

# Is ontology easy?

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February 12, 2015

## 1 Introduction

Amie Thomasson argues (Thomasson, 2015) that ontology is easy. There are roughly 3 phases to her argument: (1) a call to throw over the reign of Quinean metaphysics and to return to traditional methods in metaphysics, mainly conceptual analysis; (2) a detailed proposal for how to make easy arguments to settle ontological questions; (3) arguments that alternative views are not as successful as “easy” ontology.

I don’t think ontology is easy in Thomasson’s sense. I think it is easy in the fictionalist’s sense. My arguments here will be (a) even granting an analytic/synthetic distinction, the relevant claims in ontology are not analytic truths; (b) easy existence claims are mysterious for abstract entities; and (c) overall, fictionalism retains the explanatory edge: it can make sense of what we are talking about when we are talking about abstract objects, and incurs fewer argumentative burdens than does easy ontology.

I will also try to come to grips with Thomasson’s rejection of Quinean metaphysics. Certainly much of what Quine actually said and wrote is problematic in one way or another. But I still find the broad outlines of his empiricistic philosophy both congenial and compelling, and the neoQuinean methodology for ontology is its “last, best hope” (Yablo, 1998, 259).

## 2 The problems

Thomasson’s easy ontological arguments should work on two kinds of ontological puzzles: ones about concrete spatio temporal objects, and ones about abstract entities. Among the former we have

- (a) there are particles arranged cupwise; are there cups?
- (b) there is a dog, and another dog; is there a dogdog?

Among the latter we have

- (a) Mars has two moons; does the number two exist?

- (b) Mars is a planet; does the property of being a planet exist?
- (c) Harry Potter is the hero of the eponymous novels; does the fictional character Harry Potter exist?
- (d) There could have been blue swans; do possible worlds exist?

Quine expressed “the ontological problem” this way (Quine, 1948, 21):

A curious thing about the ontological problem is its simplicity. It can be put in three Anglo-Saxon monosyllables : “What is there?” It can be answered, moreover, in a word – “Everything” – and everyone will accept this answer as true. However, this is merely to say that there is what there is. There remains room for disagreement over cases; and so the issue has stayed alive down the centuries.

Thomasson, and others (Schaffer, 2009b; Fine, 2009), think that Quine’s emphasis on what exists was misguided and that we should move on to other projects in metaphysics. Part of the case for that change is arguments to show that the existence questions have easy answers: hence Thomasson’s book.

Quine says, and I think he’s right, that the issue has stayed alive down the centuries. Plato expressed a view that Aristotle disagreed with according to which universals exist in addition to their instances. (Russell, 1912) begins his discussion of universals with an argument of roughly this form:

There are many acts which are all one thing: just.

Therefore, there is one thing that the many just acts are: justice itself.

Some fairly simple reasoning gets us some additional information about justice itself: it cannot change; it does not have a place or time; its relation with things is not causal. Plato thought universals explain our ability to define concepts. If so, they look like candidates for a theory of what meanings are. Russell toyed with the idea that all of being could be reduced to universals (my dog Hercules then being a kind of intersection of universals). Dretske, Tooley and Armstrong advocate a view on which laws of nature are relations of universals.

If you had doubts about *whether* universals exist, this odd little argument of Russell’s together with this host of explanatory arguments would not likely leave you less puzzled. Easy ontology is designed to remove your puzzlement.

### 3 The solution

The solution is a version of Carnap’s take on ontology (Carnap, 1956a).

#### 3.1 Carnap on internal and external questions

Carnap’s idea is that metaphysics is a kind of sophisticated use-mention error (Thomasson notes approvingly that (Price, 2009) describes it this way). There are internal questions

and external questions. An internal question can be settled by appeal to the meanings of the words in which it is expressed, and experience (depending on what the question is). Arithmetic answers, for example, the question whether there are any primes between 7 and 17, and hence the question whether there are any numbers; observation now enables us to answer the question whether there is any water on the far side of the moon, and hence the question of the reality of the external world. Since the language in which internal questions are expressed fixes how they are to be answered, different languages permit apparently different questions and ways to answer them. Assuming that no language choice cuts off access to what there is, languages are chosen essentially on aesthetic grounds: is it, for example, more pleasant to do mathematics, or physics, or grocery shopping, using a language for numbers, or instead using a nominalist, number-free language?

Metaphysics, then, according to Carnap, raises a (confused) external question about numbers: the answer to the internal question is clearly “yes,” but—really—do numbers exist? Since the external question leaves behind the language within which the question can be answered—the “framework” for numbers—it cannot be answered, or at least not in those terms. We wanted to know whether there really are numbers, but what we are in fact asking is whether it is more pleasant to talk about numbers than to talk in some other way, without talking about numbers. That is a question of language design and adoption, not a question about existence.

We can then denature traditional metaphysical worries: either by acknowledging that the question we wanted to ask is really about a language choice, or else by internalizing them. If philosophers are worried about properties, they should reflect that there’s nothing standing in the way of introducing a language for properties: for example, we can define the word ‘property’ in such a way that whenever there are two things that are blue, then there is a property that they share.

## 3.2 Thomasson’s version of Carnap

Thomasson fills in Carnap’s picture in two ways: a positive account of the meanings of our words (and of concepts); and an account of at least one version of how metaphysicians raise ‘external’ questions.

### 3.2.1 Application and coapplication conditions

Language and thought express concepts. Concepts have application conditions and coapplication conditions. The word ‘dog’ applies to dogs, furry mammals with an acute sense of smell who communicate with barks, and who have contrived to be domesticated by humans. The word ‘dog’ applies to my dog Hercules, who is the same dog as the one who was here yesterday. My judgment that there is a dog here in the room involves the concept of a dog. The application conditions and coapplication conditions of that concept are those of the English word ‘dog’. We can express these conditions in the form of “rules of use” for the words we use to express the concepts.

