expressively adequate account of her vision of the world. I examine the system of *predicate functorese*, developed by Quine and show that it can provide a logic for ontological nihilism. I show how one can provide a nihilistically acceptable truth theory for predicate functorese in terms of a feature-placing metalanguage and develop an appropriate type theory. In the second half of the chapter, I confront the objection that predicate functorese is simply a notational variant of first-order predicate logic.

Chapter 4, "On Haecceitism—Cheap and Otherwise," develops the modal metaphysics of feature-placing metaphysics and argues for haecceitism without individuals. Haecceitism says that there are non-qualitative differences in ways the world could be. It is usually assumed that a metaphysics without individuals lacks the resources to account for such distinctions. I argue, on the contrary, that feature-placing nihilism is compatible with haecceitism and that there is much to recommend this combination.

The final chapter, "Generalizing Generalism," evaluates the most prominent, recent argument against individualism, Shamik Dasgupta's so-called 'dangler argument.' According to Dasgupta, individuals are theoretical 'danglers,' that is, they do no work in our theorizing. He concludes from this that they should be abandoned. I argue that Dasgupta's version of the argument threatens to generalize to all levels of the type-theoretic hierarchy. If it did generalize, then a theory that excluded danglers would be rendered contentless. In contrast, I argue that my alternative account of anti-individualism successfully avoids this threat.