



PHILOSOPHERS IN DEPTH

Thomasson on Ontology

Edited by Miguel Garcia-Godinez



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Philosophers in Depth

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To Rachael

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1

Introduction

Miguel Garcia-Godinez

Amie Thomasson on Ontology

Amie L. Thomasson, currently appointed Daniel P. Stone Professor of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy at Dartmouth College and celebrated as one of the most influential living philosophers, has gained international recognition as a leading figure in metaphysics, ontology, phenomenology, and aesthetics. Although her extensive body of work stretches far beyond the topic of this book, it is fair to say that her most notable contributions as well as controversial theses lie in her deflationary approach to ontology, which is why it is the selected theme of this volume.

As a self-proclaimed ‘common sense’ philosopher, Thomasson thinks that we should be “suspicious of any philosopher who claims to have discovered that common sense is radically mistaken”.¹ This thought underlies and runs throughout her work, but is particularly prevalent in

¹ <https://www.3-16am.co.uk/articles/on-the-reality-of-sherlock-holmes-etc>.

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her discussion of ordinary objects, like artifacts, as presented in numerous papers as well as her 2007 book *Ordinary Objects* and 2015 book *Ontology Made Easy* (which was awarded the American Philosophical Association's 2017 Sanders Prize).² In this literature, her main opponents are those who claim that ordinary objects (e.g., tables) do not exist but are, instead, merely particles arranged in certain ways (e.g., particles arranged table-wise).

Inspired by Carnap's critical approach to classical metaphysics, Thomasson's deflationary metaontology argues that in order to answer existence questions concerning entities of a certain kind, one need only engage in conceptual analysis and empirical investigation, thus famously opposing mainstream, Quinean metaphysical views about the meaning and methodology involved in dealing with ontological issues. In shaping her deflationary approach, Thomasson has also taken up current discussions regarding conceptual engineering and modality, which has resulted in her recently advancing a normativist-pragmatist analysis of modal language (as presented, for example, in her 2020 book *Norms and Necessity*).

Equally important for the development and application of Thomasson's easy ontology is her discussion of fictional characters, artworks, social kinds, and even geographical objects. Although her path through all these fields is characteristically marked with her commitment to 'common sense' philosophy, she has met with important hurdles on the way. Some of the chapters in this volume illustrate precisely the sort of challenges and objections that her view on these specific topics usually gives rise to.

The depth of Thomasson's philosophy, though, does not stop at the variety of the discussions that she engages with. More broadly, Thomasson is a rare philosopher in bridging continental and analytic philosophy together, drawing inspiration from continental and analytic philosophers alike but working very much within the analytic tradition.

Moreover, the impact of and richness found in Thomasson's work is owed to her respect of the research generated by scholars in other closely related disciplines. Her interest in delving deeply into adjacent literature

² This is an award given to "the best book in philosophy of mind, metaphysics, or epistemology that engages the analytic tradition published in English in the previous five-year period" <https://www.apaonline.org/news/361394/>.

in fields such as behavioural psychology, linguistics, cognitive science, and theories of consciousness has added an extra dimension to her work, and along with it, a sense of completeness, strength, and unmatched quality.

Thomasson's distinct methodology is the foundation of her scholarship, which is long overdue a thorough analysis. This volume delivers exactly that with eleven original chapters offering a critical assessment of Thomasson's remarkable contribution to metametaphysics, modality, conceptual analysis, social ontology, and the methodological issues concerning ontological questions about ordinary objects and fictional entities. Not only do friends and foes support, extend, and oppose various aspects of her work, but in her own chapter, Thomasson herself makes explicit the internal connections which run through it.

With a renovated and growing interest amongst metaphysicians in ontology and the various approaches to it, this volume is an excellent and indispensable resource for those interested in exploring Thomasson's contribution to the literature in all its facets.

Chapter Summaries

The volume opens with Amie Thomasson herself presenting in *How It All Hangs Together* an overview of her own body of work. Here, she not only provides us with a map to navigate her extensive research, but with a narrative of how the various topics that she has engaged with, from the ontology of arts and artifacts to modality and conceptual engineering, are all interconnected.

She starts by discussing the ways in which defending a first-order metaphysical view about fictional characters, works of arts and artifacts led her into meta-ontological concerns. Then, she shows how her work on 'easy ontology' and metaphysical modality come together to form a total deflationary approach to metaphysics, which is supported by a pragmatic analysis of discourse. Here, while recognising the heterogenous character of this collection of topics, Thomasson justifies that, overall, her past work can be seen as aiming to reconceive of metaphysics in a way that is non-mysterious and capable of making sense of the world we live

in, and our ways of experiencing and talking about it. In closing, she elaborates on how this view in turn has led to her most recent interest in how conceptual engineering can enable us to not only make sense of, but perhaps even to change, the world.

Focusing on ontology, Thomas Hofweber comes next with a criticism to Thomasson's view. In his *Thomasson on Easy Arguments*, he argues that her approach to ontological debates, viz., that we can trivially infer ontological conclusions from innocent premises, is in tension with some features of the language (viz., English) in which such trivial arguments are made.

In more general terms, Hofweber thinks that trivial or easy arguments do not only concern metaphysics but also philosophy of language, as they have important implications for natural language, language competency, and the reasoning abilities of competent speakers. Yet, as he notices, this aspect of Thomasson's ontological programme has been mostly neglected in its critical assessment. To remedy this, he reviews, on the one hand, the conditions for the validity of easy arguments; and, on the other, the 'multiple readings' of the quantified sentences that follow from them, as well as the consequences that they have for solving ontological issues. He concludes this with a rather sceptical view.

On a still critical, though more optimistic perspective, Naomi Thompson argues, in *Realism, Deflationism, and Metaphysical Explanation*, that the 'simple realism' that follows from Thomasson's easy arguments (viz., that entities of a certain kind exist, and that their existence is to be accepted as a trivial consequence of the truth of various uncontroversial sentences) is subject to an important objection; that is, it cannot account for the intuition that certain entities do not only exist, but that some of them are more fundamental than others. For example, whereas a simple realist can say that both a singleton set and its sole member exist, she cannot tell that the latter is more fundamental than the former. However, though this objection may undermine the appeal of Thomasson's approach, Thompson thinks that it can be overcome by combining this simple realism with elements of what she calls 'fundamentality realism'.

In a nutshell, a fundamentality realist holds that 'we think about ontology and realism in connection with fundamentality' (i.e., in connection with what it is fundamental, as opposed to derivative). So, according to

Thompson, it is in adding to simple realism a conception of metaphysical explanation associated to fundamentality realism that we can make sense of a general notion of reality's structure (and metaphysical priority) without giving up Thomasson's deflationary approach to ontology and the idea that metaphysics is not epistemically inaccessible.

Continuing with the evaluation of Thomasson's deflationary approach to ontology, James Miller contends, in *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Analysis?*, that it still leaves some room for 'substantive metaphysical work'. That is, according to his view, the easy ontologist needs to accept that there are worldly constraints on what sorts of entities could exist and could co-exist.

Since, for Miller, metaphysics is not only concerned with what is real, but also with the possible ways that reality could be, he thinks that something crucial is missing in Thomasson's deflationary programme. Although he does not intend with this to commit the easy ontologist to any 'epistemically metaphysical knowledge', he considers it as a further constraint regarding what could exist and, therefore, what the easy ontologist can account for via conceptual analysis.

In the next chapter, *Modal Normativism and Metasemantics*, Theodore Locke engages with Thomasson's recently developed account of metaphysical modality, which she calls 'modal normativism', and argues that in order for it to answer the compositionality challenge (namely, that if the function of indicative modal claims is to express or mandate rules of language use, then there is no way to account for their semantic contribution in embedded contexts), it must be supplemented with possible worlds semantics.

In making the case for this, Locke seeks to retain both the metaphysical and epistemological advantages of Thomasson's modal normativism, while suggesting that it can also provide us with a semantic account of modal vocabulary in terms of the familiar framework of possible worlds.

Pressing on a similar point, in *Thomasson on Modal Language*, Matti Eklund disputes Thomasson's account of modal discourse as serving primarily a non-descriptive function. His target here is both Thomasson's understanding of modal expressions as stating semantic rules of use and the theory of analyticity that rests behind it.

By elaborating on these, Eklund aims to show that Thomasson's modal normativism does not solve the problems that it is supposed to solve (e.g.,

the Frege-Geach problem), but also that such problems go beyond ‘discourse about metaphysical modality’. So, in the end, he thinks that a theory, like Thomasson’s, which is focused only on metaphysical modal discourse is not general enough to account for metaphysical modality.

In her contribution, *Thomasson’s Social Ontology*, Åsa Burman considers a different, though related area of Thomasson’s philosophy of existence, viz., a general theory of social ontology. Yet, while optimistic about its potential, Burman argues that there is an objection that we should overcome before taking this theory fully onboard.

In particular, Burman centres on a difficulty concerning Thomasson’s normativist account of social groups. For her, this account cannot accommodate ‘opaque kinds of social groups’ (e.g., economic class) since they are not structured or united by norms, but rather by other socially constructed features (e.g., material conditions). However, Burman thinks that we can solve this difficulty by adding some more pluralism to the overall picture; that is, by recognising that in order to include opaque, and not only transparent, kinds of social groups, we need to consider norms but also some other social factors.

Keeping the focus on social ontology, Miguel Garcia follows with an argument about how Thomasson’s deflationary approach to ontology can be extended to account for the existence of social entities. In his *Easy Social Ontology*, he introduces social meta-ontology as a second-order inquiry concerning what it is and how to answer whether there are social entities, before arguing that, contra some pervasive assumptions, we do not need to engage here with any serious metaphysical work, but rather we can simply take a deflationary or easy perspective.

In line with Thomasson’s argument that there is no reason for us to accept that an entity (e.g., a tree or a fork) exists only if it satisfies a ‘robust’ criterion of existence (e.g., mind-independence or causality), Garcia suggests that a deflationary meta-ontology can also be used to answer if there are entities of a certain social kind (particularly, social and institutional practices). By elaborating on the conditions under which such entities are socially constructed, Garcia also claims that we can elucidate their reality.

Exploring a different aspect of Thomasson’s work is Kathrin Koslicki in *Artifacts and the Limits of Agentive Authority*. Here, Koslicki argues that

author-intention based accounts of artifacts, like Thomasson's, fall short of explaining the case of 'prototype productivity'. Specifically, she says, because they do not make enough room for the possibility of errors and failures on the part of the makers.

In searching for an alternative, Koslicki takes a look at Beth Preston's user-based account of artifacts, and recognises that, although there are some important differences between her and Thomasson's account, both suffer equally from an 'overly agent-centric orientation'. That is, they tend to rely too much on the attitudes or dispositions of agents (e.g., authors, users, or reproducers) as the basis for an artifact's classification as a member of a certain artifact kind. She ends her chapter on a more positive note by proposing instead an 'object-centered' approach.

Challenging Thomasson on a very specific element of her theory, Daniel Korman introduces in *Mountains and Their Boundaries* a puzzle about the way in which she explains that the boundaries of mind-independent objects, like mountains, are mind-dependent.

By looking closely at the methodology that Thomasson employs to account for the ontology of geographic objects, Korman argues that, to the extent that she is a 'plenitudinist', and so committed to the existence of mereological sums and other extraordinary objects (e.g., gollyswoggles and incars), there is no reason for her to prefer a 'fixed-reference selectionism' over a 'shifting-reference selectionism'. With this, he means that Thomasson, instead of taking the reference of, e.g., 'Kinabalu', to be an object whose boundaries are decided by us, she can simply say that its referent is a mind-independent object, from which we can shift to a new one when attempting to re-draw its geographic boundaries. In the end, Korman believes that this may help Thomasson to retain the attractiveness of her modest creationism.

Finally, in closing this volume, Dana Goswick engages further with Thomasson's creationism, though addressed specifically to fictional characters. In her *Creationism, Easy Ontology, and Indeterminacy*, Goswick explores a tension between the commitment of a creationist to the existence of fictional characters (as abstract objects) and the commitment of the easy ontologist to abundant properties (e.g., the property of a fictional character's having blood type B or not having blood type B according to a story).

Through this contrast, she shows that the combination of creationism with easy ontology leads to an indeterminacy which violates classical logic. Yet, since creationists, like Thomasson, take themselves to respect classical logic, this result forces them to revise either of their commitments. Goswick wraps up her chapter by elaborating on each of these options and reviewing their consequences.

With this outstanding collection of original essays, this volume offers the first comprehensive critical assessment of Thomasson's ontology and her remarkable contribution to various topics, including metametaphysics, modality, conceptual analysis, and the methodological issues concerning ontological questions about ordinary objects and fictional entities. It also engages with contemporary debates in modal discourse and social ontology, and contains a chapter from Thomasson herself, where, for the first time, she provides a tapestry that unifies her research to date.



2

How it All Hangs Together

Amie L. Thomasson

Introduction

The essays in this volume cover the gamut of my work, from its beginnings in work on fiction, through work on the ontology of art and artifacts, social ontology, and work on ordinary objects generally, through more recent work on metametaphysics, modality, and conceptual engineering. On the surface, these themes might seem to have little in common. In this essay, however, I aim to make clear how they have been interconnected and form parts of a vision of, and for, metaphysics.

I will not try to reconstruct here the reasons in favor of the theses I have argued for—I will have to be content, in each case, to let the books and articles make the case. Instead, here I hope to make clear how these ideas and topics fit together, in a line of development that led me to successively step back from one set of questions to another, and then another, in an aim to see and develop a bigger picture.

A. L. Thomasson (✉)

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A great deal of the most respected work in metaphysics from the 1950s until I was in graduate school had focused on understanding the world *as presented by the natural sciences*, especially physics, or (as it is sometimes put these days) to develop a ‘fundamental ontology’. One common theme of my work (especially my earlier work) is an interest in and respect for the comparatively neglected task of philosophizing about the everyday world—the world of social and cultural objects, works of art and artifacts, social groups, and the like—and the ordinary language we use in everyday living. And so, this side of my work can be seen as carrying out some of the task of philosophy as Sellars characterized it, as asking how “things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term” (1963, 1). Here, however, I aim to address not how *things* hang together, but rather how the different parts of my work hang together.

Aiming to understand the everyday world we live in—what Husserl called the ‘life-world’—was, however, a task that faced barriers when I came onto the scene. For when I first came into metaphysics in the mid-1990s, metaphysics was dominated by earnest debates about whether mereological sums, properties, people, possible worlds, numbers, works of art, and tables (really) exist. And the artifacts, social and cultural entities, that I was particularly interested in were among those objects most regularly denied.

Like many people, I was bemused by these debates, and by their frequently counterintuitive conclusions. How did we come to a situation where these debates could seem worthwhile? What could possibly be going on here, how could such debates be resolved, and how could they be of value? I began by simply pressing back against eliminativist arguments of various sorts, arguing that *of course* there are tables, paintings, and even fictional characters—given the ordinary senses of these words, and the obvious empirical facts. My philosophical journey has been largely a matter of stepping backwards from first-order ontological concerns (with fiction, works of art, artifacts, and social objects), to try to trace back where things went wrong, what underlying presuppositions had led people astray, and how we could replace them. Those presuppositions, at the most basic level, lay in views about what philosophy could do and how we could do it.

Gilbert Ryle wrote, in his intellectual autobiography, “We philosophers [coming of age in the 1930s] were in for a near-lifetime of enquiry into our own title to be enquirers” (1970, 10).

By the time my generation came of age, this self-doubt had been replaced by a smug assumption by metaphysicians that *of course* they could be inquirers, in roughly the same sense as natural scientists (and, as was often said, doing work ‘of a piece’ with the natural sciences)—answering questions about what exists, and what the natures of various things are, where the results might (‘like those fundamental physics’) overturn all sorts of common sense views. That presupposition—part of what we might call a ‘scientistic’ view of metaphysics—I came to see as underlying a huge range of mistakes and missteps and as leading into a morass of problems and pseudo-problems. The difficulty isn’t just that these debates seem irrelevant to the ways we live, or that they often lead to counter-commonsensical conclusions. It is also that they end up being epistemologically mysterious, with a proliferation of competing views and no clear view of what could resolve the debates, or how we could ever ‘know’ which is correct. Moreover, while this approach presents metaphysics *on the model* of the natural sciences, it does so in a way that leaves it in an apparent *rivalry with science* that it seems bound to lose, as it lacks the empirical grounding of the sciences.¹ A large part of my work has involved an attempt to trace back this scientistic presupposition, to see where it has come from and to argue that it was a wrong turn in the history of philosophy. As a result I have become a critic of much recent work in metaphysics.

But I am more constructive than critical by nature, and my broader goal has been to develop an alternative view of the work of philosophy, and in particular, of metaphysics. On this alternative view, I would not say that asking about our title to be ‘enquirers’ is quite the right expression—certainly not if we think of all inquiry on the model of the natural sciences.² Instead, I would put my guiding question a little more broadly,

¹ For, as metaphysicians in standard ontological debates insist, there is nothing empirically at stake between, say, those who accept and those who eliminate ordinary objects. You can’t say to an eliminativist about tables “I refute you thus” by hitting them with a table.

² Of course, Ryle himself would always vigorously distinguish what he took to be *philosophical* work from the *empirical* work characteristic of the natural sciences—and so would also firmly reject scientistic conceptions of metaphysics, while attempting to articulate an alternative view of what philosophy can do.

as asking: What sort of worthwhile work can we do in philosophy, and how can we do it in a way that is clear, epistemologically transparent and relevant to human life?

Fiction

But let me start at the beginning, to better show how I became concerned with these questions and came to formulate answers to them. In my dissertation, which I eventually turned into my first book, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (1999), I developed a theory of fictional characters: what they are, how they depend on such things as the creative acts of authors and on copies of texts and capacities of readers, and why we should say there *are* fictional characters.

As I was working on this project in the 1990s, interest in fiction among analytic philosophers had arisen largely due to concerns in philosophy of language. (Did fictional names refer? If not, how could statements that include such names be meaningful and true?). Two types of reply dominated the landscape then: One was to say that such names *never* refer, and to try to find ways of accounting for the apparent truth of claims like ‘Sherlock Holmes is a detective’ by paraphrasing the relevant statements (as Russell and Ryle did), or treating them as in the context of a game of pretense (an idea Kendall Walton had developed in *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990)). The other prominent response was to say that such names *always* refer—to timeless, changeless, nonexistent or abstract objects. This approach was developed first by Alexius Meinong (1904/1960) and later given more explicit formal development in two different ways, by Terence Parsons (1980) and Edward Zalta (1983).

Influenced by my own earlier study of literature (alongside philosophy) in undergraduate days, I aimed to develop an understanding of fictional characters that better reflects our ordinary ways of thinking and talking about fictional characters, and discussing them in literary history and criticism. In developing this view, I was inspired by the work of the phenomenologist Roman Ingarden, a Polish student of Husserl’s, whose work applied the phenomenological approach to ontology to study works of literature (in *The Literary Work of Art* (1931/1973)), and to works of

art of other kinds, including works of architecture, music, and pictures (in *The Ontology of the Work of Art* (1962/1989)).

The thought was roughly this: *of course* there are fictional characters, and there are true and false things we can say about them when we write literary history and criticism.³ But they aren't timeless, changeless, Platonistic abstract objects or nonexistent objects. Instead, they are created by authors in writing works of fiction; they come to be at a particular place in cultural and literary history, and they may change (say, if the text is revised). On this view, fictional characters are contingent, historical, cultural objects—parts of literary and cultural history. In the terminology I introduced there,⁴ they are 'abstract artifacts': *abstract*, in the sense that they do not have a particular spatio-temporal location (you can't find Anna Karenina anywhere); but *artifacts* in the sense that they come to be only given intentional acts of authors, which create new fictional characters in a particular time and context.

One of the central aims in *Fiction and Metaphysics* was to defend the idea that we need such a category as abstract artifacts—a category that, I argued, includes not only fictional characters, but also other abstract social and cultural creations, such as stories, symphonies, mortgages, and laws of state. I saw defending fictional characters and clarifying what it takes for there to be fictional characters as a first step in a broader program—of developing and defending a more fine-grained ontology better able to accommodate such cultural and social phenomena; an ontology that wouldn't be limited to the traditional categories of physical particulars and timeless Platonistic abstracta.