The ontological puzzles are all expressed using the word ‘exists’. We can express a rule of use for saying that Ks exist, as follows:

**E:** Ks exist iff the application conditions actually associated with 'K' are fulfilled

This rule of use is not intended as a statement of meaning: 'Ks exist' doesn't mean that the application conditions actually associated with 'K' are fulfilled.

But the application conditions associated with 'K' are meaning-constituting (89, 245). Application conditions are "among the semantic rules of use for the terms we master as we acquire language" (90). Application conditions are sometimes explicitly stateable and known by those who possess the term/concept: those rare cases of explicit definition, like 'bachelor' or 'aunt', and some words for which we can give pretty good definitions. There are also words for which application conditions are not explicitly stateable. The word 'dog' does apply to dogs, and dogs are those furry domestic creatures, etc., but we would be hard pressed to articulate a sufficient condition for being a dog in other terms. (Sufficient is all that is wanted here; application conditions are "one-way entailments" (257).) Thomasson offers 4 conditions on application conditions (91, 96):

1. They are semantic rules of use which speakers *master*, but these rules needn't take the form of necessary and sufficient conditions, and needn't be stateable.
2. They are not merely conditions under which we would have *evidence* that the term applies, but rather conditions under which the term *would be correctly applied* (entitling us to truly say 'there is a K').
3. They need not be descriptive, and may involve deference to experts and the world.
4. Application conditions must not take the following form: 'K' applies iff Ks exist.

### 3.2.2 Objects

Natural languages offer generic ontological terms: 'object', 'thing', 'stuff'. When we find ourselves doing ontology, for example asking whether there are numbers, it's easy to slip into using this terminology: "Ok, I get it that there is a prime number between 2 and 4, but is that an object, is it a real thing?" Thomasson argues that something like Carnap's analysis applies to this usage. There are roughly 2 uses (meanings?) for the word 'object'. One is the 'covering use', governed by this analytic rule: from 'there is an *S*' (for some legitimate sortal *S*) infer 'there is an object'. The other use involves a conceptually basic sortal concept. It's the kind of concept that very young infants are deploying, for example, when their gaze fixates when they don't see a doll where, as it were, there should have been one.

In the first sense, there is no room for the ontological question. For numbers, for example, the relevant sortal is 'number' and the answer to the question, are there numbers, is clearly 'yes'.

In the second sense, we would need to know what the application conditions are for being an object. Presumably again the ontological question gets an easy answer: either numbers are objects in that sense, or they are not.

The ontological question then, that philosophers have wanted to answer, may be appealing to some “neutral” sense of object, more generic than either of these (Thomasson, 2009). But that question cannot be answered: there are no application conditions associated with this term, and so the question whether there are objects in that sense is unanswerable. In Carnap’s terms, this is an external question.

## 4 Worries about Easy Ontology

### 4.1 Analytic/synthetic

Carnap and Thomasson agree that internal questions are to be settled by empirical and/or conceptual means, and that we can tell from the meanings of the words used to express the question which methods are appropriate. Thomasson adds a substantive view about meanings, that for many sortal terms used in ontological disputes, the terms have application and coapplication conditions that specify conditions sufficient for the application of the terms. It follows from this view that many claims using these sortals are analytic, and that the answers to the ontological questions are trivially answerable just by seeing what those analytic claims say. So, for example, Thomasson holds that “if there are particles arranged baseballwise then there is a baseball” is analytically true, and that “if there is a baseball, then there is the property of being a baseball” is analytically true. The first analytic truth grounds a response to Merricks’ argument against ordinary objects. First, given the particles, the baseball is guaranteed to be there; second, no causal exclusion argument can be generated, since the analytic linkage means that being particles arranged baseballwise and being a baseball are not suitably independent. The second analytic truth settles the question of the existence of properties. It does so “easily”: all we need to know, in order to know that properties exist, is to know that some ordinary terms (‘baseball’ will do) apply, and the analytic truth that links predication with the existence of a property.

I have two serious worries about this. First, I don’t think the relevant claims are analytic. Second, Thomasson’s arguments to show that there is nothing wrong with analyticity don’t seem to me to work all that well. My concern that the key claims are not analytic does not depend on any general argument against analyticity. So even if Thomasson’s arguments for analyticity succeed, I think they are beside the point.

#### 4.1.1 Are the relevant claims analytic?

Assuming that there are analytic truths, are the relevant claims analytic? I think the answer is ‘no’.

- (a) It is not analytic that if there are particles arranged baseballwise, there is a baseball. It is *stipulated* not to be analytic by those who are interested to argue against ordinary objects.
- (b) It is not analytic that if Mars has two moons, the number 2 exists. The most fully worked out contemporary version of the claim that this is analytic, the neoFregean deflationary account (Hale and Wright, 2009), needs to hold that Hume’s Principle

( $F$  and  $G$  are equinumerous iff the number of  $F$ 's = the number of  $G$ 's) is analytic.  
But that can be, and has been, doubted.

- (c) It is not analytic that if JK Rowling wrote 7 enormously popular novels about Harry Potter, then the fictional character Harry Potter exists. That's a theory about fictional characters, not an analytic truth.
- (d) It is not analytic that if there could have been blue swans, there is a possible world at which there are blue swans. I'm inclined to think this conditional is simply false.
- (e) It is not analytic that if there are many electrons, then there is a property of being an electron. One can, without misusing the words, or changing their meaning, hold that there are many electrons but there are no properties.

Reasonable people about whom there is no question of their semantic competence have thought that sentences like these are not true, and hence not analytic.

#### 4.1.2 Refuting arguments against analyticity

Do Thomasson's arguments against Quine's and Williamson's arguments against analyticity succeed?

