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CRITICAL STUDIES/BOOK REVIEWS

Mark Balaguer.[*] ***Metaphysics, Sophistry, and Illusion: Towards a Widespread Non-Factualism.*** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xii + 295. ISBN: 978-0-19-886836-1 (hbk); 978-0-19-190481-3 (ebk). doi/org/10.1093/oso/9780198868361.001.0001.

Reviewed by **Graham Priest**[**]

As hardly needs to be said, the history of philosophy, Ancient, Medieval, and Modern, East and West, is littered with disputes about whether entities of certain kinds exist. In the present book Mark Balaguer aims to puncture at least many such debates. He argues that for many important questions of this kind — and so for others which presuppose the existence in question — there is simply no fact of the matter. He calls this view *non-factualism*.

After a brief Chapter 1 introducing matters, the book has two parts. The first makes the case for non-factualism in detail for two specific questions: whether there are abstract mathematical entities, and whether there are partite objects. Chapter 2 argues that there are substantial issues here, and not merely verbal ones.

It might be thought that non-factualism about mathematical entities undercuts both the objectivity and the applicability of mathematics. Chapter 3 argues that this is not the case. Such things can be accommodated by an appropriate version of fictionalism. Specifically, let M be some mathematical claim. Even if there is no fact of the matter about whether M is true, the conditional,

[α] if platonism were true, M would be true,

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is both true and suffices for these matters. A similar point is then made about realism concerning partite objects.

Chapter 4 makes the case for non-factualism about the existence of partite objects in detail; and Chapter 5 makes a similar case for the existence of mathematical objects. Chapter 6 worries about how conditional claims, such as $[\alpha]$, and modal claims more generally, could be true, given non-factualism about the entities involved. Balaguer argues that their truth can be explained by appeal to a class of basic modal statements, whose truth is just a brute fact: nothing at all is required to make them true.

The briefer second half of the book gestures at a much more general position than that of the first half of the book, which Balaguer calls *neo-positivism*. This is to the effect that, after clarification, metaphysical claims boil down to ones that are either (i) empirical, (ii) modal (in a metaphysically innocent way), or (iii) such that there is no fact of the matter about them. The view is sketched in Chapter 7. It might be thought that metaphysical claims which may be solved by conceptual analysis refute this trichotomy. Chapter 8 argues that such claims are really empirical ones about ordinary-language use, and so of kind (i). Chapter 9 then rehearses a neo-positivist position on a number of metaphysical issues — such as essentialism and presentism — drawing on the ideas of Part 1 of the book. In Chapter 10 Balaguer worries that he has told us only what the world *is not* like, but not what it *is* like. He replies that counterfactuals such as $[\alpha]$ do this.

The book clearly covers a great deal of ground, and there are many interesting arguments to be found in it. Given the journal in which this review is appearing, in the rest of it I will discuss only matters concerning the existence of mathematical objects.

The case for non-factualism about the existence of mathematical objects is essentially as follows (p. 135). (The argument in the text assumes that truth conditions are possible-world truth conditions, but this seems to me both unnecessary for the general case and a hostage to fortune. So I will bypass this wrinkle.) Let P be the claim that there are abstract mathematical objects. Then:

[1] We do not have any idea what the non-spatio-temporal existence of abstract objects ... could consist in, or what it could amount to.
[2] So we do not have any idea what the world needs to be like to count as one where P is true.
[3] So our usage and intentions do not determine what the world needs to be like to make P true. That is, they determine no truth conditions for P.
[4] So P has no truth value.

It seems to me that one may well balk at each stage.

For [1], Balaguer argues (p. 126) that we have no idea what the existence of abstract objects consists in, since there is nothing that can be done to clarify the notion of such existence: one can say only what abstract existence is *not*, not what it *is*. Now, it is hard enough to say something illuminating and uncontroversial about what existence *tout court* is. Since Balaguer seems to identify

being an object with being an existent object, I assume that he accepts the (dubious) Quinean view that to exist is 'to be the value of a bound variable'. That does not tell you what is specific to the existence of abstract objects, though. The matter is certainly contestable, but many philosophers (from Plato to Kant to Gödel) have held that the nature of such objects is of a specific kind; namely one such that it can be known by certain *a priori* practices. That is positive enough.

But even given [1], [2] does not seem to follow. Clearly, a lot hangs on the notion of having no idea. In an obvious sense, we do have an idea of what a world where abstract objects exist is (would be) like. It is a world where $3+3=6$, as opposed to $3+3\neq 6$. It is a world where it is not the case that all groups are commutative, as opposed to one where they are. These tell us about the properties of some objects at that world; but in a clear sense, they also tell us something about the world itself, just as much as my saying something about Germany if I say that its East and West parts are now one country, and not two.