But *Fiction and Metaphysics* wasn't just the first step towards working on an ontology of social and cultural objects; its writing and later defense also brought me into discussions of metaontology. There, for the first time, I began to address questions such as "What role should parsimony play in our decisions about what to say exists?", and "Should we accept Quine's mantra: 'no entity without identity?'" and most broadly, "How should we go about addressing existence questions?"

³The idea that there are true and false things we can say about fictional characters in literary criticism had also recently been advanced by Peter van Inwagen (1983).

⁴I have recently learned that Traugott Schiebe uses the term 'abstract artifact' in a similar way, introducing it independently in his (2021).

The methodology I presupposed in *Fiction and Metaphysics* was roughly a phenomenological approach to ontology—an approach that begins by asking what’s involved in the very idea of fictional characters, according to the ways we think and speak about them: What would it take for there to be fictional characters, and what would they be if there were such things? As challenges to my conclusions and methodology arose, I began to back up to try to articulate and justify more explicitly the metaontological approach I used in defending my claims about fiction. In a follow-up paper (“Fictional Characters and Literary Practices” (2003b)), I argued explicitly that the *natures* of fictional characters are determined by our literary beliefs and practices (this is a first anticipation of the deflationary view of modality I develop much later in *Norms and Necessity* (2020a)). In that (2003b) paper, I go on to argue that since the nature of what fictional characters *would be* is determined by literary practices, once we see what it takes (according to such practices) for there to be fictional characters, it becomes evident that it makes little sense to deny them. For on that conception, all it takes for an author to create a fictional character is that she write a work of fiction involving names *not* referring back to extant people or characters of other stories, and apparently describing (or pretending to describe) what these individuals are like or what they do. Barring global skepticism or massive conspiracy theories, these conditions are frequently met—so we have every reason to accept that there *are* fictional characters. This is a first anticipation of the ‘easy’ approach to ontology that I develop and defend more explicitly later, in *Ontology Made Easy* (2015).⁵

⁵ It also reflects the influence of Stephen Schiffer’s (1996) ‘pleonastic’ approach to fictional characters, propositions, properties, etc., which I came to know between the time *Fiction and Metaphysics* came out and the time “Fictional Characters and Literary Practices” was written. I found that Schiffer’s work gave a clear and apt way of expressing the approach I had been inclined to, and this was a key influence on my *Ontology Made Easy* (for more on the commonalities and differences between my approach and Schiffer’s, see Chap. 3 of *Ontology Made Easy*).

Phenomenological Roots

My training in graduate school included studying the phenomenological tradition, under the always kind and insightful guidance of my dissertation director David Woodruff Smith, who not only shared his extensive knowledge of Husserl, but also ways of relating it to work in the history of analytic philosophy and contemporary philosophy of mind and language. As mentioned above, the phenomenological tradition influenced my approach to ontology in general, and Ingarden's work on literature and other forms of art centrally influenced my work on fiction and the ontology of art.

After graduate school I also worked directly on the phenomenological tradition, its influence on the history of analytic philosophy, and its bearing on contemporary issues in philosophy of mind. This historical background has influenced my outlook, methodology, and the tools I have to work with in lasting ways.⁶ On the historical end, I became interested in the influence of phenomenology on the development of ordinary language philosophy, tracing that lineage (in my 2002 paper "Phenomenology and the Development of Analytic Philosophy") particularly through the work of Gilbert Ryle. Ryle's careful study of Brentano, Husserl, Ingarden, and Heidegger crucially influenced his own approach to addressing the problem he reports as having preoccupied him throughout the 1920s and 1930s: "What constitutes a philosophical problem; and what is the way to solve it?" (Ryle 1970, 12). And the answer he gives, which is that philosophy is concerned with *conceptual*, not *empirical*, questions, he draws directly from an approving interpretation of Brentano and Husserl (Ryle 1971; cf. my 2002, section 2).

Studying Ryle's work led me to see the long-term influence of phenomenology on ordinary language philosophy, and to identify the commonalities between work in that tradition and the view of philosophy I favored. I began to see myself as in part working to revive the understanding of the proper roles of philosophy and of its methods (and its relation

⁶For more explicit discussion of what phenomenology can bring to ontological methods, and a contrast between this approach and the dominant current analytic approach, see my "What can phenomenology bring to ontology?" (2019).

to the natural sciences) that was shared by work in the phenomenological and ordinary language traditions. That is, most broadly speaking, that philosophy is concerned with *linguistic and/or conceptual* work. Of course, in the contemporary historical context, this view required re-thinking, re-formulating and defending against the objections and developments that had led it to fall from favor. So I also set out to better understand the recent history, and respond to, reasons that were given for abandoning that tradition—particularly in the influential work of Quine and Kripke.⁷ I also aimed to *broaden* the earlier view, seeing the work of philosophy as including not only *descriptive* conceptual work, but also *normative* conceptual work—work in conceptual engineering (more on this below). But both Ryle's question, and his orientation in giving an answer, would stick with me.

Ryle's work (especially his 1949) also led me to appreciate the idea that different parts of language may serve different *functional roles*, and that failing to notice this may be the underlying source of many philosophical mistakes.⁸ This idea plays a crucial role in *Norms and Necessity* (2020a) and in my ongoing work on linguistic function and the idea of functional pluralism (more on this below).

In my work on phenomenology and philosophy of mind I also came to engage with the work of Wilfrid Sellars. The problem I was working on (in "First-Person Knowledge in Phenomenology" (2005a)) was how we can have first-person knowledge of the contents of our own mental states; and more generally, knowledge of the sort required to do phenomenology. I had long been suspicious of 'higher order perception' views that take this knowledge to involve something like introspection, considered as 'observation' of one's own mental states,⁹ and had long seen an alternative to this in Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction. In that paper I developed what I called a 'cognitive transformation' approach to

⁷ For those historical analyses and responses, see my *Ordinary Objects* (2007a), Chapter 2; *Ontology Made Easy* (2015), Introduction and Chapter 1 and *Norms and Necessity* (2020a), Chapter 1.

⁸ For an interpretation of Ryle's category differences as based on functional differences, see Price (2009).

⁹ See, e.g., my "After Brentano: A one-level theory of consciousness" (2000) and "Self-Awareness and Self-Knowledge" (2006).

self-knowledge, based on an interpretation of Husserl's phenomenological reduction. The idea is roughly that knowledge of the contents of one's own mental states arises not from a second act of observing the first, but rather from a kind of 'bracketing': a way of *withholding commitment* about the real existence and nature of a world apparently 'represented' in our mental states, to enable us to 'quote' and study our mental states as *phenomena* rather than *using them* in navigating our way around the world. This Husserlian approach influenced Sellars' view¹⁰ that *looks* talk does not aim to track and describe special things called 'appearances', but rather arises from *is* talk, serving the function of withholding commitment about how the world *really* is.

In my way of reconstructing a form of Husserlian phenomenological reduction, we come to know how things appear to us through two sorts of cognitive transformations out of an original world-oriented experience. Suppose we begin by seeing a bear in the woods (an experience we would, in the natural attitude, *use* in proceeding to run away, take a picture, or...). From there, we can first engage in a reductive transformation, withholding commitment to how the world really is, by introducing 'appears' talk, saying instead merely "there *appears to be* a bear in the woods". From there, we can (given standardly permitted grammatical transformations) go on to nominalize, and to introduce a new noun term for 'an appearance (as-) of a bear in the woods'—enabling us to speak of, and acquire knowledge about, *appearances* (see my 2005a, 129–131).

For me, this work was a first step in developing the ideas I would develop much more thoroughly later (2020a and 2022a): that parts of language (especially: many of those long presenting 'philosophical problems') can be seen as playing many functional roles other than tracking worldly observed features; and that rules governing their introduction may license us to make grammatical transformations to introduce reference to new kinds of 'things', and acquire knowledge about them (an idea I would later generalize in *Ontology Made Easy*).¹¹ This would again pave

¹⁰ For Sellars' references to the influence of Husserl, see discussion in my (2005a).

¹¹ This generalized approach to understanding talk, say, about properties and essences I also trace back to work of Husserl's in my (2017a). I draw out the general connections between a phenomenological approach to ontology and 'easy ontology' in my (2019).

the way for the neo-pragmatist approach I eventually develop to handle-modality and other philosophical problems (2020a and 2022b).¹²

Social and Cultural Objects

The work I did on fictional characters I had always seen as a particular case study, working towards a broader view of how we could understand social and cultural objects more generally—and this took me into a series of papers on the ontology of art and artifacts, and on social ontology, developed around the same time as my work on phenomenology and philosophy of mind.¹³ Some ideas from that phase that have stuck with me and influenced my later work include noting the wide variety of different ways in which different social and cultural objects may depend on both physical objects and human intentions, beliefs, or practices; and arguing (against various objections) that there are no good reasons to deny the existence of social and cultural objects, or to deny that they are ‘real’.¹⁴ My prior work on fictional discourse helpfully informed the latter project by making it obvious to me why fictionalist views of talk about social or other ordinary objects (or even about mathematical objects) are mistaken—for these forms of discourse are not analogous to the fictionalizing discourse of novels (see my 2003c and 2013).

Perhaps more important still was noting that social and cultural objects may come into existence in many different ways, via different sorts of rules—not all of which involve simply imposing new social features on extant objects. For some generative rules may enable us to create new abstract social entities (abstract artifacts) such as constitutions and mortgages; and rules of use for other terms may ensure that unknown and

¹²Taking a functional analysis of language also enables me to diagnose where Theodore Sider’s (2011) attempt to counter forms of metaontological deflationism by introducing a ‘joint-carving quantifier’ goes wrong (see *Ontology Made Easy*, Chapter 10).

¹³See, for example, my (2003a), (2003c), (2004), (2007b), and (2010).

¹⁴See, e.g., my (2003a). I was also pleased to discover, around this period, Lynne Rudder Baker’s (2007) realist ontology of the ordinary world. While our metametaphysical commitments diverged, she was an inspiration and an important ally for me in taking the world of everyday experience seriously, and aiming to make philosophical sense of it.

unintended byproducts, such as recessions, may also be generated.¹⁵ This brought me to appreciate the huge range of different existence conditions that may be laid out for things of various kinds¹⁶ and the ways diverse entry rules for new noun terms may *entail* the existence of new kinds of things (including abstract artifacts). (Preserving this insight is part of the impetus for the deflationary approach to existence questions I would develop later in *Ontology Made Easy* (2015)).

Another idea from this phase of my work (and from many years of teaching Heidegger's *Being and Time*) that has stuck with me is that part of *what it is* to be an object of certain kinds may involve both *functional* and *normative* features. Work on the functions of artifacts of various kinds has informed my recent work on the functions of language (which can itself be considered an abstract artifact, as I discuss below). And work on the normative features of different kinds of things influenced my work on the ontology of art and social groups. For example, part of what it is to be a work of art may include (as Jerrold Levinson (1979) argued) that the object is *to be regarded or treated* in certain ways; and part of what it is to be a member of a certain social group (say, professors, police officers, or members of certain races or genders) may involve certain *norms* about how one is to *act* and to *be treated by* or *responded to* by others.¹⁷ This would contribute to my later emphasis of the idea¹⁸ that many of our terms do not (or not merely) *describe*, but (also) *impose norms*.

Defending my first-order work on the ontology of art also led me back into questions about how we can answer questions in the ontology of art, and how we can adjudicate debates among competing views. I first began to develop and try out my deflationary metametaphysical views in this context¹⁹—an approach that I would go on to refine and defend at far

¹⁵ See especially my (2003c).

¹⁶ This diversity also lies behind my resistance to embracing any 'layered' pictures of reality, as unable to accommodate the huge variety of different rules of use for different sorts of terms. (See my (2014a)).

¹⁷ On these points, see especially my (2014b), and (2016a). For an allied (but not identical) view of social statuses as behavioral constraints and enablements conferred on individuals, see Ásta's (2018).

¹⁸ Developed at greatest length in *Norms and Necessity* (2020).

¹⁹ For example, in my (2005b).

greater length in my “Answerable and Unanswerable Questions” (2009), *Ontology Made Easy* (2015), and *Norms and Necessity* (2020a).

I had intended the work on social and cultural objects to coalesce into a book. But as I was working on this, I became aware of the increasing number and popularity of arguments among metaphysicians (especially those influenced by Peter van Inwagen’s *Material Beings* (1990)) that there *are no* tables, chairs, or other composite material objects. Well, I thought, before defending views about what these things *are*, I had better back up, and write a chapter to address the arguments that there are no such things. And I set out to compile and reflect on the range of such arguments.

The more I looked at them, the more I came to suspect that something had gone wrong somewhere in these seemingly endlessly proliferating debates about ‘what exists’, with some denying the existence of abstract entities, others denying the existence of composite material objects such as tables, chairs, and mountains (but allowing organisms); others denying organisms but accepting persons, etc. Not only was there a constantly expanding proliferation of such ‘ontologies’ (with more and more counter-intuitive views being more and more proudly promulgated), there seemed to be no clarity about what it would even take to resolve these debates. Various ‘theoretic virtues’ were sometimes appealed to, but these seemed to just be traded off in different ‘theories’ (see Bennett (2009) and Kriegel (2013)). Various paradoxes and puzzles were said to arise from accepting ordinary objects—but often with little attention to ways one could unravel them. A great deal of my later work has been directed to trying to articulate what precisely has gone wrong, how we can do better, and what role remains for metaphysics if we leave these debates behind.

The chapter I had originally planned to write, addressing the variety of arguments against the existence of ordinary objects, turned into a book of its own: *Ordinary Objects* (2007a). In it I addressed a range of arguments against the existence of ordinary objects, including arguments that are based on demands for parsimony, or for a non-arbitrary principle saying when a ‘new’ object is ‘composed’ out of simpler objects, or based on prohibitions against causal redundancy, ontological vagueness, or collocation, or worries about a rivalry between a scientific and common

sense ontology. As I considered the details of these arguments, I found that it was useful to take a step back and examine what these superficially diverse arguments had in common. Several, I found, relied on accepting what were billed as ‘completely general metaphysical principles’ (whether about the importance of parsimony, the impossibility of co-location, etc.)—which are highly dubious in cases where there are analytic entailments across the principles considered. Others relied on a heavyweight realist view of modality, treating claims about conditions of existence, identity, and persistence as subject to a form of worldly discovery, which could potentially overturn all of our ordinary beliefs built into our ways of thinking and talking. Still other arguments relied on ‘generic’ existence or counting claims—that is, claims about whether there is some ‘thing’ (composed in a situation, over and above the parts, etc.) or about how many ‘objects’ or ‘things’ there are, where the terms ‘object’ and ‘thing’ are supposed to be used in a completely neutral sense that doesn’t involve specifying any sort or sorts of entity at issue.

The key to providing a way around *all* of these diverse arguments, I argued, lay in accepting that our singular and general terms do not refer ‘purely causally’, but rather possess some sorts of basic conceptual content, especially in the form of what I there called ‘frame-level’ application and co-application conditions.²⁰ For, given that thesis, we can see that there may be analytic entailments across different sorts of statements—and that some alleged ‘metaphysical principles’ might not apply across statements where there are analytic entailments between them. We can also maintain that these basic (frame-level) application and co-application conditions for our terms fix the most basic modal facts for the entities, if any, they refer to—including their existence and identity conditions (2007a, 189), making metaphysical modal facts knowable in non-mysterious ways.²¹ Finally, we can see why some metaphysical questions

²⁰ I would now retain the idea that some conceptual content (in the form of rules of use) is required, but would not say that all general nouns, for example, must have application conditions. Some, such as those for numbers, may have entry rules that entitle us to speak of there being a number (say, a prime number between one and five), but do not have application conditions that impose certain requirements on the world in order for there to be numbers.

²¹ This was the initial idea that (through various refinements) grew into the ‘modal normativist’ view I later articulate more thoroughly and defend at much greater length (2020).

(including those formulated using ‘generic’ appeals to ‘objects’ and ‘things’) are ill-formed and unanswerable questions; and why others (say, demanding precise identity conditions) do not have answers awaiting discovery—the best we can do is to propose decisions (2007a, 192).²²

Thus, the point of *Ordinary Objects* ended up being not just to defend the existence of ordinary objects. Instead, the most important (and controversial) conclusions I defended there were metametaphysical conclusions about the nature and limits of metaphysics (2007a, 188)—conclusions I have been refining, justifying, and defending ever since.

Metametaphysics

Stepping back from my first-order work in the ontology of fiction and the ontology of artifacts, works of art, and other social and cultural objects thus led me into work on metametaphysics. And defending the metametaphysical views I had begun to sketch in *Ordinary Objects* led me to step back still further. In the metametaphysical work that follows, I have addressed questions about what we can come to know in metaphysics and how we can claim to know it; how we can adjudicate debates about what exists, or what the natures of things of various kinds are; and more broadly: about what contribution work in metaphysics can make to human life, and how it can avoid being a second-rate rival to the empirical sciences.

As I saw it, debates in metaphysics regularly center on two kinds of question: questions about what exists (these had come to prominence in the post-Quinean game of defending competing ‘ontological’ views about whether numbers, properties, fictional characters, social objects, events, mental states, etc. ‘really’ exist), and modal questions about the ‘natures’ of things of various sorts (addressing questions such as: What are the identity conditions for persons? What are the persistence conditions for artifacts? Does the ‘real’ world depend on minds or language? Do minds

²²This was the beginning of recognizing the idea that one thing that may remain to be done in metaphysics is *conceptual engineering*, an idea I have been developing and defending at greater length in a series of papers (2017b, 2021a).

depend on bodies?....).²³ So I set out to write a book (then tentatively entitled *Deflating Metaphysics*) divided into two parts, addressing both kinds of question and defending a deflationary approach to each.

That planned book became too long for a single volume, so I ended up splitting it in two: One on existence questions (that became *Ontology Made Easy* (2015)); the other on metaphysical modal questions (that became *Norms and Necessity* (2020a)).

I had come to see, through my first-order work on the ontology of fiction, social and cultural, and other ordinary objects, that the variety of arguments I found suspicious and problematic—wildly revisionary views about what things of various sorts ‘are’ (e.g. that works of art are action-types) or about what exists (e.g. that there are no tables and chairs, that there are only simples, or one great blobject, or...)—all relied on what was presented as a neo-Quinean²⁴ approach to ontology. By the time I was writing, the so-called ‘neo-Quinean’ approach had become so dominant and ubiquitous that it was largely invisible as a set of methodological presuppositions.²⁵

In *Ontology Made Easy*, I set out to unearth and examine those presuppositions, and to develop and defend a forgotten alternative way to address questions about what there is. Attempts to ‘eliminate’ fictional characters, social objects, artifacts, numbers, properties, and other sorts of thing nearly always²⁶ relied on treating questions about what exists as ‘deep’ ontological questions, to be addressed by considering whether

²³ I did not mean to claim that metaphysics is *exhausted* by such questions (it is too diverse and evolving a set of practices for any such claims to be safe); only that these cover a great many of the questions dealt with by metaphysicians at and before the time of my writing. One area of interest that was developing around the same time was interest in what came to be known as ‘grounding’ questions, generally thought of as not *merely* modal. Those would have to be addressed separately. (But see Locke (2020) for ways of extending the modal normativist approach to understand and address these questions as well).

²⁴ See, for example, van Inwagen (2009). David Lewis (1986, 4) explicitly and influentially invokes a neo-Quinean approach to ontology in his own defense of possible worlds. In saying this, I do not mean to attribute all of these views to the *historical* Quine, whose pragmatist side was characteristically forgotten in the rush to present him as a savior of ontology (see Price 2009 (326-7)).

²⁵ Though the once impenetrable base of serious metaphysics was already starting to show cracks, largely through Eli Hirsch’s (2002a, 2002b) irreverent criticisms of revisionary ontology.

²⁶ Occasionally there were also arguments that accepting the relevant entities (fictional characters, tables...) would lead us into puzzles or paradoxes. I addressed such arguments separately, showing in each case how the puzzles or paradoxes could be disentangled.

quantifying over such entities would form an essential part of our ‘best total theory’—where the best theory in turn was determined in part by its possession of theoretic virtues including ontological parsimony, ideological simplicity, explanatory power, and fruitfulness. This was part and parcel of a view that aimed to treat metaphysics as parallel to or ‘of a piece with’ the work of the natural sciences. But this scientistic approach attempted to buy metaphysics the respectability of the sciences at the price of making its epistemology mysterious (for how were we to come to discover these deep ‘metaphysical facts’ about the essences of things in the world, or about whether composite material objects ‘really’ exist?) and making it appear as a second-rate rival to the natural sciences in claiming to tell us what exists and what the world is like.