In this book she argues specifically against Williamson's attack on (epistemically) analytic truth (Chapter 7, pp. 231-252). Williamson's cases concern two people, Peter and Stephen. They (purportedly) know and use English with its standard meanings. Both reject "all vixens are vixens". Peter believes that there are no foxes and that universal quantification is ontologically committing (he's an Aristotelian about quantification). Stephen believes that there are borderline cases in the evolutionary history of vixens and that vagueness brings truth-value gaps, hence that this universal quantification will also fail to be true or false since some of its instances are borderline cases. An epistemically analytic truth is one such that anyone who understands it is disposed to assent to it; hence, apparently, "all vixens are vixens" is not epistemically analytic. Since that sentence is as good an example of a putatively epistemically analytic truth as there could be, it should follow that there are none at all. Thomasson's "rules of use" strictly entail epistemically analytic truths that express them. In this case, the quantifier rules for standard first order logic, plus some semantic doctrine about vagueness, entail that "all vixens are vixens" is analytic. So if Williamson's argument succeeds, then there are no analytic truths, and hence no "rules of use" that could answer the ontologist's questions easily.

Thomasson's response (241-4) is that Peter and Stephen are not using universal quantification according to the rules of standard usage in English. "In short, Peter and Stephen go wrong not in 'holding deviant patterns of belief' (apart, of course from 'there are no foxes'), but rather for representing themselves as uttering truths in standard English when they are implicitly changing the rules on the basis of adopting a revisionary semantics" (244).

The problem, familiar from Quine, is that the distinction between using a different meaning and having unusual beliefs is not sharp. Thomasson acknowledges (249) that Peter's Aristotelian semantics is reasonable for English, since English is just not determinate about universal quantification.<sup>1</sup> Presumably the same should go for Stephen: it's not as

<sup>1</sup>Church writes (Church, 1965, 417):

though we have a clear and uncontroversial account of vagueness in natural languages that settles the question whether Stephen is using his words with the same meaning as the rest of us.

Thomasson discusses (Quine, 1951b) and its arguments against the analytic/synthetic distinction in her earlier book (Thomasson, 2007, §§2.1-2). One stage in Quine’s argument looks like this. We could define analytic truths in terms of synonyms. We could figure out which are the synonyms by looking at definitions. When the definitions are explicit, then we get legitimate synonymy and legitimate analytic truths; but it is rare that we find explicit definition. Dictionaries capture patterns of usage. There is, however, a continuum of cases between firmly held belief (“there have been black dogs”) and truths in virtue of meaning (“dogs are mammals”). But, Quine argues, here and in (Quine, 1960), there is no behavioral test that will distinguish among these patterns of use.

Thomasson gives two reasonable responses to this argument. First, for almost all natural language, there is tacit and collective “legislation” about the proper uses of words, which introduces analyticities just as surely as do explicit definitions. Second, behaviorism is not a viable position, and so we may invoke psychological factors in drawing the distinction between analytic and non-analytic truths, such as intent to follow a rule, respect for a rule, etc.

There are various ways a Quinean or a neoQuinean (for example, a Davidsonian) might counter these arguments. But it doesn’t matter, since even if Thomasson is right, the relevant claims are not analytic.

### 4.1.3 About Carnap

It is perhaps worth commenting that Quine’s argument (Quine, 1951a) that Carnap’s take on ontology relies on the analytic/synthetic distinction is probably incorrect.<sup>2</sup> Carnap agrees with Quine that ‘ontology’ should be read off the commitments of the best theories of the world.<sup>3</sup> There are two endeavors that Carnap recognizes as related to, but distinct from, the traditional questions about the existence of numbers, etc. One is discussion of the structure of the language we use to express the best theories. The other is attempts to paraphrase or reduce some bits of language in terms of others. Infinitesimals might serve as an example of both. When Newton and Leibniz developed calculus,

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At the beginning of a certain elementary branch of logic (as it is now considered), i.e., the traditional theory of categorical propositions, a decision has to be made as to the meaning to be attached to sentences of categorical form in certain extreme cases in which one of the terms (subject or predicate) is either empty or universal. Especially the case of an empty subject term has proved troublesome or has led to controversy. As the usage of everyday language, out of which the traditional theory arose, is partly vacillating and partly unclear on this point, one simply has to make some convenient decision, subject to obvious conditions of adequacy and internal consistency, and then get on to more important matters. Technically there should be no great difficulty. But the history of the matter has a great deal of human interest, as to how the point could at first be overlooked, then later engender so much heat of controversy, so much plain confusion and stubborn clinging to preconceptions.

<sup>2</sup>This section is based heavily on (Alspector-Kelly, 2002, 2001).

<sup>3</sup>Carnap’s emphasis and scare quotes (Carnap, 1956b, 43), to warn against the “ontological, metaphysical” understanding of that word—presumably some non-naturalistic understanding. See also footnote 5, p.215.

both invoked a new word for a new thing: ‘infinitesimal’ (*infinitesimus*). Neither would have said that they invented something in the world, or that infinitesimals had a shadowy language- and mind-dependent existence. Rather, our best theory of changing rates of change (real phenomena in the world) quantifies over infinitesimals, so we are committed to believing in them. Infinitesimals are logically weird, though: they are non-zero, but infinitely small. Berkeley called them “ghosts of departed quantities”. Eventually Cauchy, Riemann and Weierstrass figured out how to express calculus in terms of limits rather than infinitesimals. We are no longer committed to the existence of infinitesimals.

Notice that analytic truths are not playing any special role in Carnap’s conception of ‘ontology’. He is not reading commitment to properties and numbers off analytic truths supported by application conditions. He is discerning ‘ontology’ the same way Quine would. Mathematicians and natural scientists talk about numbers and properties. So we should believe in them. Philosophy has no particular standing with respect to ‘ontology’. We (philosophers) could conceivably figure out a way to make mathematics or some natural science work better, in a way that leaves out the numbers or the properties. But that would be mathematical, or scientific, work, according to Carnap, not philosophical work. The question of whether infinitesimals exist, for Carnap, is the question of whether calculus talks about them. There is no special sort of “ontology discourse” that is analytic, in terms of which the discussion of existence of infinitesimals should be conducted. If we had accepted the calculus of infinitesimals, all sorts of truths about them would be analytic. We didn’t, and so we conclude that infinitesimals don’t exist.