Indeed, the most obvious way to say what a world with abstract objects is like is just that: it is a world which contains abstract objects. Balaguer says (p. 136) that this is not good enough. Saying this is just sticking one's head in the sand and misses the point he is making: such a statement is too indeterminate to provide what is required. However, such indeterminacy is established only at the next step of the argument, and uses step [2]. Hence, invoking indeterminacy at this point begs the question.

[3] claims that it follows that our intentions and usage are too indeterminate to deliver truth conditions to claims like P. Now, what has gone before concerns mental states — our lack of appropriate ones. (Indeed, claims of this kind are a recurring feature of the argumentative strategy deployed in the book, *e.g.*: 'my response is befuddlement (p. 111); 'we don't understand it' (p. 129); 'I just don't get it' (p. 132). Now, even if we grant these claims about mental states, usage is quite a different matter. To quote an old slogan: meanings ain't in the head. Specifically, it is some kind of truism that meaning supervenes on use, and as Wittgenstein argues at great length in the *Investigations*, matters of usage are not hostage to what mental processes are supposed to be going on.

Finally, [4] concludes that the indeterminacy involved produces a lack of truth value. Again, a lot hangs on how to understand the sort of indeterminacy supposed to be involved here. In many places, Balaguer suggests that this is a matter of large-scale imprecision (*e.g.*, pp. 115, 150). However many very imprecise claims are true or false: 'there is a very large number of stars in the sky' (true with a clear view of the Milky Way; false on a cloud-covered night); 'Mary was playing a game' (true if she was playing chess; false if she was asleep). The claims have truth conditions — just ones that are themselves vague.

However, elsewhere (*e.g.*, p. 135) Balaguer suggests that the indeterminacy is of such a kind that not even vague truth conditions are determined. Quite literally, such claims have no truth conditions at all. This does not mean that they are meaningless, but it does mean that they have no truth value. Clearly, one might ask how it is possible for a sentence to have a meaning if it has no truth conditions. Balaguer (in correspondence) suggests that it is because the individual words have meaning, and the compositional rules of grammar

put these together in a legitimate way. There certainly appear to be familiar cases of this kind, such as Carnap's 'this stone is thinking about Vienna'. But a natural response here is to say that such sentences are simply false, and so their negations are true — 'No, this stone is *not* thinking about Vienna; it's just the wrong kind of thing to satisfy the predicate'. Similarly, one might say 'the number three exists' is just false, since the number three is just of a kind that fails to satisfy the predicate 'exists'.

Let us now turn to conditionals such as [α], and the crucial role they play in Balaguer's account. The antecedent of [α] is a claim to the effect that mathematical objects exist. There is a very real problem about how such a conditional can be true if we have no idea what a world would need to be like to make it true. At least according to the usual account of such conditionals, they are true if, in all worlds where the antecedent is true, so is the conclusion. If we have no idea what a world where the antecedent is true is like, we have no idea whether the consequent is true there. Balaguer says (p. 59) that the conditional involved (or strictly speaking, the conditional where *would* is not to be taken as understood in possible-world terms) has to be taken as '*primitive*' (his italics). This does not help to explain how the conditional can have a sense which is true. And lots of things that cannot be defined can be explained.

But suppose that we can make sense of the idea that [α] and its like are truth-apt. The question is then what makes them true. As noted, Balaguer says that *nothing* does so (p. 197). Indeed, he calls the view *modal nothingism* (p. 169). Now, this is a hard claim to swallow. One does not have to be a realist to hold that truth depends on being. One merely has to take the point that truth does not "float in mid-air". If something is true there must be something — call it being if you wish — that makes it so. Otherwise, it might just as well be false. Calling it a brute fact gives the situation a name, but does not explain it. Deploying Balaguer's own rhetoric, one might say 'I just don't get it'.

Balaguer tries to soften the blow by saying (pp. 180 ff.) that conditionals like [α] do not make claims about the world at all: they do not say how the world *is*; they say how the world *could be*. This strikes me as playing fast and loose with the notion of world. This is a philosopher's term of art. True, at the hands of modal logicians, it has acquired a technical sense; but basically it means, as Wittgenstein puts it in the *Tractatus*, all that is the case. And if something *could* be so, that is indeed the case.

It seems to me that Balaguer effectively recognises this point in Chapter 10, where he says (*e.g.*, p. 271) that statements like [α] are part of his 'world view'. If a world view is not a view about the world, I would fain know what it is.

In summary: In the book Balaguer certainly succeeds in carving out for himself a distinctive and provocative position in the philosophy of mathematics, and more generally in debates about the existence of certain kinds of entities. But as to whether we should now be ready to commit such debates to the flames, I am skeptical.[1]

[1] I am very grateful to Mark Balaguer for his generous comments on an earlier draft of this review, which pointed out places where my explanation of his view had clearly misrepresented it.