Against this, I had long argued that whether entities of a certain kind (say, fictional characters) exist is not a matter for deep ontological argument. Instead, (I had argued) what it takes for there to be a fictional character (or table, or...) is, at the most basic level, established by the rules of use for the relevant terms (or concepts). And often it’s just obvious that (barring radical skeptical scenarios) the relevant sufficient conditions are fulfilled—in which case, we should conclude that there *are* the relevant entities. This approach was cohesive with the phenomenological approach to ontology that I had learned from Ingarden. But I came to realize that such an approach was articulated in crisp and useful terms by Carnap, in “Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology”, and was also closely related to and cohesive with recent ‘neo-Fregean’ approaches developed in the philosophy of mathematics by Crispin Wright and Bob Hale (2001) and with the pleonastic approaches to fictional characters, propositions, properties, and much more, developed by Stephen Schiffer (1994, 1996, 2003)²⁷—which insisted that we can introduce reference to new, abstract objects, via trivial inferences from uncontroversial truths. (An idea along these lines was already suggested in Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* (see my “Husserl on Essences” (2017a)).

With these shoulders to stand on, I sought in *Ontology Made Easy* to explicitly develop a neo-Carnapian ‘easy’ approach to existence questions,

²⁷ Other recent sources of inspiration along these lines included the work of Mark Johnston (1988) and Paul Horwich’s deflationary approach to truth (1998, 1999).

in a unified way that could address debates about the existence of concrete and abstract entities alike—where we take these as what Carnap would have called ‘internal questions’, leaving the linguistic framework and its rules intact, and asking the relevant existence questions *using* that framework.²⁸ The work of *Ontology Made Easy* can be seen as a way of developing and defending an approach to existence questions that would provide the backup I had needed for many of the arguments I gave earlier for the existence of fictional characters, artifacts, social objects, and other ordinary objects. It also was a way of tracing out the source of the historical wrong turn, and developing a challenging alternative to the neo-Quinean approach to ontology that had been so dominant throughout my lifetime in philosophy. Such an alternative I saw as desperately needed to bring epistemological clarity to our work in metaphysics—making it clear *how* the relevant existence questions could be answered, and debates adjudicated.

The central point I argued for there (2015) is that existence questions are *easy* to answer. Often, they are answerable by trivial inferences from uncontested truths. More generally, those existence questions that are well-formed and answerable at all (I argued) can be answered with nothing more than empirical inquiry and conceptual analysis (though both of those may, in some cases, be difficult and time-consuming). Existence questions, so understood, are not suitable subjects for ‘deep metaphysical’ debates (about ‘what (really) exists’), and the popular project of ‘developing and defending an ontology’ is best left behind.

So what, if anything, remains for metaphysics to do? As I note in *Ontology Made Easy*, metaphysics has always addressed other sorts of questions than existence questions—in fact, the obsession with existence questions is a relatively recent aberration. Modal questions of course remain: I would come to address those in *Norms and Necessity* (2020a).²⁹

²⁸ The idea that such questions can be understood and addressed in the mode of *external* questions (roughly about what language or concepts we should use) is also important to me, and shows up in my work on conceptual engineering (e.g. in my 2016b, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b).

²⁹ ‘Post-modal’ questions about grounding remain too—see Locke (2020) for discussion of how the normativist framework may be extended to cover those questions.

Conceptual work remains to be done as well, including both local and global forms of conceptual analysis—and including addressing *functional* questions about aspects of our language and concepts (doing what Huw Price (2011, 13) had called ‘linguistic anthropology’) that may shed new light on old metaphysical debates.

As I presented this idea at a talk at a conference in Canberra, Australia, in the early 2000s, I recall Sally Haslanger talking to me afterwards, asking something to the effect of: But don’t you think that we can ask questions not just about how our concepts *do* work, but about how they *should* work?³⁰ “Why, of course!”, was my reply—and this, together with my background in Carnap, may have been the start of my thinking about the importance of conceptual engineering, and the ways this broadens our view of what metaphysics can do (and sometimes what it has done). In *Ontology Made Easy* (2015) I suggest that conceptual work needn’t be just *descriptive* or *analytical* in nature—it can also involve *normative* work on what concepts or language we *should* use and how we should use it: work in conceptual engineering (a topic that was just gaining more widespread recognition and popularity around that time). In later work I have aimed to develop and defend that idea more fully.

The work in *Ontology Made Easy* thus not only aims at a kind of vindication of some of the methods used in my earlier, first-order work on ontology. It also forms the first volume of what is intended as a trilogy, aiming to deflate the old pretensions of metaphysics to ‘discover’ deep truths about what exists and about the natures of things of various kinds, to reject the ‘scientistic’ view of metaphysics, and to develop a more fruitful and transparent alternative.

Ontology Made Easy addresses existence questions of metaphysics; *Norms and Necessity* addresses the modal questions; and the planned volume *Rethinking Metaphysics* will develop a more positive vision of what metaphysics *can* do (and often has done), in the form of largely linguistic and conceptual work—both of a descriptive and normative sort: work in conceptual engineering.

³⁰ Her own influential (2000) paper had recently made this point vivid.

Functional Pluralism

As mentioned above, *Norms and Necessity* was originally conceived as part of a total project of deflating metaphysics—the part to focus on modal questions in metaphysics. What for me is distinctive about that work is the way that the idea of functional pluralism in language came to fruition for me there. As I said earlier, I had been attuned to the possibility of functional pluralism somewhat earlier, through my work on Ryle and on Sellars (as well as through teaching figures such as Wittgenstein, Ayer, and Heidegger), and from my work on the problem of first-person knowledge.³¹ But where I found the functional pluralist idea most insightful and indispensable was in my work on modality.

In *Ordinary Objects* (Chap. 3) I had laid out what I there called a ‘conceptualist’ view of modality, according to which the most basic (metaphysical) modal claims are analytic, and had argued that the most basic conditions of existence, identity, and persistence for the objects we refer are thus discoverable by a kind of conceptual analysis, making it clear how we can come to know basic metaphysical modal truths by means of our conceptual competence and reasoning abilities. (And thus also making clear why radically revisionary views about the identity and persistence conditions of things of various sorts were bound to go wrong.) My main goals in that initial foray into the problems of modality were to show how such a view was *different* from the much-maligned modal *conventionalist* view, and to show that it did not lead us to a form of anti-realism or to an ontology of mere ‘stuff’ rather than individuated *things*. I was already aware then that the key to avoiding the difficulties of past conventionalist views of modality was *not* to treat our modal statements as being *about* or *made true by* our (adopting certain) linguistic conventions. Following Ayer’s (1936/1952) wording, in *Ordinary Objects* I expressed it as the view that basic metaphysical modal statements

³¹ Another early source for me, carried over from my work on fiction, came in work on *fictionalisms* of various kinds. For while I tend to disagree with the ontological conclusions of fictionalists (say, that discourse about numbers, etc. is *merely fictional* or *pretending*—see my 2015, Chapter 5), fictionalists such as Stephen Yablo (see, e.g., his 2005) have often done crucial work in showing what functions *other than* tracking worldly entities are served by forms of discourse such as mathematical discourse.

‘illustrate’ our linguistic conventions, and argued that since these claims are analytic, they have no need of truthmakers.³²

But in the intervening time, I came to discover neo-pragmatist work by Huw Price (2011), Robert Brandom (1994), Michael Williams (2011), and others (and also went back to study work by Simon Blackburn (1993) in the related expressivist tradition). Price’s work especially presented something of a breakthrough for me; and through his work (and that of allies in the neo-pragmatist tradition) I came to a better way of developing and defending an approach to modality along these lines by the time I wrote *Norms and Necessity*,³³ (as well as to a more thorough appreciation of the importance of a functional pluralist approach to language).

In *Norms and Necessity*, I dropped the controversial talk of ‘analyticity’ (2020a, 46) and came to speak instead in terms of ‘semantic rules’. And (inspired by Price’s work) I came to see that the best way of diagnosing the problems with many metaphysical treatments of modal discourse, and with problematic forms of conventionalism alike, was in the assumption that all statements serve to describe or track ‘features of reality’ that serve to make the relevant statements true. Against this, I argued, modal discourse serves fundamentally *normative* functions. In the case of *metaphysical* modal discourse, these functions include enabling us to communicate, enforce, and renegotiate semantic rules in particularly clear and useful ways. Taking a normativist approach to metaphysical modal discourse, I argue in *Norms and Necessity*, enables us to avoid old ontological

³² I dithered a bit on the question of whether and how they could be true—at first entertaining the idea that basic modal statements are in a sense converted commands, and so do not require truthmakers; perhaps even are not apt for truth or falsehood (2007, 69). But to preserve the sense that they can be true, I ultimately argued, we can also see that they are guaranteed true given relations in rules of use (though these aren’t *truthmakers*; they just establish the meaning of the claim, in such a way that it always comes out true, regardless of worldly facts) (2007, 70). What I would say now is that modal claims enter language with a regulative function (much as commands do), but may (for good functional reasons) take the grammatical form of declaratives, which can be true or false, can be embedded, reasoned with as declaratives are, etc. (Though I would still say that such modal claims are not aiming to *track* worldly features and do not require appeal to truthmakers to ‘explain what makes them true’.)

³³ This discovery was facilitated by discussions with Price during an extended research stay at the University of Sydney in 2007, as well as by attending a series of conferences on neo-pragmatism he organized.

and epistemological problems of modality, as well as to clarify the methodology of metaphysics.³⁴

The work of *Norms and Necessity* is a keystone for my overall work, bringing together both older, more recent, and forthcoming projects in ways that show their mutual support. First, it provides at last a fuller support for the methods I used in addressing metaphysical and ontological questions from the very beginning of my work: showing why conceptual analysis is and should be a relevant method for coming to know many metaphysical modal truths. It also makes it clear why, as I had long argued (2003b, 2009), we should expect there to be places of indeterminacy, where there are no precise modal facts to be ‘discovered’. For the semantic rules are often open-ended, indeterminate, or renegotiable in the face of changes in the world or our knowledge, and it is a matter for *decision* what we should do with them.

The work of *Norms and Necessity* is also supported *by* my earlier work on easy ontology. For given the easy ontological method of addressing existence questions, we can accept the normativist view of metaphysical modal statements, and still allow that trivial inferences enable us to refer to modal facts, modal properties, and even possible worlds. As a result, accepting normativism needn’t require us to *deny* that there are modal facts and properties (still less, to deny that there are mind-independent ordinary objects that have these modal properties). Easy ontology and modal normativism form a mutually supporting package of deflationary views.

The work of *Norms and Necessity* also brings far closer to completion the overall metametaphysical project (begun for existence questions in *Ontology Made Easy*) of demystifying the methods and epistemology of metaphysics, and bringing us away from the problematic scientistic conception, to a more transparent and fruitful conception of metaphysics. For it enables us to develop a clear story of how we can come to know those metaphysical modal facts there are, using nothing more mysterious

³⁴ The focus on function also, as I argue there (2020, Chapter 3), enables us to avoid the notorious ‘embedding’ or Frege-Geach problem that plagued earlier ‘speech act’ analyses of moral, modal, existential and other forms of discourse. For we can distinguish the enduring *functions* of the discourse and the *rules* that enable the relevant forms of language to fulfill those functions, from the fleeting and diverse ways the terms are *used* on particular occasions.

than conceptual competence, reasoning abilities, and (sometimes) knowledge of empirical facts.

Finally, the work of *Norms and Necessity* helps establish the *need for* and appropriate *methods for* conceptual engineering—a central theme of my recent and current work.³⁵ Seeing claims of metaphysical necessity as object-language reflections of semantic rules, and combining this with the view that our semantic rules are often vague, open-ended, indeterminate, and subject to renegotiation, gives us reason to think that many debates in modal metaphysics are best seen as (implicitly) engaging in metalinguistic negotiation for views about how we *should use* central terms ('person', 'freedom', 'causation'...).³⁶ It also gives us reason to think that we might make our work more transparent by engaging in such decision-making more explicitly by undertaking conceptual engineering. In this way, conceptual engineering can give us a way of understanding some of the valuable work that has been done in the history of metaphysics, and of showing what metaphysics legitimately *can* do going forward, without falling into epistemological mysteries or a rivalry with the natural sciences.³⁷

Conceptual Engineering

The functional pluralism that lies at the heart of *Norms and Necessity* also plays a central role for me in articulating a fruitful and appropriate methodology for conceptual engineering. I have argued (2020b) that the notion of *linguistic function* should play a crucial role in conceptual engineering.³⁸ My work here was informed by my earlier work on cultural abstract artifacts. For given that work, it was natural to see languages themselves as cultural abstract artifacts, which come about in particular

³⁵ See my (2020a), (2021a), (2021b), (2022a).

³⁶ I develop this side of the idea in my (2016b), building on work on metalinguistic negotiation by David Plunkett and Tim Sundell (2013).

³⁷ I argue for this reconception of metaphysics in my (2017b) and (2021b).

³⁸ I am not alone in this: the idea that linguistic function should play a central role in conceptual engineering is also defended by Sally Haslanger (2000), and (in a more restricted form) by Ingo Brigandt (2010).

human circumstances to serve a range of human needs and purposes, and which are subject to change over time.³⁹ It was also natural to think that parts and aspects of language could (like other cultural artifacts) be given a *functional* analysis.

The notion of linguistic function plays a central role in the project of conceptual engineering, as I see it. It should play a central role first in the reverse engineering phase of understanding how our extant terms and concepts work. For we can often disentangle ourselves from old philosophical puzzles if we begin by properly understanding the functions served by the relevant form of discourse, rather than just assuming that all discourse functions to track ‘features of reality’ (the work of *Norms and Necessity* on metaphysical modal discourse serves as an example of this point, see also my 2022b). We can also make better decisions about whether to retain, revise, or reject various sorts of terms (for numbers, properties, races, genders, ...) if we begin by understanding what functions they serve—so that we can better assess both how well they serve those functions, and whether they are functions we want to preserve or reject. Finally, understanding linguistic functions, and the rules that enable them to fulfill those functions, can enable us to see why we would have, and want, a language that licenses us to make the trivial inferences that easy ontological arguments rely on—given the useful new functions the introduced terms serve in discourse.⁴⁰ And so, this work on linguistic function also lends further support back to easy ontology, and even to the earlier work on showing how various puzzles that motivate forms of eliminativism can be dissolved.

At the deepest level, appreciating the plurality of linguistic functions also enables us to better diagnose the mistakes behind the scientistic model of metaphysics—which relies on treating all discourse, including the moral, modal, or mathematical discourse that has long puzzled metaphysicians—on the model of ordinary empirical talk tracking the perceptible world, or on the model of scientific explanatory discourse.⁴¹

³⁹ Other views along these lines were developed by Kaplan (1990), and by Irmak (2019). The latter explicitly builds on my work on abstract artifacts.

⁴⁰ See my (2022b).

⁴¹ See my (2022b).

For me, the notion of linguistic function also plays a central role in constructive projects in conceptual engineering. For if we begin with a view of the functions (to be) served by our terms, we can assess how well proposed revisions or constructions (will) fulfill those functions, and thus make decisions in conceptual engineering that are not merely arbitrary, but also don't require knowledge of epistemically mysterious 'metaphysical' facts. In this way, a pluralistic view of linguistic functions is essential for developing a good approach to conceptual engineering that can treat it as an alternative to (and not relying on) serious metaphysics (see my 2020b).

But how can we determine what functions diverse parts of our language serve? Just as anthropologists and archeologists aim to determine the functions of ancient concrete artifacts, we can look to empirical work for a useful approach to determining the functions of (parts of) language.⁴² A natural place to begin is with work in empirical linguistics, particularly in systemic functional linguistics (a branch much influenced by, and influential in, anthropology), to answer questions about the functions served by various linguistic forms and enablements.⁴³ My current research (begun in my 2022a) aims to build on that work to answer questions about what the functions of various areas of discourse are, how we can identify them, and how we can use that knowledge to better untangle old philosophical problems and make better decisions in conceptual engineering. In this way, I hope to not only sustain a deflationary metametaphysical approach without epistemological mysteries, and to show how to unravel a range of old philosophical puzzles (including many that have led to eliminativism), but also to show how to develop a clear and compelling re-conception of much of the worthwhile work of metaphysics, and philosophy more broadly, as work in conceptual engineering.

⁴² This echoes Huw Price's call to adopt the perspective of linguistic anthropology (2011, 13).

⁴³ For example, questions about what functions are served by a modal system, a mood system, a capacity to make transformations across grammatical categories, etc.

Conclusion

Here I have aimed to make it clear how the various parts of my work, from work on fiction and the ontology of art, through social ontology, philosophy of mind, phenomenology, metametaphysics, and conceptual engineering, hang together. I have also tried to show how the sequence of topics reflects a ‘stepping back’ from one set of problems (first-order metaphysical problems about the existence and natures of fictional characters, works of art, or social objects) to examine the deeper presuppositions on which these problems and many responses to them rely (presuppositions about metametaphysics, methodology, modality, and language).

More importantly, I hope I have made clear the way in which my recent work comes together in an attempt to show where much work in recent metaphysics has gone wrong, and to develop an alternative view of what philosophy can do, and how we can do it, that makes philosophy more epistemologically transparent and more clearly relevant to human life. The deflationary metametaphysical approach I develop aims to demystify metaphysics by reconceiving the central work of metaphysics not as ‘discovering’ deep facts about what (really) exists or about the ‘essences’ of things of various kinds, but rather as work in conceptual engineering (both reverse engineering and (re-)constructive engineering). By so doing, we can disentangle many old problems, and blow the cover off some pretensions of metaphysicians to ‘discover’ deep worldly truths. Instead, we can lay bare the practical nature of our conceptual decisions, where the functions our concepts serve—or those we aim to serve via our interventions—must be made public and open to debate.

I have become known as a critic of metaphysics; and in some ways, of course, my work in this key is reminiscent of other work critical of metaphysics, for example by Wittgenstein and by the logical positivists, for whom ‘metaphysics’ was largely a term of derision.⁴⁴ But there is also an important difference: I aim not for a slash and burn *rejection* of

⁴⁴Though these were allies I came to appreciate later, not the original inspiration for my approach. Writing in a different time and context, their opponents weren’t really mine, and a different approach was needed to diagnose the problems with the post-1970 revival of metaphysics, and to more fully develop a viable alternative.

metaphysics, but rather for a *reconception* of it that can preserve a sense of its potential usefulness and value for human life. I am a critic of much work in *recent* metaphysics. I do think that the scientistic conception of metaphysics has led us astray, and that much of the work that has gone on in the post-Quinean revival of metaphysics has been misdirected, especially in ontological debates about what ‘really’ exists, and many wildly revisionary views about the existence or natures of things of various kinds. One way I have progressed in my work is to move from a vague suspicion of such debates and positions, and thinking that something must have gone wrong somewhere, to being able to better pinpoint *where* they have gone wrong, historically and argumentatively. I have also been aiming to develop an alternative approach that is cohesive with much past work in philosophy, but avoids the wrong turn, and preserves the value of much past work in philosophy.

For despite suspicions about much work in recent metaphysics, I do think that much of value has been done in historical debates, say, about what free will is and whether we have it, what art is, how we should track personal identity, and so on. Many such debates (as I argue in my 2016b) can be seen as implicitly engaging in metalinguistic negotiation—renegotiating what concepts or terms we should use, and how we should use them—and thus implicitly as doing work in conceptual engineering.⁴⁵ Putting work in this key, however, requires us to be transparent about the practical concerns motivating our conceptual choices, and about the fact that we *are* making conceptual choices—not ‘discovering’ deep facts about reality.

Such work in conceptual engineering is clearly important and has great past and potential impact for human life. For how we use such terms or concepts as ‘person’, ‘cause’, ‘responsible’, ‘art’, ‘woman’, ‘intelligence’, ‘nature’, ‘property’, etc. has had and will continue to have enormous importance for our legal and political system, our education system, our scientific investigations, and most basically, for our ways of acting, valuing, and treating each other and ourselves. Reconceiving metaphysics in

⁴⁵ Other debates, too, about what conceptual scheme is needed to be presented with a spatio-temporal world at all, or with a world of agents, persons, causal order, etc., can similarly be seen on this model as interesting work in reverse-engineering our conceptual scheme.

this way can not only demystify metaphysics and avoid the appearance of a rivalry with science, but can also preserve an important role for metaphysical work, reconceived. For conceptual engineering can enable us to not only make sense of, but perhaps even to change, our ways of thinking, theorizing, and living.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ On this point, see my (2021b).