Given that our current “framework” does commit us to numbers and properties, it’s still an open question whether the meanings of our words—Thomasson’s application conditions—support analytic “introduction rules” of the form “if there is a bagel on the table, then the property of being a bagel exists”. The words ‘number’ and ‘property’ are old words in our natural languages, so the rules for their use are implicit (we cannot think of them as being explicitly introduced by definition). I think it is reasonable to wonder whether “there are 2 bagels on the table, therefore the number 2 exists” is analytic, and (as I suggested above) even someone friendly to the deflationist neoFregean program could deny that. I think it’s even more plausible to say that “if there is a bagel on the table then the property of being a bagel exists” is false, hence not analytic. My own (instrumentalist fictionalist) view is (a) that is a theoretical inference, an inference to the best explanation, and (b) the relevant explanatory theory, property theory, is false. If these terms were introduced by explicit definition, both options would be available: (1) to make the relevant inference analytic (as it is for ‘corporation’) or (2) to make it theoretical (as it was for Mendel and ‘gene’).

## 4.2 Easy existence

Thomasson’s easy ontology is a version of deflationism. It makes claims similar to those of the neoFregean programme and Schiffer’s pleonastic approach to some ontological questions. Thomasson takes her view to be more general than Schiffer’s, and Schiffer’s to be more general than the neoFregean programme. Generality comes mainly in the kinds of bases that give us answers to the ontological questions. neoFregeans start with biconditionals involving identity, like Hume’s Principle: the number of  $x$ ’s = the number

of  $y$ 's iff the  $x$ 's and the  $y$ 's are equinumerous. Schiffer starts with one-way conditionals of the form  $S \rightarrow \exists x(Fx)$ . Thomasson starts with application conditions for sortals, which may not be articulable in natural language.

Thomasson's discussion is also more general in that it gives definite positive answers to ontological questions both about abstract entities like numbers and properties, as well as about concrete entities like cups and persons.

Intuitively, there is something troubling about all three proposals, in their application to abstract objects. If someone has doubts about whether directions or numbers exist, it's hard to see how Frege's direction principle (the direction of  $x$  is the direction of  $y$  (for lines) iff  $x$  is parallel to  $y$ ) or Hume's principle is going to settle the doubt.

Admittedly it is not at all a simple matter to say what such a person is worried about, or whether the worry is legitimate. And ontological deflationists have done a pretty good job answering specific challenges from the skeptic about their proposals. Nevertheless the doubts seem to remain. It is not, apparently, easy to make the objection stick, that these arguments have the air of magic about them. Maybe so; but still: what's the point of arguing for the *existence* of these entities? What's the difference between saying that Hume's Principle tells us that numbers exist, and saying that Hume's Principle is the beginning of a beautiful and useful fiction? Roughly as the quizzicalist might say (Yablo, 2009): it makes no difference as far as how we regard arithmetic; why should we care about (or argue for) the existence of the numbers?

Deflationists themselves are not speaking in one voice about this concern. Schiffer argues that pleonastic inferences show us the existence of entities that have no hidden and substantial nature. All there is to know about these entities is what can be known about the pleonastic inferences. These entities are "mere shadows of sentences", "mind- or language-created entities" (Schiffer, 1996, 153). As far as I know neither Schiffer nor Hale or Wright apply the deflationist programme to concrete objects. Thomasson by contrast holds that easy ontological inferences show that both concrete and abstract entities exist, that is, exist in the only sense that anything exists. Hence there is nothing shadowy or mind- or language-dependent about, for example, properties or propositions, even though our only access to them is through the fulfillment of simple application conditions ("if Hercules is a dog, then Hercules has the property of being a dog").

Thomasson faults Schiffer for holding that our epistemic access to pleonastic entities is different from our epistemic access to concrete entities, and for holding that pleonastic entities are causally inconsequential (145-158). Her arguments strike me as successful but in a sense beside the point. Since she holds that easy ontology works in the same way for concrete objects as it does for abstract objects, there are going to be clear cases of objects secured by easy ontological inferences (cups and persons, for example) that are known in the ordinary complicated ways, and are as causally consequential as anything is. That's fine for concrete objects. But it leaves the questions for the abstract objects untouched. Schiffer's claim that pleonastic abstract objects have 'diminished epistemological status' or no 'hidden and substantial nature' appears to be exactly right. Similarly, they are causally inconsequential: for example, Hercules' having the property of being a dog has precisely the causal consequences that Hercules' being a dog has.

Schiffer thinks pleonastic inference gets us shadowy entities; Thomasson thinks it

gets us entities that exist in the fullest possible sense; the realist thinks it gets us nothing at all. What is at issue between them?

We might take it as a mark of the successful introduction of an ontological problem that it will be impossible to say what the issue is. Take for example questions about composition. People have intuitions that dogs exist but dogdogs don't. People are pretty confident that there are statues but they are unnerved when they consider reasons for thinking the material of the statue is something distinct from the statue. The arguments go back and forth; the philosophers work out various strategies to explain away problems. Eventually "highly localized fighting at close quarters" (Bennett, 2009, 74) reaches an impasse. There appears to be more than one way to understand what there is and what we think, and no way to decide which one is right.

Now, that's the point at which the various metametaphysical strategies come into play. Bennett argues that this impasse isn't reason to think that there is no answer, only that we aren't (yet) in a position to know what it is. Hirsch argues that the various views are terminological variants on one another. Sider argues that there is a *correct* terminology and the solution lies in using it. Thomasson argues that the questions are easily answered on the basis of analytic truths. And so forth.

Yablo comments that he has an inkling of an idea of what it would be to take number talk more literally than he actually does (Yablo, 1998, 259), but he does not express what that inkling of an idea is. Thomasson thinks that this comment points in the right direction: we do not, and Yablo does not, have any idea what it would be for numbers to exist if that is something that is not already secured by our successful use of arithmetic.

