Summary
To a first approximation, ontology is concerned with what exists, metaontology with what it means to say that something exists. So understood, metaontology has been dominated by three views: (i) existence as a substantive first-order property that some things have and some do not, (ii) existence as a formal first-order property that everything has, and (iii) existence as a second-order property of existents’ distinctive properties. Each of these faces well-documented difficulties. In this chapter, I want to expound a fourth theoretical option, which unfortunately has remained ‘under the radar.’ This is Franz Brentano’s view, according to which to say that X exists is not to attribute a property at all (first- or second-order), but to say that the correct attitude to take toward X is that of accepting or believing in it.

1. Introduction: Metaontology and existence talk

Moral philosophy is usefully divided into ethics and metaethics. Oversimplifying considerably, the distinction is this: ethics is concerned with which things are good, metaethics with what it means to say that something is good. The goal of ethics is to produce a comprehensive list of all the good things (in the broadest sense of the term). Metaethics concerns a more fundamental question: when we say that X is good, what exactly are we saying? In a way, ethics is concerned with the extension of the concept good, metaethics with its intension.

This is an oversimplification in at least two ways. First, ethics and metaethics are concerned with other normative concepts, such as right, virtue, and reasons. Secondly, metaethics deals with other issues, such as moral epistemology—how we can come to know what things are good. Still, there
is a clear sense in which answering the question of what exactly we are doing when we say that something is good lies at the heart of metaethics.

A similar division of labor may be applied to ontology and metaontology. Again oversimplifying, ontology is concerned with what exists, metaontology with what it means to say that something exists. The goal of ontology is to produce a comprehensive list of existents; that of metaontology is to answer the question of what exactly we are saying when we say that X exists. To that extent, ontology is concerned with the extension of the concept existence, metaontology with its intension.

One way in which this oversimplifies is that ontology may well be concerned with other concepts, such as grounding, fundamentality, or essence.\(^1\) Another is that metaontology is also concerned with other issues, notably the methodology of ontology.\(^2\) Nonetheless, there is a sense in which at the heart of metaontology lies the question ‘when we say that X exists, what exactly are we saying?’\(^3\)

To this question, there are three prominent answers in the extant literature. According to the first, to say that X exists is to attribute to X a substantive, discriminating first-order property that some things have and some do not (Meinong 1904, Parsons 1980). According to the second, it is to attribute a second-order property of existents’ distinctive properties or of the concept designed to pick them out (Frege 1884, Russell 1905). According to the third answer, more popular in recent discussions, to say that X exists is to attribute to X a formal, undiscriminating first-order property that everything has (Williamson 2002, van Inwagen 2003). Each of these has met with strong resistance and faces extraordinary objections, but have also been admirably defended. My main goal here is to present a fourth alternative, drawn from Brentano’s metaontology. Just by way of motivating the search for another approach to existence talk, §2 offers a brief survey of these views and some of their immediate difficulties.

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1. See Schaff er (2009) for a view of ontology as concerned primarily with grounding and fundamentality rather than existence, and Lowe (2008) for the view that essence is a central part of what ontology is about.

2. Thus, debates over Quine’s (1948) quantificational method vs. Armstrong’s (2004) truth-maker method belong within the sphere of metaontology.