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3

Thomasson on Easy Arguments

Thomas Hofweber

The Problem in a Nutshell

Easy arguments are a special group of arguments that seem to show that an apparently difficult issue can apparently be resolved quite easily. Easy arguments appear in different parts of philosophy, but in particular in epistemology and in metaphysics. My focus here will simply be on a particular kind of easy argument in metaphysics, in particular ones that appear to be relevant for ontology. These are all well known, so I hope I can be brief in setting up the issue. I will use easy arguments for numbers as my example.

Whether there are numbers has been widely debated in the philosophy of mathematics, and whichever side one takes, yes or no, it seems to bring with it a very different picture of what arithmetic, the mathematical discipline concerning natural numbers, is like from a philosophical point of

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view. Does it aim to describe a domain of entities, the numbers, or does it do something completely different? However, the question whether there are natural numbers can apparently be answered easily, using a simple argument from uncontroversial premises to the conclusion that there are. The standard examples of this goes back to Frege (1884):

(1)

- a. Jupiter has four moons.
- b. Thus: the number of moons of Jupiter is four.
- c. Thus: there is a number which is the number of moons of Jupiter.
- d. Thus: there is at least one number.
- e. Thus: there are numbers.

In light of this argument, there are several reactions one can have. The list includes:

(2)

- a. The argument is not valid, since one or another step is mistaken.
- b. The argument is valid, and it answers the question we originally asked.
- c. The argument is valid, but it does not answer the question as we asked it.
- d. The argument is valid, but it shows that we should have asked a different question to begin with. Not: are there numbers, but: are there fundamentally numbers, or are numbers real, or the like.

In (Thomasson, 2015) Amie Thomasson has given a detailed, forceful, and very influential defense of the second option, (2b): The argument is valid, it does answer the question we asked, and we were simply mistaken in thinking that this question was hard. Ontology is easy, and easy inferences like our example above show that it is.¹

In this short essay I would like to critically discuss Thomasson's account of what is going on in these easy arguments. I will focus in particular on issues in the philosophy of language. I will argue that there are features of

¹ I will rely on Thomasson's presentation of her view in (Thomasson, 2015). There are also numerous later papers by Thomasson discussing objections and clarifying her view, but as far as I can tell the view remains the same.

the English sentences that occur in these trivial arguments which are in tension with Thomasson's preferred account of what their significance is for ontology. In particular, I will argue that they are in conflict with Thomasson's easy ontology program. Part of my motivation comes from thinking about what needs to be explained in this generally puzzling situation. In part the problem here is that if ontology is easy, why is there still so much debate about it? And if the easy arguments are tied to our competence with our own language, why do so many competent speakers who happen to be philosophers not follow through and endorse easy ontology? And why are those arguments so compelling and apparently trivial to begin with?

What Needs To Be Explained?

The whole situation with easy arguments is puzzling and in need of an explanation of various things. One thing, obviously, concerns the argument itself: is it valid or not, and why or why not? But there are many other things in the neighborhood of these arguments and their role in philosophy that need to be explained as well. Some concern the argument as a whole, some only certain parts of it. As for those that concern the argument as a whole, we need to explain why the steps in the argument certainly appear to many to be valid. But why is there this appearance, whether or not they are valid in the end? And we need to explain why there is a persistent majority of philosophers who insist that these arguments do not settle the questions that we set out to settle? Why is there this persistent debate about there being numbers despite these arguments?

Thomasson can try to explain this in the following way. The inference form 'Jupiter has four moons' to 'The number of moons of Jupiter is four' is based on a conceptual truth or conceptual connection between how many things there are and what their number is. This conceptual connection arises from the application conditions associated with the relevant words. Grasp of these application conditions is part of linguistic competence, and these application conditions get incorporated into the meaning of the relevant expressions, giving rise to the corresponding conceptual

or analytic connections. And similarly for the quantifier inferences: There is a conceptual connection between the number of moons being four and there being a number which is the number of moons. That there are four moons of Jupiter is established empirically, but, of course, for other examples we would not even need an empirical premise. We could have started with there being no things which are not self-identical, and therefore their number being zero, or the like. Conceptual connections support that the relevant steps are compelling, and thus no wonder that many are inclined to accept them as unproblematic. Or so the explanation in outline that Thomasson can naturally give for why the inferences seem compelling to many.²

But this outline of an explanation given so far won't be good enough by itself, since even though it might explain why we are tempted to accept the inferences, it does not explain why many are resistant to take this to settle the question we started with, even though the question was naturally articulated as 'Are there numbers?' If in the end it all comes down to conceptual connections, why is there still a debate here? After all, there is no corresponding debate about how many sides triangles have, something also settle by conceptual connections. Since we are all presumably competent with our concepts, what explains the persistent philosophical debate about there being numbers? Wouldn't our competence simply settle the issue?

Thomasson's answer here, as I interpret and extract it from my reading of (Thomasson, 2015), is that on her conception of a conceptual truth and of conceptual connections this is an epistemic and normative notion, one that is not tied to what dispositions speakers or thinkers actually have, but only to what entitlements they have. Thus we are entitled to infer, but we don't have to infer. It is thus perfectly compatible with her view that some stubborn philosophers just don't accept it and don't follow the entitlements they have. And so they are hesitant to either draw the inferences they are entitled to draw or else to accept that they answer the question we originally asked, as they would be entitled to accept.

This is a fine reply to why there are some holdouts, but this doesn't really resolve the overall issue. After all, if we move to entitlements and

² A broadly congenial, but different, line is taken in (Schiffer, 2003).

away from dispositions or actual inferential practice, then the question re-arises, why we generally do infer this way. We don't usually infer what we are entitled to infer, so more needs to be said why the entitlement is generally followed in this case. To mention just one case, if there is a valid mathematical proof of a certain theorem, then I am entitled to infer to that theorem. But if the theorem is unproven, then I don't draw that inference even though I am entitled to. Now, that example is disanalogous in various ways, but it brings out the issue of a gap between entitlement and actual inference. Why is that gap bridged in the easy arguments, although not in general? And whatever one says here, the issue re-arises why one then doesn't go all the way where our entitlements lead us, namely to consider the issue tied to the ontology of numbers settled and done with.

Thus I see a tension in Thomasson's view in that conceptual connections on the one hand are great for explaining why we infer as we do, but on the other hand, they are terrible at explaining why there is this large resistance to easy ontology among philosophers. Why does it seem to many of us that there are substantial questions here, despite our ordinary inferences and our general conceptual competence?

My own view is that we can explain all this by paying closer attention to what is actually going on in the language we employ in the various steps of these inferences. This paper is not about my view, so I will spare you the details,³ but the issues that motivated my view are ones that arise for everyone, and I can't spare you the details of those issues. I believe thinking about them is significant for understanding the easy arguments, and why we react to them the way we do. What these issues highlight points away from Thomasson's easy ontology position, or so I will argue in the following. Thus I will need to discuss some of the issues that motivated my own position in the following, and why I think they pose problems for Thomasson's view. And in doing this I will also need to point to what I think these issues motivate when it comes to the easy arguments. I will also need to briefly return to my position on the easy arguments towards the end to contrast it with Thomasson's and to highlight how it seems to me some things can be explained in a more satisfactory way.

³ You can find the details in the first half of (Hofweber, 2016).

Conceptual connections give us a very tight connection between what is connected. This can seem too tight, and give rise to the puzzle of extravagance, see (Hofweber, 2007). The problem is simply this: If it is a conceptual truth that

(3) Jupiter has four moons iff the number of moons of Jupiter is four.

then the question arises why we would have both of these conceptually equivalent sentences in our language, and why we would ever utter one rather than the other in ordinary communication. They are conceptually equivalent, after all, so which one we would use might make no difference. In particular, since one of the equivalent sentences is longer and more complex, it would seem that this one should get little use. Why the extra effort, after all?

There are several ways this puzzle could be solved. One is to highlight the increased expressive strength one gets by combining singular terms with quantifiers, a line nicely defended by Stephen Yablo in (Yablo, 2005).⁴ Here the thought is that there is an advantage to having singular terms for numbers, since those can interact with quantifiers and that gives rise to expressive strength. After all, once I nominalize number words into singular term position I can then use quantifiers and say that there is some number of dogs, while before I would have had to say that either there is one dog, or there are two, or three, etc. etc. But that etc. would never end, or at least I wouldn't in general know where it ends, and so is just out of reach expressively, while the quantified statement is not.

That is all fair and good, but it only explains why we would want to have quantifiers over numbers, and why we might need number words as singular terms to get there, but it doesn't explain why we would ever utter 'the number of moons of Jupiter is four', in particular, why we would do this even though we also have the simpler, and shorter, 'Jupiter has four moons'. When I say that the number of moons is four, then I am not relying on the increased expressive strength that number words as singular terms are associated with in a language. In fact, I could have said a conceptually equivalent, but shorter thing instead. So, this line might explain why it is good for a language in general to have number words as

⁴This line differs from Yablo's more recent position concerning subject matter spelled out in (Yablo, 2014).

singular terms in it, but it does not explain why anyone would use them on a particular, quantifier-free occasion when conceptually equivalent, but shorter, options are available. So, why would we do that, and what does it show for what is going on in the easy arguments?

To bring out the issue at hand, as well as what seems to me to be the right answer, let me relate a story: I once had a meeting with the syntactician Sam Epstein about such uses of number words. I told him that I am trying to figure out what the syntactic structure of ‘the number of moons of Jupiter is four’ is, and that I could really use his help with it. He thought about it for a while and then said ‘You know, I once knew a guy who talked like that’. And not only did I think that was funny, it is also an important observation: it is a weird thing to say. Not because of the content, but because of how it is said. Considered in isolation it is a weird way of talking. And that is puzzling. Why would anyone talk like that? And how is it weird? It might be a personal style of speech, as presumably in Epstein’s friend’s case, or it might be connected to ordinary purely communicative reasons.

The right answer seems to me to be this: when one utters ‘the number of moons is four’ one thereby brings about a certain focus effect that comes from the syntax of the sentence uttered. That focus effect could have been achieved also via intonation, by stressing part of the sentence as in ‘Jupiter has **FOUR** moons’, properly pronounced. But without special intonation, ‘Jupiter has four moons’ has no focus effect, whereas ‘the number of moons of Jupiter’ does have a focus effect even without special intonation. The focus effect of the latter sentence comes from the syntax, not from an optional additional intonation. That this is so can be argued by looking at question-answer congruence of the different sentences, i.e. which sentences are proper answers to which questions. In a nutshell, if you ask what I had for lunch, it is fine to answer that I had two bagels, but awkward to answer that the number of bagels I had is two. That stresses the wrong thing: how many I had, not what I had. But if you ask how many bagels I had, then it is OK. The details of this proposal are in (Hofweber 2007 & 2016). If it is correct, then it would explain why anyone would ever utter ‘the number of moons is four’. Even though I can say something with the same truth conditions, even something that might be conceptually equivalent, I say it in a different way with that

sentence, with a focus effect that is guaranteed by the syntax. And even though I can achieve this focus effect also with intonation, that is itself a cost, and having the option of getting a focus effect from the syntax is a reasonable one to have and to draw on. For example, it can be combined with a secondary focus by using intonation in addition to the syntactic focus. And it makes a lot of sense in written language, where phonetic focus is not captured in the writing.

In Chap. 9 of (Thomasson, 2015) Thomasson very generously discusses this proposal, and she mentions that she finds it plausible. She also holds that it is compatible with her own view on easy ontology, for the following reason: even if the focus effect story is correct, it doesn't mean that the number word in 'the number of moons is four' isn't referential. And that is all that matters for her position: number words refer to numbers, and thus such sentences imply that there are numbers, as the easy arguments require. There might well be a focus effect, and it might well be that this is why we use the sentence in communication. But that doesn't mean that 'four' isn't referential in addition.

But this is mistaken, or so I will argue now. The account of the focus effect of 'the number of moons is four' outlined above is not compatible with the easy arguments leading to easy ontology. I hope to make this case in the next section. If this is correct, then the easy ontology approach is missing an explanation of the role of sentences like 'the number of moons is four' in ordinary communication, and relatedly it will fail to explain what needs to be explained about our use of number words and, I will argue further down below, our reaction to the easy arguments and the persistence of ontological debate.

Easy Ontology, Focus, and Reference

A structural, syntactic focus effect can explain what use 'The number of moons is four' has in ordinary communication. But why does the focus effect occur? Here there are several different proposals that are worth considering. One is motivated by an asymmetry between 'Jupiter has four moons' and 'the number of moons of Jupiter is four'. The former does not have a focus effect coming from its syntax, while the latter does. What

explains this asymmetry? One option is to look at other cases of such an asymmetry, for example pairs like these:

(4)

- a. Mary entered quietly.
- b. Quietly Mary entered.

Here, too, there is a one-sided difference in focus. The second has a focus effect coming from the syntax, focusing on how Mary entered, whereas the first does not. An explanation of this difference suggests itself in outline: 'Quietly' is an adverb that belongs to the verb phrase, and in the first sentence that is where it appears. But in the second one it is displaced, it appears out front, away from the verb that it modifies. This gives it prominence and leads to a focus effect. Now, how that all goes in proper syntactic theory is another question, but it motivates a connection between syntactic displacement and focus effect. And 'displacement' here just means 'appearing away from where you properly belong'.

Taking this analogy, we can also apply it to our pair concerning Jupiter's moons. In 'Jupiter has four moons' 'four' appears where it belongs. It modifies the noun, and its semantic function in this use is just that: to modify a noun and help form a quantified noun phrase, which combines with 'has' to form a predicate. But in 'the number of moons of Jupiter is four' 'four' is displaced, it appears away from where it belongs, and thus we get a focus on it, and on how many moons Jupiter has. That focus effect comes from the syntax, as discussed above, and not from optional, additional intonation. Again, how that goes in proper syntactic theory is left open by all this, but it is an outline of an approach that could be filled in in several ways.

If this were so, then 'four' in 'The number of moons of Jupiter is four' is not referential. Its semantic function is to modify a noun, but it appears syntactically away from the noun for the focus effect. But reference is also a semantic function, and one that is incompatible with modifying a noun. Here it is important to distinguish two levels of semantic description. One is semantic function. This concerns what a phrase aims to do semantically. Here a phrase has one function, or at least one primary function on a particular use. It doesn't make sense to hold that a phrase

aims to modify a noun, and also to modify a verb and also to refer to a dog. Those are different functions, and you can have at most one of them, at least as a basic non-derivative function. Thus if the function of phrase is to modify a noun, then it isn't to refer to an object. That so far is just talk of semantic function. There is also another level of semantic description, which is to be distinguished from semantic function. It concerns what in linguists' lingo is often called 'denotation', but which doesn't mean what many philosophers mean by denotation. It instead means what semantic value a phrase gets assigned in a background compositional semantics. So, when someone says that 'four' denotes a function from this to that, or 'four' denotes a higher-type object or the like, then they are talking about semantic values.

Semantic values are a rather different level of description of a phrase than semantic function. To bring up a standard example to illustrate the difference: Richard Montague in (Montague, 1974) assigned proper names sets of properties as their semantic values, which allows for a more uniform treatment of noun phrases in a compositional semantics. But that doesn't mean that Montague proposed that 'Sue' refers to a set of properties, nor that Sue is a set of properties. 'Sue' still has the semantic function to refer to Sue, and that way 'Sue' makes a contribution to the truth conditions, which in turn can be captured by assigning 'Sue' the set of Sue's properties as its semantic value. But those are different things. Similarly, all phrases get semantic values in standard compositional semantic theories, but only a few have the function of reference. 'Very' has a semantic value, and thus denotes some higher-type object, some function from functions to functions of some kind, but it doesn't aim to refer to that higher-type object.

All this also applies to 'four'. When it occurs in 'Jupiter has four moons' it modifies a noun. That is its semantic function. If its occurrence in 'The number of moons is four' is the result of displacement for the purpose of achieving focus, then this does not affect its semantic function. It still does not aim to refer, but it aims to modify a noun. But it appears away from that noun it hopes to modify in the syntax of the sentence to achieve focus. This account of why the focus effect occurs in one, but only one, of our pair of Jupiter sentences is thus in tension with the claim that 'four' refers in 'The number of moons of Jupiter is four'. And if it doesn't refer

in these uses then something else must be going on in the easy arguments than Thomasson's proposal.

The only real way out of this, it seems to me at least, is to hold that reference is ubiquitous, and that all phrases aim to refer. In fact, on this line in its most natural development, the only primary semantic function is reference, and all other functions are derivative on it. So, 'very' does aim to refer, likely some higher-type object, and it intensifies an adjective, say, via what kind of object it refers to: it refers to something that when applied to whatever the adjective refers to leads to the desired result. On this 'it's all reference' line one could try to recover the diversity of semantic functions we naturally attribute to various phrases via the kind of entity these different phrases refer to. But this 'it's all reference' line has a famous problem: it is unclear how a bunch of referring expressions lined up next to each other give rise to truth-conditions and propositional content. It is just as if every sentence is of the form 'Mary Fred Josef Sue'. Now, even if 'Josef' in that sentence refers to some higher-type thing, why does a string of names lead to truth-conditions and propositional content, no matter what they refer to? Maybe this problem can be solved, and then maybe it is fine to hold that 'four' refers anyways, even when it has the function to modify a noun, since the function of reference is primary, and the function of modifying a noun derivative on what it refers to. But this is certainly a small minority view, one whose rejection goes back also to at least Frege and likely much further. I personally find it hopeless, and I suspect Thomasson does not like it either. And if we leave it aside, then we face the issue that displacement does not affect primary semantic function and thus does not lead to reference.

The view I outlined above involving displacement as an explanation of focus is the one I think is the right one. But there are other options. One alternative is to hold that 'The number of moons is four' is a specificational sentence which in turn is a question-in-disguise. For a discussion, for or against, see (Schlenker, 2003), (Brogaard, 2007), (Moltmann, 2013), (Felka, 2014), (Snyder, 2017), (Schwartzkopff, 2022), and others. I think of this as an alternative, since on the most natural way of spelling it out, nothing is displaced, it is only that certain things are omitted. But the question-in-disguise view can also be seen as broadly congenial to the view outlined above, since it aims to give an explanation of the focus

effect in terms of syntax. But be that as it may, it wouldn't help Thomasson in her use of easy arguments, since on the natural way of formulating this proposal, 'four' does not refer either in 'the number of moons of Jupiter is four'. On a common way to spell out that question-in-disguise proposal, it goes something like this: The sentence involves a question in disguise, in that sentence we identify the question and the answer, and we strike out a bunch of the syntactic material to get the resulting sentence:

(5) [~~What~~ the number of moons of Jupiter ~~is~~] is [~~Jupiter has~~ four ~~moons~~].

Much can be and has been said about this proposal, but as spelled out, 'four' is still modifying a noun, except that we don't articulate that noun in the sentence. So, 'four' is not referential in this use. Its semantic function is to modify a noun, not to refer.

All of these issues deserve much more detailed discussion, of course. My main point is simply this: there are features of actual uses of 'The number of moons is four' which speak against the use of this sentence in the easy arguments and against Thomasson's use of these arguments in her easy ontology. The fact that we have a focus effect in this sentence speaks against the number word in it being referential. There are promising accounts to explain this focus effect which are in conflict with the number word being referential, and thus with 'four' referring to a number in this sentence. None of these issues are settled, of course, and there is an ongoing debate about them. But I have argued that Thomasson is mistaken in holding that she can accept accounts of the source of the focus effect and the role of the sentence in ordinary communication and hold that in addition the number word refers in this sentence. These two are in tension. That there is a tension doesn't mean that in the end they can't be combined. But it is unclear how, and I think fair to say that it hasn't been done yet.

All this gives rise to the question about what to do with the quantifier inference. For Thomasson's easy ontology approach it is clear: the quantifier ranges over a domain of things which exist and which are the ontology of the world. And one of those things is the number four. But if 'four' does not refer, how could the quantifier inference be valid? I would like to postpone this issue for now, although I will revisit it below, if only briefly.