Thomasson offers an explanation for the philosopher's disposition to take this hunch or feeling to show that their existence really would be something more. It's that the philosopher thinks that, not only is arithmetic true, but it is true *about objects*. Thomasson agrees that that is precisely correct, since arithmetic provides application conditions for number talk. But that's not what the philosopher thinks: she thinks that, beyond the application conditions, there is a question of whether arithmetic is made true by objects, whether the truths of arithmetic hold in virtue of the way those objects are. Thomasson's response then is the Carnapian one: no sense has been offered or made of this conception of objects. So the philosopher is, strictly speaking, asking a nonsensical question.

Schaffer argues (Schaffer, 2009a, 152-154, §3.2) that Thomasson's Carnapian strategy with 'thing' and 'object' doesn't work. Here's a version of one of his arguments. Thomasson argues here (63-69) that 'exists' expresses a purely formal concept: the "quantifier variance" approach of Hirsch and Sider is misguided, because the quantifier has a univocal meaning, and does not change its reference depending on what language it is used in. I think Thomasson is entirely correct about this. The worry, then, about 'thing' and 'object', is that those concepts, too, are purely formal: things and objects are what the quantifier ranges over.

More generally: I think that the Carnapian strategy doesn't really do justice to the problem. There is a philosophical problem here because there are apparently several equally good arguments to various conclusions about the problem, no way to end the discussion, and no agreed clarity about what it would take for one side rather than another to be right about the problem. The Carnapian strategy is to hold that the language in which

the problem is expressed had better either settle the question or leave it unanswerable (not because it is a mystery, but because the question is strictly speaking nonsense). But the language of the problem (together with everything else we believe) is what brought us the problem in the first place.

The easy strategy is too easy. If the Carnapian view is correct, then the Russell argument about universals is trivially valid, since it's based on the rules of use for predication of concrete objects. But it's not trivially valid. According to the realist, it's substantively valid, since the object referred to in the conclusion makes the premise true. According to the antirealist, it's not valid: the premise is true and the conclusion is false. According to someone like Hofweber, there's a kind of triviality here, but it's not a trivial inference to ontology: rather it's a way of rewriting the premise to shift focus and to bring new kinds of logical machinery to bear. According to Thomasson, one of Hofweber's arguments depends on denying a signature deflationist claim: that two sentences that refer to different things can nevertheless have the same truth condition. I'm willing to agree with Thomasson that that begs the question against the deflationist. But, equally, the signature deflationist claim is *not trivial*.

### 4.3 Application conditions and noncircularity

Thomasson devotes considerable energy defending condition 4 on acceptable application conditions:

Application conditions must not take the following form: 'K' applies iff Ks exist.

There are several things that could be problematic about an application condition like this. I list some here because it's not entirely clear from Thomasson's discussion what problem she intends her discussion to settle.

1. Such a condition would be circular. As a matter of psychology, it would make the concept impossible to apply: if I have to know, in order to decide whether 'K' applies, whether 'K' applies, I will not ever be able to make that decision.
2. Such a condition would be troubling for the Carnapian picture of meaning. Carnap imagines *adding* expressions to a pre-existing language. Having language for saying that there are dogs, we discover the value of quantifying over aspects of things and introduce the rule: "if *a* is *F*, then *a* has the property of being *F*". A rule that *used* the new vocabulary as its application condition could not serve to introduce the term.
3. If the application conditions for 'K' are that there is a K, then the easy method in ontology won't succeed. The easy method answers existence questions by answering *other* existence questions which are easy to answer. Are there properties? Well, if there are dogs, then there are things that have the property of being a dog. And it's easy to know that there are dogs. So if the application condition for some puzzling case in ontology is that very kind of thing (if, for example, the application

condition for ‘number’ involves numbers) then the easy method cannot settle the question of whether that kind of thing exists. So ontology would be “hard” that is, not easy.

For the project of easy ontology to succeed, ontology needs to be easy in all cases. It would count against the success of easy ontology if some term resisted the easy treatment. Thomasson divides the problem in two: there are nouns that are obviously derivative, and there are basic nouns.

The obviously derivative ones include institutional nouns (‘contract’, ‘corporation’, ‘marriage’, and the like) and terms that have clear definitions (‘aunt’, ‘sibling’, ‘bachelor’). These pretty uncontroversially meet condition 4. A contract is an agreement sanctioned by the legal system among some parties to reciprocally deliver services, money, materials or other goods to one another. So the application condition for ‘contract’ specifies an arrangement of events, none of which is a contract, such that when that arrangement is satisfied, there is a contract.<sup>4</sup>

If there are derived nouns, then presumably they are derived from something. This encourages, but doesn’t strictly entail, a fundamentalist picture of application conditions: there should be a chain of application conditions, which terminates in concepts that can be applied without appeal to further concepts. If the fundamentalist picture is accepted, then, apparently, the chain *has* to stop somewhere, since otherwise it would appear to be impossible to apply any term anywhere. The crucial problem for easy ontology with the fundamentalist picture is that the basic terms wouldn’t be susceptible to the easy ontological treatment.

Thomasson discusses two kinds of fundamentality: fundamental in physical theory, and fundamental in the developmental acquisition of concepts. In both cases it is possible to avoid the worry just raised. Suppose ‘particle’ is fundamental to physical theory. Nevertheless, there are, in fact, multiple sufficient conditions for the application of ‘particle’ that do not refer to particles. Now, suppose ‘cup’ is fundamental in the order of concept acquisition. There are *many* application conditions that suffice for the existence of cups which do not themselves mention cups.

Indeed it seems that there are various different ontological descriptions we could use to express sufficient conditions for the application of the ordinary sortal ‘cup’: if particles are arranged cupwise, there is a cup; if there is a state of affairs of an object instantiating cuphood, there is a cup; if there is a bundle of tropes including cupness, etc., there is a cup, or if there is a certain mode or disturbance in a region of space-time there is a cup, and so on. Or one could perhaps instead express the application conditions in what Hawthorne and Cortens (O’Leary-Hawthorne and Cortens, 1995) call a ‘feature-placing language’, and hold that if it is cupping around here, then there is a cup. If so, we could state the application conditions for ‘cup without appealing [to] the existence of a cup *or indeed of any object at all.* (107)

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<sup>4</sup>Somewhat more controversial examples are sets and numbers. The comprehension axiom for sets (if there is a predicate  $\phi$  then there is a set whose members are exactly those objects that satisfy  $\phi$ ) has the form of an application condition. Hume’s Principle is similar.

Thomasson cites approvingly Heather Dyke's (Dyke, 2007) idea 'that many nonsynonymous truths may have the same truthmaker, and that there is no unique and privileged way of describing the truthmakers (or here: of stating the application conditions). As she puts it: "the words we use to describe ... truthmakers need not commit us to any particular ontology" (83)' (107, footnote 23).

It is difficult to see how this is going to work. Take any of the conditions she offers for 'cup'. They are expressed using apparently troubling ontological concepts ('trope', 'feature', 'particles arranged cupwise', 'mode'). For easy ontology to succeed, these application conditions need to be easily accounted for: we need easy application conditions for these application conditions. That's not such a hard problem: for example, if you want to know that there is a trope of cupness, you use the standard introduction rule, that if there is a cup, then there a trope of cupness. We haven't escaped the circle, though. So we will need to deploy some other application condition. We might doubt whether there is one that succeeds without using the concept for cup at some point (that would be a candidate objection to using the 'particles arranged cupwise' application condition). But suppose there is. The application condition says whenever you have  $X$ ,  $Y$ ,  $Z$  in arrangement  $A$ , you have a cup. The question now is how  $X$ ,  $Y$ ,  $Z$  are applied. Either their application conditions are easy and noncircular, or not. If they are not, then we have a bit of hard ontology. If they are easy, then we go back one step. But how is the regress going to stop? At some point we need conditions that *just do apply*. And at that point ontology is "hard" again.<sup>5</sup>

Thomasson is clear (that's in condition 1 on application conditions) that application conditions need not be articulable by speakers (thinkers), and indeed that many application conditions are not stateable at all. 'dog' is a reasonable example. We all learn, very quickly, to apply the concept pretty much to all and only dogs. With semantic maturity and some work, we can produce a fairly good articulation of a sufficient condition for being a dog. But it's not perfect, and it will fail on various odd cases. Call this a "recognitional concept". Could application conditions "bottom out" in recognitional concepts, and thereby avoid the worry that if there is no noncircular application condition, then ontology is hard? It seems to me that this invites far more trouble than it avoids. For the concrete object cases (cups, persons, mereological sums) why can't the generous ontologist claim that those are recognitional concepts? I know cups when I see them; I don't need an application condition about particles arranged cupwise. Similarly the abstract cases: why can I not claim that, when I see a dog, I see the property of being a dog?

(We could say that the fundamentalist account is right, and that the application conditions for some basic concepts is just the presence of an instance of that concept. So long as there is no special reason to worry about whether *those* things exist, then ontology will be on a reasonably secure footing. Thomasson doesn't make this suggestion. As I said at the beginning of this section, I'm not completely sure I understand what the issue about Condition 4 really is.)

Let me raise one more puzzle. The long quote above encourages the following thought: Ontology is entirely relative to choice of language. Take any concept: cup, number, per-

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<sup>5</sup>This objection is related to one made in (Horgan, 2008). Thomasson's response (Thomasson, 2008) to Horgan's objection is perfectly accurate, as far as I can tell, but I think the regress problem is still there.

son, etc. Given the other concepts in play for the users of these concepts, these might be derived or basic. If derived, they have clear noncircular application conditions. If basic, there are truthmakers for any truth statable using that concept. Any single description of a truthmaker makes use of some ontology or other. But there are enough descriptions of the truthmakers to avoid a required commitment to any particular ontology. It may take a pretty radical departure from common sense to find the descriptions (the Strawson/Hawthorne/Cortens language, for example) but there always will be enough. We have a choice of what to say at this point. (1) Any ontology is as well supported by easy ontology as any other, since so long as we successfully introduce terms, we are guaranteed that there are descriptions of the truthmakers that suffice to give us application conditions for them. This fits with Thomasson's generous or non-parochial metaphysics (214-15): whatever is coherent to say exists, exists. Yet this whole picture seems perilously close to Putnam's "internal realism" or "cookie cutter" view, on which the world itself does not support one out of a range of equivalent ontologies, rather our language choices fix what ontology we are committed to (56-63). (2) No ontology is supported at all. The world is the truthmakers, and the truthmakers have no special ontological structure.

Neither of these options seems like a good one.

#### 4.4 Traditional worries

There are traditional worries about Carnap's view that may transfer over to Thomasson's view.

- Carnap's proposal about internal and external questions is a *theory* about what's going on in metaphysical philosophy. If it is true, then there is an explanation for why the philosophers say the things they do (they didn't notice that they were using their words without their internal meanings), and a solution to the metaphysical problems (internal questions can be answered in the ordinary ways, but the philosophers' misguided external questions cannot be answered in the way the philosophers hoped they could be answered). There are two things worrying about this for Thomasson's project. First, this is a theory, like others, and it doesn't seem particularly better than the theory that the philosophers' problems are genuine problems expressed using meanings available in the natural languages in which they are expressed.<sup>6</sup> Second, if this picture of the account of the internal/external distinction is correct, then Thomasson, despite her avowals to the contrary, is engaged in theory based philosophizing.
- One textbook objection to verificationism is that verificationism seems to be neither empirical nor analytic. The question should be asked for Thomasson's theory. I don't think the answer is obvious, but that's partly because I don't think it's obvious that the theory is analytic—it doesn't look like a piece of conceptual analysis.
- A version of this question for Carnap (Stroud, 1984, 192) is this: in what sort of

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<sup>6</sup>(Stroud, 1984, Chapter V, 185) suggests that Carnap's *only* reason for holding that the skeptical philosopher's problem is an external problem is that if the problem could be expressed internally it would be empirically unanswerable. By itself that doesn't seem like sufficient reason to endorse Carnap's diagnosis.

language is the theory of truths ascertainable within a framework and their relation to that framework expressed? The claim is not, apparently, a fully ‘internal’ one, so is it properly meaningful? Thomasson needs for any claims that some bit of ontological discourse are not meaningful to be grounded in a meaningful theory of what those bits of discourse are doing.