What is more directly relevant instead is if Thomasson can hold onto easy ontology, and with it the validity of the easy arguments and the referentiality of number words in them, and simply not take on board the views on focus and displacement (or questions-in-disguise) outlined above. If those two are in tension, Thomasson should be free to reject the account of the use of these number sentences, and hold onto the account of the easiness of ontology. But this seems to me to be difficult, since something like this view on the actual use of number sentences will be necessary to explain what needs to be explained about our reaction to the easy arguments. I would like to turn to that next.

Conceptual and Other Language-based Connections

Easy arguments are puzzling, even if they are valid, since on the one hand they are compelling and forceful, but on the other hand the debate over the issue they are apparently resolving persists. We need to explain why: why are they forceful, and why does the issue not seem to go away? Thomasson can explain their force via conceptual connections, and the resilience of the issue they apparently resolve via an entitlement account of conceptual connections. In a nutshell, there are conceptual connections which entitle us to draw these inferences, but that doesn't mean that everyone draws them and accepts them as settling the ontological question, as they should. But as I argued above, this doesn't fully resolve the issue, since if we stress the entitlement part tied to conceptual connections, and downplay the disposition to follow the entitlements, then we lose a bit of the explanation of the force of the argument: being entitled doesn't explain why we do it, and if we know that we are entitled, then it doesn't explain why we continue to debate the issue. It looks like conceptual connections aren't really properly suited to explain what needs to be explained here.

Conceptual connections, as I understand the term here, and I think as Thomasson understands it as well, is a connection that arises from an aspect of the meaning of a particular concept which is available somehow

to competent possessors of the concept, or at the linguistic level, to competent speakers of the language. For Thomasson, application conditions are connected to meaning and content, and are mastered, or at least appreciated, by competent speakers. This is how we get from simples being arranged table-wise to there being a table, according to Thomasson.

But how does this go for Jupiter having four moons to the number of moons of Jupiter being four? Which concept is it that makes this connection a conceptual equivalence? It is tempting to think of this as a schema — there being n Fs iff the number of Fs is n — but this way we leave out what the relevant concept is. Is it n ? Or each instance: one, two, three, etc..? And is it a separate conceptual connection each time, or a general one? All this is simply left open so. But what is clear is that the connection between the two sentences is a special one and not just any old equivalence, assuming it is an equivalence. Here I agree with Thomasson that the relevant biconditionals are in a sense not substantial. Let's consider what we can call the Frege-biconditional:

(6) Jupiter has four moons iff the number of moons of Jupiter is four.

Thomasson holds that it is a conceptual truth, and that the truth of (6) should be apparent to all those who have the relevant concepts, at least in the sense that their concept possession entitles them to assent to it. But that seems to me to be the wrong way to think of the connection and why it is insubstantial. Let me illustrate another way in which equivalences can be insubstantial and apparent to competent users of a language without being a conceptual truth. And to do that I can reuse an example from above, which we can call the Mary-biconditional:

(7) Mary entered quietly iff quietly Mary entered.

In this particular case of adverb prefixing, the truth conditions are not affected, and so the two sides are equivalent.⁵ Is the Mary-biconditional a conceptual truth? From which concepts does this conceptual connection arise? It seems both sides involve the same concepts just arranged in a different order. It seems strange to me to say that concept possession of

⁵To be clear, there can be cases where the truth-conditions are affected by a focus construction, namely when it involves focus sensitive expressions, for example 'only'. 'Only Mary entered quietly' and 'only quietly Mary entered' can be understood as differing in truth-conditions. And this general phenomenon of focus sensitive expressions can be illustrated with more natural examples, but I won't pursue this now, since it isn't relevant for our example in the main text.

the individual concepts involved entitles one to assert to (7), since it is just the same concepts on both sides. But, of course, not any arrangement of the same concepts entitles one to assent to the corresponding biconditional.

What does explain our assent to the biconditional and our recognition that both sides are equivalent is not something tied to the possession of some individual concepts, but our competence with the underlying linguistic structures which put these concepts together. It is my basic linguistic competence that leads to the proper understanding that moving the adverb out front doesn't affect the truth conditions in this case, but does lead to a focus effect. It is my basic competence with syntax and its relation to focus that gives me this insight. Thus my recognition of the truth of the biconditional (7) is derivative not on conceptual connections, but on syntactic competence.

Essentially the same holds for the Frege-biconditional (6), or so it seems to me, and so is natural to hold on anything like the displacement explanation of the focus effect outlined above. It is not a conceptual connection based on the concept of number, but a broadly syntactic connection based on displacement and focus. But the situation is not quite as simple as with (7), since the relating sentences are more complex, and more surely needs to be said here how this is supposed to go in detail.

Still, the point remains that the equivalence of these sentences in (6) can be explained in a broadly insubstantial way: it is not our insight into the nature of numbers or anything like it, that makes clear to us that this equivalence holds. After all, who has such insights? Instead it is something tied to our basic competence with our language. But contrary to Thomasson, I don't think it is tied to our grasp of the contents or meanings of certain concepts. It is not that application conditions augment the meanings of these expressions in such a way that it makes clear to us competent speakers that (6) is correct. Rather it is our basic competence with the syntax of our language and its relation to focus, possibly augmented with that number determines concern how many things there are, or something similar. Both of these approaches make the equivalence insubstantial, in the suggestive sense of the term, but they do so in different ways. Both of them hold that our insight into the truth of the Frege-biconditional is not derivative on an insight into the nature of numbers

or necessary connections between different things, but derivative on something tied to our competence with our own language. We can thus call a *linguistic truth* one that is insubstantial, in the intuitive sense, and based on facts about language. Among those can be conceptual or analytic truths, which are based on facts tied to the contents of the relevant concepts or expressions, and syntactic truths, which are tied to facts about syntax. So understood, conceptual truths and syntactic truths are both similar in that they are insubstantial and linguistic truths. But they are also importantly different.

Now, the difference in the way in which the inferences can be insubstantial makes a difference in explaining what needs to be explained about the easy arguments. As outlined above, I feel that relying on conceptual connections alone is not going to settle this issue, since either that connection is tight, and thus leaves open why the debate persists, or it is loose, and then leaves open why the inference is so widely seen as trivial. ‘Tight’ and ‘loose’ can here be understood in different ways, with the normative, entitlement conception of conceptual truths being on the loose side, on a natural way of understanding it.

The syntactic competence understanding of the inference form ‘Jupiter has four moons’ to ‘The number of moons of Jupiter is four’ is a tight one, and it would explain why we widely accept it. But why is the issue tied to ontology still not resolved? That is connected to the next step: the quantifier inference. I would now like to briefly look at Thomasson’s account of that step, and why an alternative might do better.

Conceptual Connections and Quantifiers

On Thomasson’s account that quantifier step is in essence no different than the first step in the easy argument, which nominalizes the number word: It involves a conceptual connection, the fulfillment of some application conditions, and thus an entitlement to draw that inference. This gives rise to the same problem as above: if it merely is entitlement with no disposition, then why do we generally draw this inference? And if it is more than that, then why does the debate persist?

I would like to add, in agreement with Thomasson as I understand her, that it seems to me that make a separation between quantification and existence to solve this problem is pointless. So, one could try to hold that the quantifier inference is indeed trivial and that there being numbers is indeed trivially true. But the ontological question is not about there being numbers, but there existing numbers. Here one could hold either that quantifiers range over non-existent objects or that quantifiers are ontologically neutral, as claimed by (Azzouni, 2004) and (Bueno & Cumpa, 2020). But this strikes me as a red herring, among other things that should be critically said about it, since the puzzle arises simply with the use of quantifiers alone, without talking about existence at all. On the one hand it seems to be trivial that there are numbers, and it apparently trivially follows from Jupiter having four moons, but on the other hand, it seems substantial whether there are such things as numbers which arithmetic aims to describe and which are either somewhere or nowhere, and which turn arithmetic into a descriptive discipline of a domain of numbers. Some more colorful language might be necessary to really get the sense of a more substantial question going, but this is how the puzzle is commonly motivated, and I think successfully so. And this way the motivation goes without the use of talk of existence. For Thomasson, this can make no difference: both the quantified statement and the corresponding existence statements can have the same status: both can be easy, and easily established with easy arguments. Thus focusing on existence seems to get us nowhere new, and I think that is correct. See also (Thomasson, 2021).

But there are other options as well. In particular, those who hold that number words in ‘The number of moons is four’ do not refer, for some reason or other, will naturally be inclined to hold that quantifiers do not only interact with referential expressions. I have defended such a view of quantification elsewhere, which in essence holds that quantifiers are semantically underspecified and have two readings: one is inferential, which interacts with anything that it is syntactically permitted to, and one is about a domain of entities, which many take to be the standard and only use of quantifiers. Thomasson discusses this underspecification line in Chap. 9 of (Thomasson, 2015) and she is less pleased with it than with the focus construction move discussed above. Thomasson holds that

this underspecification view is too dependent on some examples I used that involved fictional names and intentional transitive verbs. I won't aim to defend myself against these charges now, in part because I have since given a more detailed motivation for the underspecification view that aims to be independent of the use of fictional names and intentional transitive verbs. See Chap. 3 of (Hofweber, 2016). What I would like to discuss instead is how the underspecification view can explain what needs to be explained about our reaction to easy argument, something I argued above Thomasson's view can't adequately explain.

The puzzle about easy arguments is in part that the arguments are compelling, they imply that there are numbers, yet the ontological debate persists. One attempt to explain this is one of the options of how to react to the easy arguments mentioned above: accept the arguments, and accept them as trivial, but hold that the question that ontology is trying to answer is not answered by what these arguments conclude. This could be done in more than one way. One way is to hold that this question wasn't the question whether there are numbers, but the question whether numbers are fundamental, a line taken, for example by Jonathan Schaffer in (Schaffer, 2009). But this does not seem to me to address the real issue. True enough, the question whether numbers are fundamental is a further question, in whatever sense of fundamental one might rely on, but the puzzle doesn't seem to be just about what is fundamental, it's about what there is. On the one hand it is trivial that there are numbers, and I can give several examples of them, on the other hand it seems substantial whether there are numbers, whether there are such things as numbers that mathematics aims to describe. This puzzle seems to me to be real. And if so, then it is natural to continue to ask whether there are numbers, even after the easy arguments are pointed out and taken as compelling.

The underspecification view has an easy way to explain this. 'there are numbers' has two readings. One reading is the inferential reading outlined above, and described in detail in Chap. 3 of (Hofweber, 2016). Relying on this reading of the quantifier, it is trivial to establish that there are numbers, and the easy arguments succeed in doing this. But that is not the only reading quantifiers have. On the other, domain conditions reading it is not trivial that there are numbers. And it is this reading that we rely on when we ask ontological questions: the questions we ask when

we wonder whether there are such things as numbers that mathematics aims to describe. On the one hand it is trivial that there are numbers, but on the other hand it is a substantial question. And the reason for this is that what is trivial is expressed using one reading of the quantifier, and what is substantial is expressed using another.

But this distinction of two readings alone does not explain everything that needs to be explained. The problem remains why not everyone realized that there are these two readings, and that this is what is going on in the original puzzle and with it how it should be resolved. We are all competent users of our language, but there being two readings of quantified statements is not generally accepted. It thus gives rise to the challenge of explaining why that is, and why the debate about how substantial it is that there are numbers continues. After all, our syntactic competence is supposed to make clear to use that the inference from Jupiter having four moons to their number being four is a valid inference. So, why does our competence with our language not give us insights into there being numerous readings of quantifier statements if there really are such readings?

And here there is a real difference. It is not generally true that there being multiple readings of sentences is apparent to competent speakers. This is often a linguistic discovery. Once the readings are discovered, they can be triggered in competent speakers with proper setup. But this going successfully is not required for linguistic competence. To give an extreme example, there is a debate about how many readings certain sentences with reciprocal expressions like ‘each other’ have:

(8) The philosophers sat next to each other.

What the answer is, is not obvious, as sitting next to each other can be understood in numerous ways, which can be seen as numerous readings of that phrase: all lined up in a row, in pairs possibly with linguists in between, in a circle, etc.. See (Kim & Peters, 1995) and (Dalrymple et al., 1998).

If there are multiple readings of ‘there are numbers’, then this can explain why the debate persists, even though the easy arguments are valid. They show that there are numbers on one reading, leaving open the other one. Furthermore, there being multiple readings can also explain why the debate about the status of easy arguments persists. Linguistic competence

does not require the explicit recognition of which readings there are, nor of how many there are. Recognizing that there are multiple readings of quantifiers is not required by linguist competence, and thus we can explain why the debate continues. The syntactic connection view explains why the first step of the argument is valid and compelling, the inferential quantifier reading explains why the second step is valid and compelling, the underspecification view explains why the debate persists, and the elusiveness of how many readings a phrase has explains why all this is not simply accepted.

This combination of views thus can explain what needs to be explained: why we react the way we do when faced with the easy arguments. But Thomasson's view, I argued above, cannot explain this. On her view we should either not find the trivial inferences as compelling as we do, or else we should not continue to argue about ontology. Of course, Thomasson would suggest the second, but the fact that this has not happened is what needs to be explained, and the underspecification view does better here than the conceptual connections view. Or so it seems to me.

Conclusion

There is a temptation to address Thomasson's easy ontology too much as a purely metaphysical proposal. It is that, of course, but it is more than that. It is also a proposal about natural language, about speakers of natural language, and about people reasoning about ontology and what there is. Too much on the large literature on Thomasson's proposal seems to me to focus on the metaphysics and also on the general picture in the philosophy of language tying application conditions to content. But not enough has been said about ordinary assertions and ordinary thinkers when exposed to the easy arguments. I tried to make the case in this paper that Thomasson's view is problematic in this regard, and that an alternative view does better. Of course, I already believed that the alternative view is correct, so I am surely biased in its favor. Still, the reasons given in favor of it strike me as good ones, so I hope the case I tried to make can stand on its merits. Others will surely disagree, as they probably

should, to pursue their preferred approach further. Thomasson has since (Thomasson, 2015) developed her approach into a larger neo-Carnapian program, in which the easy arguments are only one part among many. Still, the easy arguments are and remain central, and controversial. There is a lot of disagreement about what to make of the easy arguments and Thomasson's easy ontology, but I hope we can all agree about the significance of these issues for ontology and metaphysics, and about the significance of the relevant issues in the philosophy of language tied to understanding the individual steps in the easy arguments, what they show, and why we find them compelling.

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4

Realism, Deflationism, and Metaphysical Explanation

Naomi Thompson

Easy Ontology and Simple Realism

According to the ‘easy’ approach to ontology championed by Thomasson, ontological questions (questions about what exists) can generally be answered in a straightforward way simply by appeal to conceptual competence and (often) by conducting some kind of empirical enquiry (Thomasson, 2015, p. 20). The idea is that we can start from an uncontroversial truth (e.g. ‘the tomato is red’) and reason through some trivial steps (‘the tomato has the property of being red’) to what might have been thought of as philosophically controversial ontological conclusions (‘there are properties’). Answering existence questions turns out not to be the deep and difficult project we have become accustomed to believing it to be, but is in fact a relatively simple exercise. (The hard work for the philosopher, according to Thomasson, is in making sure that our concepts are clear and appropriate).

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Thomasson is a deflationist about existence: she thinks that all it is for something (i.e. some kind) to exist is for the application conditions associated with that kind to be fulfilled (Thomasson, 2015, p. 117). What those application conditions in fact are will vary depending on the kind under consideration (perhaps for there to be chairs there must be particles arranged chair-wise, and for there to be a church the building must have been consecrated), but the criterion for existence itself is purely formal. Though Thomasson thinks that the existence of disputed entities can be established on the basis of easy arguments, she denies that there is any sense in which we should think of the entities *themselves* as deflated. We should, Thomasson argues, be ‘simple realists’ about those entities.

Thomasson explicitly rejects the claim that there is anything deflated, minimal, or ‘thin’ about the entities established on the basis of the easy arguments. She considers and rejects two claims made by Schiffer regarding the ‘shallowness’ of the relevant kinds of entities: that they have a different (and diminished) ontological status from the kinds of entities we might establish the existence of through means other than being ‘inducted into the language games involving these terms’ (Schiffer, 2003, p. 62); and that they merely conservatively extend the theory. The intuition that there *is* something thin about the relevant entities is hard to deny, and so it’s worth discussing Thomasson’s responses in some detail.

Regarding the first, Thomasson (2015, p. 148) points out that we might come to know about the existence of seemingly robust entities (trees, tables, and the like) on the basis of trivial inferences (e.g. that there are some particles arranged tree-wise). There is of course no difference in ontological standing between a tree known of whose existence is arrived at in this way, and a tree that we establish the existence of on the basis of scientific investigation (for example). Thomasson takes this to show that ‘the fact that we may come to know of the existence of certain things by undertaking trivial inferences does not show that the entities themselves are in any way epistemically diminished or ontologically shallow’ (2015, p. 148). Granting this, there nevertheless does seem to be an intuitive distinction between entities the existence of which we can *only* come to know about through induction into the relevant kinds of

language games, and those we can gain knowledge of through, for example, robust empirical investigation.¹

This kind of distinction is admittedly hard to make precise, but it is a tempting thought that there simply isn't any more to two people being married than for them to have said some vows and signed a piece of paper (as Thomasson herself often notes) but that there is something more to there being a tree than for there to be particles arranged tree-wise. For one thing, there seems to be a modal distinction—the relationship between trees and particles arranged tree-wise seems to be more modally robust than that between marriages and vows and a signed piece of paper, in the sense that a close possible world with the same laws of physics might be one where we don't have a marriage when we have vows and a signed piece of paper, but we do have trees whenever we have particles arranged tree-wise. For another, it seems that the only route to knowledge of marriage involves some conceptual wrangling, but that one might come to know about trees simply by bumping into one.

Thomasson does say (2015, p. 150) that there might be important epistemic differences between different kinds of entities, but that the difference is not to be characterised in terms of 'depth'. It is tempting, I think, to maintain that there is something shallow about marriages as compared with trees. However, the temptation to align this with the epistemology of marriages versus trees weakens when we consider the other kinds of entities we might establish the existence of on purely conceptual grounds. When we establish on the basis of easy arguments that there are properties, for example, it doesn't seem that we are thereby entitled to infer anything in particular about their nature. Plausibly, the ontological shallowness of marriage has to do with the nature of marriage itself: perhaps for example its apparent mind-dependence,² or perhaps some other feature (I'll make one such proposal later in this chapter). By contrast, it might well be that properties are platonic entities, and so a paradigm of ontological weightiness.

¹ Of course, some would deny that we can gain knowledge of any kind of entity through induction into language games.

² I can't defend here the view that mind-dependent entities are ontologically shallow, but I think it has some *prima facie* plausibility.

The second reason from Schiffer that Thomasson considers for the relevant entities being ‘shallow’ is that they merely conservatively extend the relevant theory, and hence they make no difference to the causal order of things. Once we accept that the grass is green, it is a conservative extension (Thomasson claims) to say that it has the property of being green. Thomasson argues that whether an extension to a theory is conservative or not depends on the prior theory. So a prior theory that included particles arranged tree-wise would take trees to be a mere conservative extension, whilst one with no grip on living tall branching leafy sticks would not. Entities the existence of which are established on the basis of easy arguments are inconsequential to the background theory’s standing empirical commitments, but nothing follows about their having or lacking causal powers (Thomasson, 2015, p. 149).

I presume that the idea in the background here is that whenever we have a theory according to which there are particles arranged tree-wise with a causal profile, we should expect trees to have the very same causal profile. (After all, if one can move via trivial inference from the existence of particles arranged tree-wise to that of trees, then presumably one can move via similarly trivial inference from the claim that particles arranged tree-wise are causally efficacious to the claim that trees are causally efficacious.) This thought is somewhat revealing. There is no troubling causal overdetermination in thinking that we might describe both a brick and some particles arranged brick-wise as causing the breaking of a window. Why not? Perhaps because the particles arranged brick-wise are identical to the brick. We can employ different concepts to think about them, but the world remains the same.

This perhaps is why many have the intuition that entities like the brick are ‘ontologically lightweight’; they are no addition to being over and above the particles arranged brick-wise. Indeed, the idea that the entities introduced on the basis of easy arguments are identical to something the existence of which we already accept is borne out by comments Thomasson makes (2015, p. 157): we can’t explain why the house is red by appeal to the fact that it has the property redness, because the latter is just a way of restating the former. As Katherine Hawley puts it in her comments on *Ontology Made Easy* (2019, p. 232), in easy inferences the conclusion (e.g. there is an x) and the first premise (e.g. there are particles arranged

x -wise) are ‘mutually transformable via the conceptual truth’. It follows that if there is nothing ontologically lightweight about particles arranged tree-wise, there won’t in fact be anything lightweight about trees either.

Though we can accept that there is nothing lightweight about the disputed entities themselves on Thomasson’s view, it nevertheless seems reasonable to characterise the simple realism about those entities that she subscribes to as lightweight in the sense that the *very notion of realism* becomes, in a sense, shallow and relatively unserious. For Thomasson, we should be simple realists about xs when the xs exist according to our background theory, and we can infer the existence of xs on the basis of easy arguments.³ For Thomasson then, (minimal) simple realism is not a deep and serious position in a difficult debate, it is something that falls out of some uncontroversial things that we ought to accept.⁴ There is, however, a serious debate in the vicinity: the higher level question of how we ought to conceive of realism remains on the table, and we will need substantive arguments (of the kind that Thomasson offers) to establish the correctness of Thomasson’s deflationary or ‘lightweight’ approach over that of, say, the heavyweight realist (who thinks of ontological questions as deep and serious). This is the debate that will concern us in the remainder of this chapter.

Joint-Carving

In this section I’ll first introduce the notion of ‘joint-carving’, which plays a key role in a version of heavyweight realism defended by Sider (2011), and which Thomasson rejects along with all kinds of what she

³ Many philosophers deny that the existence of something suffices for realism, further requiring that we think of the relevant thing also as *mind-independent*. We can think of these as two conditions for realism about something. I’ll follow Thomasson in largely setting aside the mind-independence condition and focusing on the existence condition. (We can, if we like, think of the discussion here as involving a kind of *minimal realism* which is a necessary basis for a more substantial realism which includes mind-independence.)

⁴ This is not to say that we should be realists about *everything* on Thomasson’s view. Thomasson rejects, for example, realism about witches on the basis that the application conditions associated with the term ‘witch’ include that a woman be endowed with supernatural powers following a pact with the devil. Since there are no supernatural powers and no devil, these application conditions are not met (2015, p. 154).

calls ‘explanatory realism’. I’ll then suggest (in this and the following section) that we can think of Sider’s realism and others like it as version of *fundamentality realism*. I’ll ultimately argue at the end of the chapter that this view can be helpfully combined with aspects of Thomasson’s position to overcome some of the difficulties facing the pure versions of both simple and fundamentality realism.

In Plato’s *Phaedrus* (265e), Socrates employs a metaphor which is commonly appealed to in contemporary metaphysics: reality is like an animal, and our job (qua metaphysician) is that of a good butcher—to carve at the natural joints. The joint-carving metaphor can be variously unpacked, but it suggests something beyond Thomasson’s ‘simple realism’, and is indicative of precisely the kind of depth to questions about ontology that Thomasson rejects.

Lewis (1984, 1986) accounts for joint-carvingness in terms of *naturalness*: some groupings of things are such that ‘their boundaries are established by objective sameness and difference in nature’ (1986, p. 227). These groupings correspond to the perfectly natural properties. Lewis holds that the perfectly natural properties are special. They provide a minimal supervenience base, feature in laws, and are the kinds of things investigated by fundamental physics. They are also the more eligible candidate meanings for the expressions of our language, and so in this way language cleaves to nature’s joints.⁵ Properties are not simply natural or unnatural; naturalness comes in degrees. The perfectly natural properties are, according to Lewis, properties like *mass*, *spin* and *charge*. Less natural than those are properties like *green*, *wet*, and *friendly*, but those familiar properties are nevertheless more natural than gerrymandered monstrosities like *friendly if wet*, and *massive or green*.

Sider (2009, 2011) extends Lewis’ notion of naturalness so that it applies cross-categorically. Sider’s primitive operator, *S*, is an operator which acts on any portion of a language. Thus, it is not just predicates and the properties that correspond to them that appear on the relevant hierarchy, but also quantifiers, sentential operators, predicate modifiers, and so on (see Sider, 2011, chapter 6). Sider’s conception of joint-carving

⁵ This of course is not the whole story. Lewis’ metasemantics involves a trade-off between interpreting speakers charitably such as to maximise the numbers of their utterances that come out as true under the interpretation, and constraining the interpretation in accordance with the eligibility of the referents.

is thus more thoroughgoing than Lewis'—he identifies more joints along which to carve; more axes along which one might succeed or fail accurately to represent reality's objective structure. He takes it not only to be the case that some predicates are objectively better for representing the world than their rivals, but also that some quantifiers, operators and so on, and the grammar with which they are expressed, carve nature at the joints more closely than rival notions.

Sider's position is a prime example of what Thomasson calls 'explanatory realism' according to which (in a Quinean spirit) the realist introduces various posits in order to explain some phenomena. This realism is explanatory in the sense that it allows us to *explain* our observations. Realism about some posit is justified when the existence of that posit provides the best explanation for what we observe. For example, we might be realists about properties because we observe that redness is a shared feature of multiple objects, and the best explanation for this is that there is some universal, *redness*, which these objects instantiate. Or we might be realists about numbers because we take them to be indispensable to doing science, and the best explanation of their indispensability is that they exist. For Sider, this kind of reasoning justifies realism about structure itself: 'recognising structure improves our understanding of the world...[s]tructure is a posit that is justified by its ability to improve our theories' (2011, p. 10).⁶

Though the entities of the explanatory realist are (according to Thomasson) no more robust than those of the simple realist, they do play a different theoretical role, since the explanatory realist admits and the simple realist denies that the property *greenness* (say) has any explanatory power. Unlike the explanatory realist, the simple realist can't (and indeed mustn't) justify the existence of a disputed entity by appeal to inference to the best explanation. Any such appeals would be illegitimate, given that the entities of the simple realist must provide only conservative extensions to the theory.

For the explanatory or 'heavyweight', non-deflationary realist, realism itself is a weighty position. The job of the realist is to discern what *really* (stares; thumps table) exists, and not just to formulate easy arguments

⁶ Note that strictly speaking, structure is a piece of ideology rather than ontology. It is clear though that Sider uses the same kind of methods to establish the existence of something as he does to justify the inclusion of some ideology in his best theory.

and accept their conclusions. One might argue though that an appeal to explanatoriness is not sufficient for heavyweight realism. Special science posits such as money have explanatory power, explain our observations, improve our theories and so on, but heavyweight realism about money would be a hard position to defend. (Not so for lightweight realism about money: I have some coins in my pocket; I have some money in my pocket; there is money.) Presumably our reasons for feeling queasy about heavyweight realism about money is that we don't think that money is among the *ultimate* explainers; money is not fundamental. And perhaps this is even what Thomasson has in mind in her discussion of explanatory realism: perhaps heavyweight realists are concerned with ultimate explanation.⁷ This notion of ultimate explanation seems to be pointing at the same thing as our earlier discussion of joint-carving and of metaphysical structure. (At least some) heavyweight realists have in mind the idea that the entities about which they are realist carve nature at the joints, or perhaps are related in the right kind of way to joint-carving entities.

We can unpack this by considering how further contained within the joint-carving metaphor and brought out by consideration of Lewisian naturalness and (even more so) by Sider's structure is the idea that we can distinguish between the fundamental (the perfectly natural or perfectly structural) and the derivative. Talk of reality's structure refers not just to the joint-carving fundamentals but also (at least sometimes) to the hierarchical relations between the fundamental and the increasingly derivative; to the layered conception of reality. This allows us to state more clearly an option for the heavyweight realist: that we be realist about whatever is fundamental, and that we think about ontology and realism in connection with fundamentality.⁸ Call this kind of position

⁷ Perhaps low-enough-level explanation is enough, as it would have to be if there are no ultimate explainers. In such worlds, the notion of joint-carvingness must be reinterpreted along the lines discussed for naturalness in Schaffer (2004). I do not have the space here to discuss this in detail.

⁸ The details of the position might go various different ways. For example, we might be realists about only whatever is fundamental, and restrict our ontology to the fundamentals. We might think that reality comes in degrees, and that the fundamental is maximally real and the derivative less real the less closely connected it is to the fundamental. We might be permissive about ontology but think that all that really counts when it comes to keeping metaphysical scores is the fundamental. I'll not take a stand on these issues here, though I will describe some positions in more detail in the next sections.

fundamentality realism. Fundamentality realism is heavyweight because it seems to make the practice of ontology a deep and serious one; it is about finding out what fundamentally exists, or what reality is, at bottom, like.

It's possible (as suggested above) that Thomasson takes explanatory realism to be or to include fundamentality realism: we should be realists about whatever it is that we need to explain everything else. As she states it though, her target in her discussion of explanatory realism seems to be closer to the broadly Quinean idea that we should be realists about whatever we quantify over in our best theory of the world (see Quine, 1948), and not about whatever is quantified over in our best *fundamental* theory. To my mind, fundamentality realism is layered, structured, or multi-dimensional while we can think of the realism associated with broadly Quinean quantificational ontology as somewhat 'flat'. Nevertheless, it certainly seems possible to combine the two views, and Sider's work seems explicitly to do this (as do others e.g. Schaffer, 2009). In the next section we look at fundamentality realism in a little more detail, beginning by contrasting the view with a different kind of deflationism to that endorsed by Thomasson.

Fundamentality Realism

According to Eli Hirsch (e.g. 2002, 2009, 2011), ontological debates are defective because they presuppose that there is some privileged interpretation of the existential quantifier when in fact there is no such interpretation. According to Hirsch, when two people disagree about whether there are tables they might be talking past one another; one is working with a conception of existence according to which tables exist, the other is not. Hirsch considers himself a realist on the grounds that our subjective, linguistic choices don't determine what exists (as he takes it the anti-realist would have it). What those choices *do* determine is what we mean by 'exists', and so (assuming that we pick out what exists using the existential quantifier), the meaning of the existential quantifier varies with variations in linguistic schemes (Hirsch, 2002, p. 52). Sider's heavyweight realism is a rejection of this kind of view, and an endorsement of the idea that there is some kind of privileged language (complete with privileged quantifiers) for doing ontology.

We can now refine our suggestion for how one might combine an appeal to joint carving with an expression of realism, and also maintain the more traditional idea that to be a realist about the *xs* is to hold (in the most sober tone of voice) that the *xs* exist:⁹ we should be realist about whatever falls under the extension of a joint-carving quantifier. So, we can imagine various different interpretations of the quantifier '∃', one of which is metaphysically privileged. That is to say, one of which represents an objective distinction in nature. To be a realist about numbers is then to think that numbers are among the entities quantified over by this metaphysically privileged quantifier. This view combines both explanatory and fundamentality realism.

The Thomasson-style deflationist is threatened by this kind of move, because it can be maintained that even if ontological questions have trivial answers in ordinary English (and other natural languages), the correct language in which to do ontology is 'Ontologese', and so the deep and mysterious substance of ontology can be recovered. For example, Schaffer (2009) argues that ontological questions are not particularly deep, because they can often be quickly answered in the affirmative without revealing any deep truths about reality. So, the fact that our best theory of the world quantifies over tables (if it does) does not settle whether or not we should be realists about tables. The question of whether we should be realists about tables can only be answered by considering whether or not tables are *fundamental*. That is to say, it can only be answered by thinking about the structure of the world (and this is the task of metaphysics) (see Schaffer, 2009, p. 379).

Sider (2011, p. 83) accuses Thomasson of engaging in precisely the kind of metaphysics she rejects, because in order to insist that debates about ontology cannot be relocated to the metaphysics room and conducted in terms of a privileged, joint-carving quantifier (and not the English quantifier that simply brings out the quantification implicit in our conceptual scheme) she must deny that there is any such joint-carving

⁹ Again, perhaps realism as it is traditionally conceived also involves a denial that the *xs* are somehow mind-dependent, but we could imagine mind independence being built in to the interpretation of the relevant structural quantifier.

quantifier.¹⁰ But this, according to Sider, is to claim something about reality's intrinsic structure, namely that it lacks such a quantifier. This kind of claim is not merely a reflection on our linguistic practices. On the contrary, it is metaphysically deep and substantive. Thomasson responds that she need not abandon her 'epistemic high ground' (Sider, 2011, p. 187) by engaging in the sort of metaphysics she rejects. It is enough merely not to endorse the claim that reality has any quantificational structure, without making the substantive claim that it doesn't.¹¹ This position can be maintained by claiming that linguistic analysis reveals that the quantifier is simply not the kind of term that is in the business of carving nature at the joints (Thomasson, 2015, pp. 315–6).

This exchange again reveals the depth of the disagreement between Thomasson and her opponents. Sider would presumably respond that it is misguided to look to linguistic analysis in order to reveal truths about the role of the quantifier; we should instead be thinking about the work that a metaphysically privileged quantifier can do for us in our theorising. And Thomasson will reject this for the same kinds of reasons that she prefers 'simple' over 'explanatory' realism. However, there is an alternative formulation of fundamentality realism (and hence of heavyweight realism) which doesn't make use of the idea of privileged quantifiers.

According to Fine (2009, p. 161), ontological questions should be understood as questions about what is *real*. Fine's notion of Reality is in many ways close to Sider's notion of fundamentality, expressed in terms of structure (though where Fine officially rejects quantificational approach to ontology, there is a sense in which Sider endorses it). Where Fine is concerned with propositions about what is true in Reality (the 'real propositions'), Sider is concerned with what he calls the 'structural truths'; those propositions expressed by sentences where every word in the sentence is joint-carving (see Sider, 2011 section 8.3). An ontological claim like 'tables are real' in Fine's mouth is, for Sider, akin to saying that *S*(tables). However, Fine's approach and Sider's employ different kinds of

¹⁰ It is important that Thomasson deny this because accepting that there is a joint-carving quantifier allows for the possibility that Thomasson's easy ontological claims are definitional but not true (because the relevant inferences might not be truth preserving on the most eligible interpretation of the quantifier)—see Sider (2011, p. 196).

¹¹ Warren (2016, p. 2431) makes a similar point.

machinery, and Thomasson's arguments against Sider's move to an Ontologese quantifier don't carry over to Fine's notion of Reality (or to the more general contention of the fundamentality realist: that we should think about realism in connection with fundamentality).

Fundamentality realism involves recognising both some way to mark out or distinguish whatever is fundamental, and some kind of level connector to connect the fundamental to the derivative. Fine (2001) takes his notion of Reality to be primitive (in the sense that it can't be understood in any other terms), but it is common in the literature to think of *grounding* as the appropriate level connector, and to identify the fundamental with the ungrounded (see e.g. Schaffer, 2009). Grounding is usually taken to be a non-casual dependence relation which plays a role in explanations. For example, we might say that the ball's being red is grounded in (and explained by) it's being a particular shade of red (e.g. crimson), or that the existence of a singleton set is grounded in (and explained by) the existence of its sole member.

It's worth noting for our purposes that this kind of non-causal explanation (called *metaphysical explanation*) is not the same kind of explanation as features in Thomasson's explanatory realism. Thomasson's explanatory realism makes use of inference to the best explanation: the proponent of explanatory realism justifies realism about some posit on the basis of the explanatory work it does. The fundamentality realist who takes derivative entities to be metaphysically explained by the entities that ground them justifies her realism about those derivative entities on the basis of their connection to the fundamental.

Insofar as fundamentality realism makes ontological questions deep and substantive, Thomasson will (I presume) be inclined to reject it. Fine's notions of reality and notions like grounding are generally introduced as posits in precisely the sort of way Thomasson objects to. We are encouraged to accept them based on the work they can do, and to do this in spite of their having an (at best) underdeveloped epistemology (see e.g. Thompson, 2018; Miller & Norton, 2017). Complaints about the epistemology of structure can also be levelled against Sider's brand of fundamentality realism. Warren (2016) argues that Siderian realism about structure faces a strong version of Benacerraf-style epistemological arguments (see Benacerraf, 1973). Granting that our attitude-forming

mechanisms are in a loose sense (which Sider would grant) *causal* mechanisms, reliably true beliefs about causally inaccessible metaphysical structure are merely a happy accident. The proponent of structure must concede that in relevantly similar scenarios where the structure facts remain the same, but we happen to prefer a mathematically equivalent theory with non-joint-carving ideology, we will be mistaken about the facts about metaphysical structure. Beliefs about structure that are reliable only by accident or by luck are not to be considered well justified (see Warren, 2016, pp. 2427–8). If this style of argument is successful, it generalises to other causally inaccessible metaphysically primitive notions including grounding, Reality and naturalness.

Thomasson's own objections to forms of heavyweight realism reject any substantive criteria for existence. Thomasson claims that any term whose application conditions as established by ordinary speakers are fulfilled, but where the substantive criterion is not met, will count as a counterexample to that criterion (2015, p. 117), so e.g. the fundamentality realist might reject realism about marriages on the grounds that marriages are not fundamental (or appropriately connected to the fundamental), but it seems clear that the application conditions for a marriage as established by ordinary speakers are in fact often met. The mistake made by heavyweight realists, according to the deflationist, is that they find an application condition for the existence of things of a certain kind, and then illegitimately generalise (Thomasson, 2015, p. 120). For example, we might propose mind-independence as a criterion for the existence of fundamental particles, and then illegitimately suppose that everything that exists must be mind-independent, even though (according to the deflationist) marriages clearly exist and are mind dependent.

However, the fundamentality realist can respond to this objection precisely because she has the resources *not* to make the illegitimate generalisation Thomasson mentions. Instead she can maintain (as does e.g. Schaffer, 2009) that we can draw a principled distinction between the existence of *fundamental* entities and the rest. We can accept that entities exist when their application conditions as established by ordinary speakers are met, and yet still make realism a substantive thesis by expressing the view in connection with fundamentality. We work out whether or not some *x* fundamentally exists by seeing whether or not it can be

metaphysically explained by anything further. I'll explore this idea further in the next section.

We now have in play three notions: simple realism, explanatory realism, and fundamentality realism, and have said something of the relation between them. In the remainder of this chapter, I will argue that Thomasson is under pressure to accept a version of ontology that is not flat, but that exhibits some kind of metaphysical structure. The first motivation for this (which I discuss in the next section) is that as stated, Thomasson's brand of realism is indistinguishable from what we might call 'sophisticated' antirealism: versions of antirealism that are at pains to respect the kinds of things that ordinary speakers are inclined to say. I'll later suggest that we can offer reasons in favour of recognising notions like fundamentality on the basis of something like easy arguments, but (at the end of the paper) that the move to a version of fundamentality realism need not go against easy ontology or against Thomasson's neo-Carnapian outlook.

Creeping Minimalism and Metaphysical Explanation

Proponents of contemporary, sophisticated variants of antirealist positions about various domains of discourse are concerned to find ways to accommodate the way in which language is used by ordinary speakers. Thus, antirealists about morality are happy to maintain that torturing cats is wrong, and antirealists about numbers are willing to assert that there are prime numbers between 5 and 10. As Dreier (2004) puts the problem, in 'the good old days' we used to be able to distinguish moral realist from antirealist by asking them something like 'but is torturing cats *really* wrong?', and we could have expected the antirealist to say 'no', on the grounds that that there aren't *really* any moral properties; moral properties aren't part of metaphysical reality. But ordinary speakers don't just say that torturing cats is wrong; they say that it is *really* wrong, that it is *true* that torturing cats is wrong, and that if torturing cats is wrong than torturing Whiskers is wrong. In short, ordinary speakers talk like

moral realists. It is precisely this kind of consideration (a respect for what ordinary speakers say) that helps motivate Thomasson's simple realism. This, combined with the rise of minimalist theories of facts and truth (such that all there is to truth is something like collected instances of the schema 'S' is true iff S) have led antirealists to start talking a lot like realists, threatening our ability to recognise a distinction between the two positions. Dreier's name for the problem is *creeping minimalism*.

It's a small step from minimalism about truth to minimalism about properties, and about propositions. Moral antirealists can now accept that there *are* moral properties, maintaining that all it is for x to have the property of being F is for x to be F . Predicates standing for moral properties behave logically and grammatically just as other predicates do, and antirealists have recaptured the ordinary realist language of ethics. In Dreier's words, minimalism 'sucks the substance out of heavy duty metaphysical concepts' (Dreier, 2004, p. 26). The threat is that antirealism has thereby become indistinguishable from realism. There are no obvious resources remaining to characterise the sense in which the antirealist wishes to assert that something is the case whilst denying that it is 'really' part of a metaphysical conception of reality.