- Stroud argues that Carnap *has* to claim that ontology is language relative. If he does not, then the existence of things is fully independent of language, and the problem of the external world remains. Thomasson pretty clearly does not hold that ontology is language relative, although (end of last section) it’s not exactly clear how to think of her view. Thomasson does seem to leave open the possibility that our application conditions and the analytic ‘truths’ they underly are *incorrect* (she seems to concede this point to Sider (300-1)).

## 5 Fictionalism

Fictionalism is a family of views according to which our talk of various entities (fictional characters, possible worlds, numbers, properties, propositions, sets ...) is *fictional*. Just as we do not think that Lady Macbeth is a real person or that there are facts about how many children she had, we can treat our talk of these apparently problematic entities as a kind of story telling. Fictionalism is thus a competitor to easy ontology, and offers its own criticism of easy ontology.

Thomasson discusses Yablo’s versions of fictionalism, primarily his pretense-theoretic account (Yablo, 2001). The idea, following Kendall Walton, is to treat the activity of talking, for example, about numbers, as a game, in which we pretend that numbers exist, much as we might pretend that some stumps in the back yard are bears. The “literal content” of the game includes the false claim that there are bears. The “real content” of the game is claims about the real world that can be derived from what we say in the game: for example, if within the game we say that there are 5 bears, we can infer that there are 5 stumps. In turn, the literal content of these claims is that there is a number, 5, that measures the cardinality of the set of stumps; the real content is just that the cardinality of that set is 5, or that that set and the fingers on my left hand are equinumerous, etc.

The fictionalist then says that the easy inferences based on application conditions are inferences into the fiction, not to truth.

Thomasson argues that there is a striking disanalogy between games and arithmetic (besides the obvious one that people who talk about numbers typically don’t think they are pretending). We can pretend that there are bears in the back yard because we know what it would be for there to be bears in the back yard.

For it to make sense to say that we *merely* pretend that P, there must be a difference between what we are committed to in *merely pretending that P*, and what we would be committed to in *really asserting that P*; a speaker can *merely pretend* that P only if she is not committed to the truth of P (187)

But (as we saw above) it’s not obvious what it would be for numbers to really exist, if

arithmetic is merely pretense. Thomasson points out that according to the Carnapian easy ontologist, *there is no difference between using arithmetic and going on to say that numbers really exist: there is nothing more to the truth of arithmetic than what we can prove in arithmetic.* Hence the fictionalist begs the question against the Carnapian easy ontologist. Furthermore, there are lots of clear cases where application conditions secure the uncontroversial existence of things: marriages, contracts, corporations and the like.

There are three separable ideas here. First, the claim that we cannot pretend that numbers exist if we cannot say what really being committed to them amounts to. This is not obvious. I can pretend round squares exist and then reason about them, all the while holding, correctly, that I have no conception of what it would really be for round squares to exist. There is a sense in which this is exactly what a fictionalist about numbers should say. I can reason about round squares because I can reason about shapes and round things and square things. Round square things are not triangles: that's true. That is: saying that a round square exists brings into play a considerable amount of conceptual material. There are the concepts, and the relations among the concepts, and the inferential machinery we use to reason about these things in all kinds of other cases. We can derive truths from all that conceptual material without committing ourselves to saying that the round squares really exist.

Second, the claim that the pretense-theorist begs the question. The question, in this case, is whether the question of the existence of numbers is a purely internal question in Carnap's sense. The easy ontologist says yes, the fictionalist says no. For either side to base any argument on those answers would be question begging. So I think this objection fails as well.

Third, that there are uncontroversial cases of existence creating application conditions. Agreed, there are. It would be crazy to say that I am merely pretending that there is a marriage between my wife and me. But, equally, it would not be crazy to say that I am merely pretending that Harry Potter exists, or that possible worlds exist, or that numbers exist.

If *the only* motivation that a fictionalist has for her fictionalism is that there is a fruitful analogy between game playing and talk of abstract objects, then Thomasson's case is strong. Yablo did comment (Yablo, 2001, 87) that the traditional motivations for fictionalism (the epistemological worries about abstract entities, the obnoxiousness of the ontology) are "dead and gone". I doubt that they are dead and gone. I think they are alive and present, for example, for the question of the existence of possible worlds. I myself think there are real puzzles about whether properties *could* exist, since some traditional ways of thinking about them construe them as contradictory beings. So I think Thomasson's critique of fictionalism misses the target in a couple of ways. She considers only Yablo's pretense theoretic account, one among a wide variety of views;<sup>7</sup> and some of her criticisms depend on claiming that the fictionalist is committed to saying that marriages and corporations do not exist.

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<sup>7</sup>Her objection to (Yablo, 2009) is that we don't need to think about non-catastrophic presupposition failure, since the presuppositions don't fail. But that's again to beg the question.

## 6 Easy ontology against the rest

I agree with a lot of what Thomasson says through the rest of the book.

I think Hofweber is in some sense on the right track: there is something about the way that language and cognition work that explains the puzzling ontological inferences. What exactly it is, I do not think is clear. I don't think Hofweber has managed yet to articulate what it might be in a satisfactory way. His view seems to be tangled in some fairly troubled claims, for example, that the quantifier is ambiguous as between an internal quasi-substitutional meaning and an external "deep ontology" meaning, and that the adjectival treatment of numbers is basic, rather than the referential.

Sider's view is complex. He argues that the quantifier can vary, so that it can mean different things and hence the answers to the (Quinean) question of what there is can vary. But he thinks there is a preferred quantifier, the "joint-carving quantifier" which we may stipulate as ranging over all and only what is really there in the world. It is the perfectly natural quantifier, in the sense of "natural" of (Lewis, 1983).