This might sound initially as though it ought not to worry Thomasson—there is a sense in which sucking the substance out of heavy duty metaphysical concepts is precisely what she argues for! Moreover, in her brief discussion of Blackburn's quasi-realist programme (which adopts the kind of strategy described here) Thomasson is clear that she takes Blackburn's position to be misleadingly named: like her, he is in fact a simple realist. According to Blackburn and to Thomasson, there are (e.g.) moral properties in the only sense those terms have (Thomasson, 2015, p. 153). But this doesn't quite seem right. The quasi-realist (if the project works) is ultimately able to talk like a realist, but it is key to the position that the starting point is moral attitudes and not moral properties. It seems to me that when it comes to settling questions about realism and antirealism it's not just what people say that is important, but also what accounts for the truth of what they say (or at least, what they take to account for the truth of what they say).

One reason for thinking this is that it certainly seems to matter to the sophisticated antirealists (who take themselves to be antirealists but

nevertheless are happy to endorse realist-sounding propositions) that their position is not realism, and it seems fairly clear that they do not merely wish to contrast their position with explanatory realism, but also with deflationary or simple realist positions like Thomasson's. Thomasson herself is at pains to distinguish her position from fictionalism (see e.g. her 2013, 2017), but a sophisticated fictionalist could clearly adopt the minimalist's strategy and end up saying the same things as Thomasson, even though she thinks (contra Thomasson) that a pretence attitude is the appropriate stance to take towards propositions in the relevant domain.¹² If ultimately Thomasson's position is indistinguishable from the fictionalist because they endorse the same propositions with respect to e.g. what exists, that seems like a problem for both parties. As Dreier (2004, p. 31) says, the problem belongs to metaontology. It should trouble anybody who believes that realism and sophisticated antirealism about a given domain of discourse are distinctive positions, and that realist and antirealist espouse different ontological commitments.

It is this problem that motivates Fine's (2001) introduction of the notion of grounding into the contemporary discourse. The basic idea is that we can take some sentence that both realist and antirealist are willing to assert:

(1) Torturing cats is wrong

Rather than asking each party whether the proposition expressed by (1) is true, whether they think it is *really* the case, or even whether or not the proposition is fundamental, we ask them what *grounds* the proposition that torturing cats is wrong. Fine argues that the realist and the antirealist about morality will give different answers to the grounding question, and we will thereby be able to determine who is a moral realist. (Further determining who is correct is a matter of weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of the different accounts of a given practice, but we need not concern ourselves with that here.) For the moral realist,

¹² It's no good to object that there's clearly a difference in that the fictionalist thinks that there is ultimately pretence involved. The quasi-realist similarly thinks that ultimately attitudes are involved; my point is that we need to think about what is ultimately the case in order to see the difference between these views.

moral properties will feature in the explanation of what makes it the case that torturing cats is wrong. For the moral antirealist, they won't. Because the moral realist thinks moral properties feature in ultimate metaphysical explanations of other facts (such as (1) above), she is a fundamentality realist about moral properties. The moral antirealist denies that moral properties so feature, and so is not a fundamentality realist about moral properties.

I have skimmed over the details of Fine's account here, but for our purposes all we need is the idea that we can solve the problem of creeping minimalism by appealing to a levelled conception of reality: by maintaining that some things make other things the case, metaphysically speaking. Central to this idea is a focus on (metaphysical) explanation, and in fact this is the notion that Dreier (2004) takes to solve the problem. We can get at this notion by asking what-makes-it-the-case-that questions, and we can expect realist and antirealist to give different answers to those kinds of questions.

We have seen how the heavyweight moral realist gives a different answer to a what-makes-it-the-case-that question involving a proposition like (1) than that which will be given by the sophisticated moral antirealist, but what of the deflationary realist? If it's right that we should be realists about properties because conceptual competence dictates that once we accept that torturing cats is wrong, we ought also to accept that there is a property, *wrongness* which torturing cats has or instantiates, then we should presumably accept a metaphysical explanation of torturing cats that goes via that moral property. That is, we should accept that there are moral properties because we accept that torturing cats is wrong, and *wrongness* is a moral property. However, we shouldn't conflate the epistemology with the metaphysics. The deflationist holds that we are primarily acquainted with the wrongness of cat torture, and on that basis we establish that there are moral properties, but it would presumably get things the wrong way round to claim that *metaphysically speaking*, there are moral properties because there is cat torture.

This allows us further to clarify the issue that arose earlier about the ontological 'depth' of the entities the existence of which we establish on the basis of easy arguments. Now we have the resources more clearly to state why marriage seems ontologically shallow (because what makes it

the case that two people are married is that they signed a paper and said some vows) whereas properties don't seem shallow (properties themselves are plausibly fundamental: they don't depend on and aren't metaphysically explained by anything else). The illusion of shallowness in the case of properties established on the basis of easy arguments came from conflating the epistemology with the metaphysics. This is something Thomasson warns against, but appealing to metaphysical explanation allows us to sharpen the distinction between a method of establishing the existence of something, and the nature of the thing itself.

My suggestion then is that an attractive line for Thomasson to take would be to combine her simple realism with fundamentality realism (just as Sider combines explanatory realism with fundamentality realism). One can be a simple realist about the disputed entities in the sense that their existence is to be established on the basis of easy arguments rather than by inference to the best explanation. However, we can further make use of the notion of metaphysical explanation in order to recognise a distinction between those entities that are properly to be considered ontologically shallow or lightweight, and those whose existence is more substantive. Simple realism means we can answer existence questions about these disputed entities in the affirmative, but we can also recognise (by appeal to the resources of fundamentality realism) a sense in which some entities are lightweight as compared with others.¹³

The kind of argument for thinking of realism as a combination of simple and fundamentality realism and for recognising a levelled conception of reality discussed above is not the kind of argument that would appeal to Thomasson. It is rather the kind of argument the explanatory realist offers: it justifies a posit by appeal to the work it can do. In the next section I argue (tentatively) that we might be able to offer a more deflationist-friendly argument for this way of thinking about realism, before (finally) I claim that this proposal is ultimately quite friendly to Thomasson's metaphysical outlook.

¹³ Earlier I suggested that ontological shallowness might go with mind-dependence. These proposals are not in conflict, as it might be that one way in which entities can be non-fundamental is to be mind-dependent.

‘Easy arguments’ for Fundamentality Realism

I’ll argue below that we might be able to offer something like ‘easy arguments’ for the sorts of notions favoured by the fundamentality realist, and that this, in conjunction with the argument of the previous section, gives reason for the deflationist to adopt aspects of fundamentality realism. Before that, some caveats. First, what I’m offering are not really easy arguments: they aren’t arguments at all. Like Thomasson’s easy arguments though, they appeal to the kinds of things ordinary speakers say and the argumentative moves they accept in order to claim that we ought to accept and to use notions like fundamentality, metaphysical explanation, and their cognates. Second, Thomasson’s easy arguments as stated concern ontology, not ideology. One might claim then that even if we can offer something like easy arguments for pieces of metaphysical ideology, Thomasson is not compelled to accept that ideology on the basis of them. This issue deserves more space than I can give it here, but *prima facie* it would seem that if we can offer a meaningful, truth apt sentence about fundamentality or the fundamentality of some entity and that sentence can be shown to be true using conceptual or empirical means, it would be strange for Thomasson (given her other commitments) nevertheless to reject the notion of fundamentality and its cognates. If Thomasson thinks there is something special about ontological sentences such that they can be assessed conceptually or empirically and that this doesn’t hold for other kinds of sentences, she doesn’t say what it is (see Eklund, [2017](#)).

Notions like *grounding* and *metaphysical explanation* are arguably semi-technical, and it is plausible that ordinary speakers don’t exhibit the kind of competence with them that would be required for us to be able to make for them anything like the kind of case Thomasson makes for ordinary objects, or for the other kinds of entities she takes to be established on the basis of easy arguments. There is no room on this view for a kind of simple realism about such notions. In Hofweber’s terminology, these notions belong to ‘esoteric’ metaphysics, a domain of enquiry that involves questions formulated in distinctive terminology and which cannot be answered by other parts of enquiry (see e.g. Hofweber, [2016](#), p. 312).

However, all that is needed for a version of fundamentality realism that allows us to respond to the problem of creeping minimalism is the idea that some things *make other things the case*. With this notion, we can distinguish the realist from the sophisticated antirealist, because the realist accepts and the antirealist denies that (for example) moral properties have a role to play in making it the case that some act is wrong. Earlier I suggested that the best way to understand this notion is in terms of metaphysical explanation.

Dasgupta (2017, p. 76) argues that this kind of notion of metaphysical or (as he calls it) ‘constitutive’ explanation is common and ubiquitous (note that Dasgupta identifies this notion with grounding):

[G]round is “quotidian” in [the] sense that it is an everyday concept used by the masses. When I explain the concept to non-philosophers they recognize it immediately and talk intelligibly about it, offering examples of constitutive explanations in their own fields of biology, economics, journalism, or cooking.

The notion that Dasgupta has in mind is a deflated one relative to much of the contemporary grounding literature. I think it fairly plausible that grounding on the more inflated conception is genuinely esoteric, but we don’t need such a notion to give an account of fundamentality realism. All that we need is a way in which we can understand reality as structured: a way of understanding how things fit together, metaphysically speaking. If Dasgupta is right that this notion is entirely familiar, then we should expect Thomasson to accept it. To use Hofweber’s terminology again, the notion is ‘egalitarian’ in the sense that it is defined in generally accessible terms (see e.g. 2016, p. 321).

The notion (or at least a notion) of fundamentality expressed in terms of (metaphysical) explanation seems similarly egalitarian. Most would be willing to accept (and empirical investigation can help to confirm) that the biological facts can be explained in terms of the chemical facts, and the chemical facts can be explained by the physical facts. It is the physical facts that make the chemical facts the case, and the chemical facts that make the biological facts the case. It follows that the physical facts are more fundamental than the biological facts, and this has something like the form of an easy argument for fundamentality.

Hofweber (2016, p. 330) argues that whilst there *is* an egalitarian notion of fundamentality, this is not the notion we need for a position like fundamentality realism because it doesn't have the appropriate connection to metaphysical priority. *Pace* Hofweber, I don't think we need to think of metaphysical priority in such an inflated (and thereby esoteric) way in order to formulate and to benefit from fundamentality realism. We can think of metaphysical priority as an ordering that is determined by what-makes-it-the-case-that questions and the answers to those questions, and can even do so while thinking of metaphysical explanation as a familiar, ordinary notion which is sensitive to variations in context, related to understanding and so on in the familiar way. What makes an explanation metaphysical and secures the connection to metaphysical priority is that the relevant questions are what-makes-it-the-case-that questions rather than why-questions—they are answered by specifying grounds rather than causes.¹⁴ There is no mystery here, and no terms which cannot be understood outside of the relevant domain of enquiry. If we want to define what it is to be fundamental, we can do so in familiar terms (e.g. it is to not be explained in terms of anything else).

Upshots

I have argued that the easy ontologist shouldn't just be a simple realist. In order to respond to the problem of creeping minimalism and to satisfactorily account for the intuition that some entities are more 'ontologically lightweight' than others, she should combine her simple realism with fundamentality realism, which involves recognising metaphysical structure as imposed by taking some things to make other things the case. I have left open precisely how one might articulate fundamentality realism, but I think the best option for the Thomasson-style deflationist is to have a permissive ontology (as secured on the basis of easy arguments) and to further recognise those entities about which we are realist to be part of a metaphysical structure determined on the basis of what (metaphysically) explains what. This structure allows us to determine which entities are

¹⁴ This view is developed in detail in Thompson (2019).

ontologically lightweight (perhaps those that are only distantly related to the fundamental, or perhaps those that are mind-dependent) and which are heavyweight.

The conception of metaphysical explanation with which we formulate reality's structure is based on our familiar notion of explanation; it is not an esoteric notion of explanation into which we need to be initiated. One consequence of this is that metaphysical explanation is relative to our conceptual schemes and our theories, and so our notion of metaphysical structure can't reach beyond this. We can't on this view make sense of some special metaphysical notion of reality that transcends our theorising, and thus becomes epistemically inaccessible. I contend that this approach to metametaphysics thus retains much of the deflationary spirit of Thomasson's proposal in *Ontology Made Easy*, but does so whilst securing a few additional advantages.

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5

Who's Afraid of Conceptual Analysis?

JTM Miller

Amie Thomasson's work provides numerous ways to rethink and improve our approach to metaphysics. Despite being congenitally inclined towards non-deflationary views of metaphysics, I have learned a lot about what metaphysics can and should be from Thomasson's work. But this chapter is my attempt to begin to sketch why I still think there is room for substantive metaphysical work, and why I do not think that metaphysics needs to rely on any 'epistemically metaphysical' knowledge.

After distinguishing two possible forms of deflationism, I outline Thomasson's commitment to simple realism and the role of coapplication conditions in ensuring that the entities that the world contains are of the 'right sort' to be the referents of our terms. I argue that these commitments mean that the easy ontologist needs to accept (implicitly or explicitly) that there are worldly constraints on what sorts of entities could exist, and could co-exist. I argue this leaves room for a substantive role for metaphysics if (following the work of Lowe) we take metaphysics to be

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concerned with the possible ways that reality could be. I explain how this conception does not need to appeal to any ‘epistemically metaphysical’ knowledge, and need only make use of conceptual and/or empirical means to arrive at views on what could exist (and co-exist).

I view this as a conciliatory proposal. I argue that (non-deflationary) metaphysicians can accept, along with the easy ontologist, the claim that the primary role for metaphysics is to engage in conceptual analysis and that there is no need for ‘epistemically metaphysical’ knowledge. But that the (non-deflationary) metaphysician can do this while still holding that there is some substantive work for metaphysicians focused on investigating the ways that the world could be. Thus, the answer I propose to the question posed in the title is no-one. Or, at least, no-one *should* be afraid of conceptual analysis. Not even metaphysicians.¹

I

Debating about the precise meanings of a certain ‘-ism’ is often pretty unimportant. After all, what is important in philosophy (and other domains) is not what gets labelled as a form of ‘x-ism’ or ‘y-ism’, but what the view itself says. What is important is whether the view is true or not, not what we happen to call it.

However, while I agree with this sentiment to a degree, how we categorise views can be significant for the (explicit or implicit) implications and commitments that we take to accompany a particular view. For example, if I tell you that I am an ‘anti-realist’ about some entity, you will likely immediately begin to think certain things about the view that I defend. You might think that I reject the existence of those entities for instance. But my actual view might turn out to be more nuanced. I might think that such entities exist but that they are not mind-independent, and I might hold that mind-independence is important for ‘realism’ about such entities. In this case, the label ‘anti-realism’ might be accurate (at least in

¹ Hence the chapter title’s hidden subheading: Or, how I learned to stop worrying and love metaphysics.

one sense), but also might be misleading given the connotations that go along with that label. This suggests that while labels matter, so does having a clear conceptual understanding of the particular nuances of views that might, for other reasons, be perfectly reasonably categorised together.

For this reason, I want to start with a brief comment about what counts as a deflationist approach to metaphysics. I think that the term 'deflationism' is often used to describe a number of views that are importantly similar, but also importantly distinct. More specifically, I want to distinguish two distinct ways of being deflationist about metaphysics. These are ways that I think are sometimes combined in our immediate reactions to hearing that some view is 'deflationist', but need to be teased apart. For, as will become apparent, it is possible to be deflationist in one sense, but not the other, and vice versa.

The first form of deflationism we can call 'content deflationism'. Content deflationists deflate metaphysics by arguing that metaphysics cannot arrive at knowledge of the nature of reality.² Instead, if meaningful at all, metaphysical theorising only provides insights into the nature of our concepts, our language, or about how we think or perceive the world. This form of deflationism therefore stands against the 'traditional' view of metaphysics wherein the subject matter of metaphysics is the (fundamental) nature of reality. Such 'substantialist' or 'heavyweight' (as Chalmers (2009) calls them) conceptions of metaphysics hold that (at least some) metaphysical debates are (or could be) debates about the world as it is 'in-itself'.

Amongst (many) others, content deflationists might be taken to include Strawson's defence of descriptive metaphysics (Strawson, 1959); Kant's rejection of knowledge of the noumena (Kant, 1998); Carnap's analysis of language (Carnap, 1931, 1950); Putnam's critique of metaphysical realism and defence of Internal Realism (Putnam, 1981, 1987); and Hirsch's defence of Quantifier Variance (Hirsch, 2011). Though these figures might disagree over why metaphysics is non-substantive, and over what metaphysical claims really are about, each are plausible some form of content deflationism. In each case, metaphysics is not really

²I will use the terms 'reality' and 'the world' interchangeably throughout.

about the world, and is instead (at worst) meaningless or (at best) merely a reflection of how we happen to think, talk, or perceive the world.³

The second form of deflationism is methodological deflationism. As the name suggests, this form of deflationism focuses on the methods of metaphysics. For example, Ladyman and Ross in their critique of metaphysics argue that a priori methods cannot provide us with knowledge of the nature of reality (in part) due to the ways in which our concepts arise not being conducive to genuine knowledge of the world (Ladyman & Ross, 2007). They argue that traditional (or ‘analytic’) metaphysics is rationalistic and relies on flawed a priori methods, while naturalistic metaphysics embraces science, and holds that it is through a close relationship with empirical science that we can arrive at knowledge about the nature of the world. Hence, (this version of) naturalised metaphysics accepts methodological deflationism, but rejects content deflationism.

Debating the merits of methodological deflationism is difficult as it is disputed as to what the methods of metaphysics actually are. What counts as a ‘method’ of metaphysics? How many are there and (in some cases) how can they be differentiated from each other? For instance, we might take the naturalised metaphysician to be correct in that a traditional method of metaphysics is a priori reasoning, but does conceptual analysis fall under this label? Are thought experiments entirely ‘a priori’? And if so, where does that leave, epistemically, the use of such methods in the sciences?

These are broad and difficult issues that I cannot go into depth on here. My intention here is to talk about the sort of deflationism that Amie Thomasson defends in her work, not about deflationism in general.

³ See Miller (2022) for a more general discussion of various views that deny our ability to ‘access’ reality in the way presupposed by substantive (or perhaps realist) metaphysicians. Note that although I mention these figures as arguing for some version of content deflationism, this does not mean that these views only deflate the content of metaphysics. Many of them also argue for the second form of deflationism—methodological deflationism—as well. The specifics of how content and methodological deflationism interact for each of these figures will vary. For some, content deflationism underpins methodological deflationism; for others, it is methodological deflationism that leads to content deflationism. A full discussion of each of these views and the specific structure and interaction of the different forms of deflationism is not possible here, but could be interesting in future work to see if any patterns emerge in terms of whether concerns about the content of metaphysics drives claims about its methods or vice versa.

With that in mind, and noting that this leaves many of the above issues un(der)explored, let us turn now to Thomasson and her 'easy ontology' and assess it with respect to these forms of deflationism.

II

Thomasson has outlined and defended her 'Easy Ontology' approach in a number of publications (2007, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2020a). I will assume that the audience for a book such as this one will already be familiar with many aspects of easy ontology, and so to avoid giving a long outline of a view that is already familiar to readers, I will only highlight a few aspects that relate to the topics I wish to focus on.

Versions of the easy approach have been around for a while.⁴ A history of easy approaches normally includes Frege, and the neo-Fregean views in philosophy of mathematics that his work inspired (see Hale & Wright, 2001, 2009) and Schiffer's arguments that apply an easy approach to other abstract entities, such properties, propositions, events and fictional characters (Schiffer, 2003). In both, the central idea is the same. Existence questions can be answered easily, merely through some simple valid inference, that starts from an uncontroversial premise and ends with a conclusion about what exists. For example, in the case of numbers, we can begin from the uncontroversial premise that 'The cups and saucers are equinumerous', make use of the conceptual truth of Hume's principle (that 'The number of ns = the number of ms iff the ns and the ms are equinumerous'), to derive the claim that 'The number of cups = the number of saucers'. From this, as the conclusion is a true identity claim and singular terms in true statements must refer, we can conclude that numbers exist. A great and seemingly difficult metaphysical question is thus solved easily.