One way to respond to Sider is to argue, with Thomasson and with van Inwagen and John MacFarlane, that there is only one quantifier, there is no variance, and the ontological problems are storable and discussable in regular English.

Sider thinks this is a costly move which involves the easy ontologist in some non-easy ontological claims. Sider holds that denying that there is a most natural joint-carving quantifier means holding that the world has no preferred structure. The structure is what the joint-carving quantifier would capture; if a philosopher claims that there is no such quantifier, then she must be saying that the world does not have that structure. But saying that the world has no structure is a substantive ontological claim, and (apparently) not one that could be established by way of the Carnapian easy ontological method.

Sider's claims about the preferred structure of the world are not evident. The arguments for them are not demonstrative. They have roughly two flavours. One is an invitation to just see and understand how crazy it would be to say that the world has no structure. The other has the form of Lewis's argument for natural properties. If we are attempting to "write the book of the world", that is, write down a theory that makes the best sense of everything, some things must be taken as primitive. The test for whether those things are correct, then, is whether they do in fact ground a theory that makes the best sense of everything. Neither of these argument flavours are to my mind particularly persuasive. Rejecting natural properties doesn't mean rejecting structure in the world: it means rejecting that there is a single preferred structure. The *form* of the best-theory argument is a good one. But when it is called upon to justify something that otherwise seems pretty unpalatable, the barrier to accepting it is higher. And, as usual with Quine-style metaphysics, metaphysical theories are sufficiently underdetermined by the data that it's difficult to get a clear decision that one of these theories is a clear winner.

Thomasson makes an interesting move here, Carnapian in spirit. It isn't clear that Sider's forced choice (natural structure or no structure) is a good choice. Perhaps the question is misguided. It's difficult to tell at present: Sider's arguments are powerful and subtle and complex, and it's not clear where, if at all, they go wrong. So for the moment we can refrain from endorsing either his view or the alternative he offers to it.

## 7 Quinean metaphysics

Quine's suggested solution to the ontological problem is to use the best methods we know of for figuring out what there is (natural science), represent what we learn in predicate logic, then count whatever that theory quantifies over as what there is. This method will get us whatever natural science counts as fundamental in the natural world, plus whatever machinery is needed in order to state what is fundamental (sets and numbers, for example, although Quine was loathe to accept parts of mathematics not needed in order to state physical theory). Hence Quinean metaphysics discounts almost all of the things of ordinary experience: people, meaning, cups, and so forth.

Quinean metaphysics can be disconnected from Quine's own fundamentalist physicalism. Retain the idea that what we're doing is trying to come up with the best theory of everything: the story that captures all the appearances better than alternative stories. Modify the theory to allow in objects that aren't fundamental. (I try out a special-sciences based criterion for the case of mental causation (Dardis, 2008, Chap 9).) Acknowledge that given the richness of the world and the richness of ordinary language, there are going to be alternatives. And many of the best alternatives will be on a par, in the sense that there will be no good way to rank them. Sider uses the expression "epistemically metaphysical" for methods that are nonCarnapian: that is, neither empirical nor conceptual. Quinean metaphysics, as I'm sketching it, fits that description, but it is not thereby essentially mysterious. In fact it is precisely what most thinking about the world is: inference to the best explanation.

Thomasson's overall recommendation is that we return to the traditional picture of philosophy as engaging in conceptual analysis. Ontology isn't entirely trivial: there are hard cases where we have to tease out what the concepts really are.

From the Quinean perspective, this seems unduly conservative. Analysing the concepts sounds like teasing apart something that is already there. Whatever concepts are already there for us to discover and analyse are, presumably, concepts we have for mostly non-philosophical purposes. It's hard to see why we should attribute a lot of authority to that sort of concepts when trying do to ontology. (At this point it doesn't seem unreasonable to ask whether English has the same concepts as German, or French, or medieval or classical Latin, or Golden Age Greek, or Chinese, or Urdu, etc.: whereas it *does* seem problematic to think that what there is hangs in any way on what concepts these languages have.) Alternatively, we may find, as we do our work of analysis, that our concepts need revision. But now the project is indistinguishable from that of Quinean theory building. The concepts need revision because the classification they provide us does a bad job in helping us make sense of what there is. The revision changes the concepts so that we can tell a better overall story about what there is and how it all hangs together.

This perspective provides an explanation of sorts for my reaction above to the idea that easy ontological inferences are analytic. Certainly some inferences are analytic: 'from, there is exactly one prime number between 1 and 3, it follows that there are numbers' is analytic; 'from, something has the property of being a dog, it follows that there are properties' is analytic. These are claims made "from within" arithmetic and property theory respectively. But inferences from outside those theories are not analytic: it's not

analytic that ‘there is a number’ or ‘there is a property’ follows from ‘there are two bagels on the counter’. The latter inferences are inferences into the theories of arithmetic and property theory. They are inferences to the best explanation: the best way to make sense of everything we believe includes arithmetic and property theory.

## 8 Conclusion

I don’t think ontology is easy in the neoCarnapian sense. I don’t think our concepts are clear enough to ground clear decisions on what there is. In particular I don’t think that we can generally expect that either there are analytically true answers to ontological questions or else that the questions are meaningless. We could revise our concepts so that analytic truths do ground easy ontology. But doing so would amount to accepting, for *lexical* purposes, one of the contested ontological theories.

I do think that ontology is easy in the fictionalist’s sense. We tell stories, and by so doing we try to make the best sense of things as we can. Sometimes we tell those stories seriously and count ourselves as attempting to say something true about what there really is in the world. Sometimes we tell those stories semi-seriously: the structure of the story, together with what else we know about the world, enables us to say more true things about the world. But not everything the story says exists really does exist in the world. It says those things exist because it thereby engages the logical machinery involved with reference and quantification. This machinery is needed in order to say other true things about the world.

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