One highly significant aspect of Thomasson's work has been to expand the range of entities the existence of which might be secured through easy means. In particular, Thomasson has argued that the existence of ordinary concrete objects can also be secured easily. There are two key aspects

⁴ A useful history of easy arguments can be found in Thomasson (2020b).

to this extension. The first concerns the fundamental rule of use for ‘exist’. Thomasson holds that the ‘core’ rule of use for ‘exists’ is that ‘Ks exist iff the application conditions actually associated with ‘K’ are fulfilled’ (2015, p. 86). There is, for Thomasson, nothing more to the notion of existence beyond this, and she rejects any ‘substantive’ criteria of existence (which I will talk about more below). The second key aspect is the notion of ‘application condition’. Very briefly stated, application conditions are ‘rules of use’ for a term. These are typically rules that competent speakers of a language already know (though need not be able to state; see Thomasson, 2015: section 2.2).

Combining these two elements, we arrive at the position whereby ‘existence questions that are well formed and answerable to be answered straightforwardly by conceptual and/or empirical means, without the need for distinctively philosophical inquiries into existence, or for any ‘epistemically metaphysical’ knowledge’ (Thomasson, 2015, p. 129).

For example, consider the question of whether a table exists. Traditionally, the debate is such that on the one side are eliminativists who hold that tables do not exist—there is no table; there only are particles-arranged-tablewise. And, on the other, realists (or composition-*alists*) who hold that in addition to those particles, there exists a table—the particles compose some further entity that is the table. But Thomasson holds that:

A competent speaker, for example, who has mastered the use of the noun ‘table’, is in a position to know that the term may be successfully applied in restaurants all over the country, and so to conclude that there are tables without the need to read the copious metaphysics literature on composite objects. (Thomasson, 2015, p. 113)

Therefore, in the case of tables, we first use some conceptual knowledge—our knowledge of the application conditions for the relevant term—and then some empirical knowledge—our simple perceptual abilities in various restaurants—to conclude that the application conditions are fulfilled, and hence that tables exist. It is this that secures the wider scope to Thomasson’s easy ontology than other easy arguments that came before it. Thomasson’s version can be applied to existence question

beyond those concerned with abstract objects, just so long as we know the application conditions and can use empirical and/or conceptual means to assess whether those conditions are fulfilled.

Another important way that Thomasson's easy ontology is different from the easy approaches that preceded it concerns the status of the entities that we secure the existence of via easy means. For others, in particular Schiffer, the entities whose existence we secure via easy means are 'pleonastic'. They are ontologically 'lightweight' and have 'no hidden and substantial nature for a theory to uncover" (Schiffer, 2003, p. 63). Thomasson rejects this. By extending easy arguments to cases involving disputes over ordinary concrete entities, Thomasson undermines the motivation for thinking that the entities that we secure the existence of through easy means are ontologically lightweight. For Thomasson, all entities derived via easy means are as real as each other, and none has any lessened ontological status. After all, concrete entities are often taken to be the gold-standard of existing entities, and so if we can secure them, then why think that other entities (such as propositions or numbers) shown to exist via the same methods are any less real.

Putting these pieces together, we arrive at what Thomasson calls 'simple realism'. Simple realism is a first-order metaphysical position—it is about what exists (or does not exist), not about the nature of metaphysical disputes. Easy ontology 'typically leads to realism about the disputed entities' (2015, p. 155), and so Thomasson is committed to there being many things, and that these things are simply real.

With this very simplified description of Thomasson's views in mind, in what sense is it deflationist? First, as simple realism commits us to the existence of a number of entities, we can see immediately that this is not a form of content deflationism. Content deflationists hold that we cannot have knowledge of the nature of reality, with metaphysical claims (including existence claims) really being claims about the nature of our language, concepts, or how we perceive the world. Simple realism is clearly inconsistent with this form of deflationism. The entities whose existence is secured through trivial inferences are not 'shadows' of our language. They are simply real. On the reasonable assumption that knowing that something exists is to know something about the nature of

reality, if we accept easy ontology, we can still arrive at knowledge about the nature of reality.

This suggests that if easy ontology is deflationary, then it should be a version of methodological deflationism. This is borne out in two other aspects of Thomasson's easy approach. First, by Thomasson's suggestion that the easy approach relies only on conceptual and/or empirical truths, and requires nothing 'epistemically metaphysical'. Easy ontology is intended to demystify metaphysical debates, allowing us to resolve them without appeal to methods or claims that are 'epistemically metaphysical' and hence are on shaky epistemological ground.

And, second, by Thomasson's way of differentiating the way in which we arrive at simple realism within the easy approach, and other views in the metaphysical literature that also posit the existence of various entities, such as Platonism concerning abstract entities. The difference between simple realism and Platonism is not found via considering (at least directly) what entities each view accepts as existing. For it could be the case that supporters of the two views are committed to the existence of the same things. Rather, the difference arises in ways in which the two views will arrive at claims about the existence of said entities and whether or not they accept some substantive criteria of existence.

Easy ontologists, as we have seen, will make use of only conceptual and/or empirical truths, and simple valid inferences from undisputed premises. The easy ontologist accepts whatever entities fall out of this method. This allows the easy ontologist to deny that there is any universal criteria of existence. That is, the easy ontologist need not hold (and indeed Thomasson argues *should* not hold) that there is any 'substantive criteria' that we can use to determine whether or not something exists.

By 'substantive criteria of existence' Thomasson has in mind things like the Eleatic principle (that: "Everything that exists makes a difference to the causal powers of something" [Armstrong, 1997, p. 41]); or that we should only be committed to the existence of things that are 'mind-independent' (e.g. 'Lakoff 'Existence cannot depend in any way on human cognition' [Lakoff, 1987, p. 164]); or the neo-Quinean idea that we should accept those entities that are required by our best theory with the entities posited because they can play some (indispensable)

explanatory role within that theory. Thomasson's rejects both these specific criteria and the very possibility of there being a 'substantive' (or 'deep') criterion of existence:

A deflationary treatment of existence, however, involves the idea that there is no call for a theory aiming to uncover a deep and substantial nature of existence, for there is nothing more to the notion than is captured in the rules of use that enable it to fulfill its function. If the deflationary approach to existence is right, we may reject all attempts to find an acceptable principle telling us what it is to exist, or what features are definitive of existence. So we deny that we should even be looking for any principle of the following form: for every x , x exists iff x is such and such (causally relevant, mind-independent, in possession of a real nature ...). The deflationary approach thus involves rejecting the idea that there is a shared substantive criterion for existence. (2015, p. 116)

Thus, within Thomasson's easy approach 'what is deflated is not the entities but rather the ontological debates about the entities' (2015, p. 154). The deflationary element is metaontological, being founded on a deflation of the *methods* of metaphysics, not its content.⁵

Metaphysical debates, on this view, however, are not shallow or pointless. Metaphysical work remains 'difficult and of worldly significance and interest' (2017, p. 365), but it does take metaphysics 'away from the epistemological mysteries of 'serious metaphysics'' (2017, p. 364). The work of the metaphysician is conceptual, but this does not mean that this work is limited to being mere description. Instead, Thomasson suggests that metaphysical work should be prescriptive and normative, engaging in the task of working out what our concepts should be like. Thomasson ties this idea that view metaphysics is engaged in normative conceptual work closely to her deflationism:

For metaontological deflationists like myself, the idea that metaphysics has often been and can be engaged in normative conceptual work is particularly helpful and important. I have argued elsewhere (2015) that ontological

⁵After all, a non-deflationary metaphysician might agree with Thomasson that there is no single universal criteria of existence.

questions can be answered ‘easily’. That is, meaningful, well-formed questions about whether things of a given kind exist can be answered by a combination of conceptual work and (often) straightforward empirical work, and often can be answered (in the affirmative) by trivial inferences from uncontested premises. Metaphysical modal questions, too, I have argued (2007, 2013), can typically be addressed by a combination of empirical work and conceptual analysis. (2017, p. 364; see also Thomasson 2020a)

Thomasson conceives of this conceptual work as being pragmatic in nature. It is work that aims to arrive at a view of how our concepts should be, and what concepts we should accept for some particular purpose or function. This means that the role of metaphysics, for Thomasson, is primarily (if not entirely) to engage in metalinguistic negotiation. To do this work, we need to ‘figure out, empirically, what function(s) the concepts have served and do serve (where these, of course, might differ), and do descriptive conceptual work in figuring out how they work and what the ‘site constraints’ are: how they are related to other concepts and practices’ (2020, p. 455). We must make decisions about what function we want our concepts to serve in the future, and then ‘we combine that with empirical work, in doing constructive conceptual engineering: determining whether (given worldly constraints) certain modifications or precisifications would better enable the term to fulfill its function’ (2020, p. 455).

These ‘worldly constraints’ also indicate that the commitments derived from the easy approach are intended to be reactive to and reflective of the real world. This is because some of the functions that we want terms to play might require those concepts to be responsive to the world in certain ways as concepts might be ‘designed to figure in our explanatory and predictive theories’ (2020, p. 451). This normative conceptual work might lead us to suggest a change in application conditions for a term—new application conditions that better reflect the function that we want that term to fulfil. But Thomasson suggests that this is still taken to be ‘a method that does not require appeal to specifically metaphysical facts for guidance’ (2020, p. 455). Thus, metaphysical disputes are not devoid of content in the way that other deflationists have argued: easy ontology is

not a form of content deflationism. Rather, metaphysics is deflated in its methods as we should reject 'epistemically metaphysical' knowledge and embrace conceptual analysis as the (primary) role of the metaphysician.

III

As we have seen, for Thomasson, the role of metaphysics is to engage in conceptual analysis. From that conceptual analysis, we arrive at views about what the application conditions for our terms are, or what they should be. And by considering whether those application conditions are fulfilled or not, via conceptual and/or empirical means, we can arrive at claims about what exists.

We have also noted that the ontological commitments we arrive at are intended to be reactive to and reflective of the world. Easy ontology is not a form of linguistic idealism. As Thomasson states: 'the trivial inferences entitle us to infer that objects of a certain kind exist, but they do not *create* the disputed objects, or in any way call them into existence' (2015, p. 217, *emphasis in original*). Rather, the entities 'typically exist quite independently of our language and concepts' (2015, p. 217).⁶

However, this leads a question raised by Evnine (2016) about the *natures* of the entities that we are able to assert the existence of. For, when I do metaphysics, I am not only interested in the basic question of whether there is some thing that we can use the word 'rock' to talk about. What I am interested in is whether there are entities in the world such that they satisfy various criteria that I think are associated with being a rock, such as being made of stone, or being mind-independent. It is not the case that just any *thing* can satisfy this. The entities in the world must be such-and-such a way—have certain characteristics if you prefer—which ensures that there are the right sort of things in the world to allow us to conclude that there are rocks. The concern is that even if the fulfilment of application conditions secures that some thing exists, it is not enough to secure that the *right sort of thing* exists.

⁶Note that by including 'typical' here, Thomasson only means to allow that some social and cultural entities may depend on language or concepts (2015, p. 217).

Thomasson has responded to this. In brief, her response is to hold that the coapplication conditions for a term help to ‘determine *what sort of thing* our terms refer to, if they in fact refer at all, and so also help determine what sort of thing we are asking about when we ask the existence question in the first place (2015, p. 224, *emphasis in original*). Thus, the coapplication conditions ‘fix the most basic identity conditions for the things the term is to refer to (should it refer at all)’ (2015, p. 224). This ensures that if we conclude that the application and coapplication conditions are fulfilled, we thereby secure the existence of an entity of the right sort, and ‘that the entities referred to are guaranteed to have many of the identity conditions, persistence conditions, and other features supposed to characterize them’ (2015, p. 229).

There is, though, in my view, a lingering related issue. To see this issue, let us consider a simple case—that of the existence of tables. Let us grant that the existence of tables can be secured via easy means. Indeed, it is one of Thomasson’s examples to illustrate the way in which the easy approach can seemingly solve the debate between the nihilist and the compositionalist. Now focus on the entity—in this case some particular table—itself. As noted above, when say that the table exists, we want to ensure that the right sort of thing in the world exists to fulfil the application conditions for the term ‘table’. That is, we would like it to be the case that whatever exists includes some entity with the right sort of characteristics to be a table.

We should therefore ask what sort of thing is a table? What characteristics must some entity have in order to be the right sort of thing to fulfil the application conditions for ‘table’? Presumably it is a physical object, on the assumption that tables are not abstract objects. Being a physical object, we might plausibly think that a table has certain characteristics. We might hold, for instance, that like all physical objects, tables must be uniquely spatiotemporally located and must possess certain causal powers. We would not want, I assume, to hold that the application conditions for ‘table’ are fulfilled by some entity that lacks these characteristics. Russell’s table—a companion of his more famous teapot—would not be an acceptable thing for the term ‘table’ to refer to for it would lack some of the key characteristics that we take a table to have (if tables do in fact exist).

As we have seen, Thomasson appeals to coapplication conditions to ensure that tables do have these sorts of characteristics. Thus, it is the coapplication conditions for 'table' that ensures that it has the right identity conditions, persistence conditions etc. This seems persuasive at first. We are able to secure the existence of tables, *and* we are able to ensure that the things in the world that the term refers to are the right sort of thing.

However, like all terms, we might come to think that we should adjust the application conditions for 'table'. That is, we might come to think that the term 'table' requires some normative conceptual work to better allow the term to fulfil some function that we wish it to play within our language. My question is: what limits are there on this normative conceptual work? Are there conceptual claims that we simply must accept because if we do not, the world will not contain entities of the 'right sort' to be the referents of our terms? It seems that there must be such limits for if the world turned out to contain Russell's table, then, presumably, it should be the case that the application conditions we typically accept for the term 'table' are not fulfilled as there is no entity of the 'right sort' to be a referent of 'table'.

The issue is not just that simple realism commits us to the existence of certain entities. It is that the coapplication conditions ensure that those entities are of the 'right sort'. This commits the easy ontologists to the view that the world cannot contain just anything. If there are entities of the 'right sort', then there are constraints, driven by the world not our language or concepts, on what does and does not, and can and cannot exist. Without this, there would not be the entities of the 'right sort' to fulfil our application and coapplication conditions for our terms. There must be worldly constraints on what application conditions can be fulfilled and our normative conceptual work must be responsive to these limits.

To stress, this is not intended to be a *problem* for the easy ontologist. The easy ontologist will hold (in my view, rightly) that there are some things that exist in the world independently of our language as it is not a form of linguistic idealism. This implies that the world contains some constraints on what exists. And, the easy ontologist will hold that if our concepts do not—or even cannot—refer, then that might be a reason to

change or abandon those concepts. These claims are part of easy ontology, and are not aspects that I wish to argue against.

But it does lead to a question for the easy ontologist. If we are able to engage in this productive normative conceptual work, then it seems that we must have some knowledge of the limits that the world sets down on what application conditions even *could* be fulfilled. If we want to say tables genuinely exist, and we secure their existence via coming to know that the (co)application conditions for the term are fulfilled, then we have already decided that those application conditions *could* be fulfilled. And this knowledge of what application conditions could be fulfilled is part of what drives our normative conceptual work. It is why we do not consider (or argue for) application conditions for 'table' that would include the possibility of non-physical tables. For we have already taken the view that *if* the world contains tables, then those entities must be of the 'right sort', and cannot be non-physical entities. In order to be able to come to some view about whether something exists or not, even if derived via easy inferences and a consideration of application conditions, we first need to (implicitly or explicitly) have taken a view about what could exist, or (in my terms) what is metaphysically possible. How, though, do we come to know what is metaphysically possible?⁷

Another example may help here. Consider the question of whether or not square circles exist. The term 'square circle' will have certain application and coapplication conditions, which I assume most think are not satisfied. However, most think it is not just some contingent fact that square circles do not exist. Rather, we reject their existence because although we can come up with application and coapplication conditions for the term, we do not think that the world can be such that those conditions are satisfied. This could be done through arguing that the application and/or coapplication conditions are inconsistent. But even in those cases, inconsistent application conditions only secure the impossibility of square circles if we have already accepted the claim that the world itself

⁷If there were no worldly constraints on what might be included in any particular application condition, then it is unclear how the easy ontologist can avoid being some form of linguistic idealism wherein what exists, and the nature of those things that exist, is determined not by the world, but by how we think or conceive of the world. As Thomasson is clear that easy ontology is not a form of idealism, I will not even consider this line of thought here.

cannot be such that it contains entities whose application and/or coapplication conditions are inconsistent. To conclude that the application conditions of 'square circle' are inconsistent and hence that the concept cannot refer, we must already have a view that there are worldly constraints that help to determine what can exist, and one of those constraints is that an object cannot be both a square and a circle (at least at the same time).⁸

Whatever normative conceptual work we might do around the term 'square circle' will need to respect this. Unless I also propose some argument that it is possible that the world could contain an entity that can be both a square and a circle, and assuming that we must hold the meanings of the terms 'square' and 'circle' relatively stable, there is no amount of conceptual work that I can do that should allow us to conclude that square circles exist. For most people, the world simply cannot contain entities of the 'right sort' such that any proposed application conditions for the term 'square circle' will be fulfilled.

This should not, I think, be bad news for the easy ontologist given their commitment to simple realism and the rejection of linguistic idealism. The easy ontologist accepts the claim that the world constrains what exists. This is, I take it, partly why Thomasson stresses the role of empirical data in answering existence questions to ensure that easy ontology can maintain a genuine connection with the world. The easy ontologist should accept that there are worldly constraints that are prior to any conceptual work we might do that restrict what sorts of things can exist, and hence what sort of application conditions even *could* be fulfilled. This means that in order to do the sort of normative conceptual work assigned to metaphysicians, and to allow us at the end of that process to arrive at application and coapplication conditions for terms that at least *could* be fulfilled, we must already have taken a view about what *could* exist.

But, this is what leads to our seemingly simple but ultimately very difficult question: what are those worldly constraints, and how do we investigate them? It is this, I will argue, that creates the room for substantive

⁸ More accurately, it might be that what we hold is that there cannot be a square circle on the basis of the property of being a square excluding the property of being a circle. Thus, no object could have both of these properties. This additional level of detail does not affect my argument here.

metaphysics. Or at least substantive metaphysics on a certain conception of metaphysics. In the following section, my suggestion will be that under a certain conception of metaphysics, answering these questions is (at least) a significant part of what metaphysics aims to do: metaphysics is concerned with working out what are the possible ways that reality might be. Furthermore, I will argue that this sort of metaphysics requires anything ‘epistemically metaphysical’. It requires conceptual analysis, but conceptual analysis trained towards the question of how might the world be, and of what sorts of things could exist and co-exist.⁹

IV

Thomasson’s work has rightly encouraged many metaphysicians to think more carefully about what it is that they are doing when they do metaphysics. Whether or not we consequently accept a form of deflationism will turn on what we think metaphysics (and ontology) is. Thomasson’s target in her discussion is quite clear: it is neo-Quinean conception of metaphysics wherein the central question of metaphysics is ‘what exists?’.

However, this is not the only conception of metaphysics available, and there are many metaphysicians (myself included) who would also want to reject the neo-Quinean conception. A question therefore arises. What is the impact of easy ontology on those other conceptions of metaphysics? Does easy ontology include arguments that would deflate those other forms of metaphysics? Given the limited space, I will only focus on one other conception here—one that, in my view, does not receive as much discussion as it deserves. The view that metaphysics is, at least substantially, concerned with not only the way the world *is*, but also with how

⁹To stress, although I will suggest we can arrive at views on this via conceptual analysis, this does not mean that it is a mere conceptual matter. The issue is whether the world could contain entities of the right sort to be the referent of our terms with certain coapplication conditions. This is a worldly matter. I do rely on the claim that our concepts can be reflective and/or responsive to the world, however this is something that the easy ontologist also accepts, hence I will simply assume it here, though see also fn. 14 below.

the world *might* be. To outline this conception, I will draw heavily on the work of EJ Lowe.¹⁰

Lowe writes: 'I do not claim that metaphysics *on its own can*, in general, tell us what *there is*. Rather—to a first approximation—I hold that metaphysics by itself only tells us what there could be. But given that metaphysics has told us this, experience can then tell us which of various alternative metaphysical possibilities is plausibly true in actuality' (1998, p. 9, *emphasis in original*; see also Lowe, 2018). The way I interpret this is that it is to suggest that metaphysics (and ontology) is, at least initially, involved in an exploration of the ways in which the world might be. That is, it is interested in what things, or sorts of things, might exist, and what combination of things might exist—in what is possible and compossible (see Miller, 2020).

How do we inquire into what is possible and compossible? What is the methodology of metaphysics on this view? It is a mixture of conceptual and empirical—the method 'is first to argue, in an a priori fashion, for the possibility—and compossibility—of certain sorts of things and then to argue, on partly empirical grounds, for the actuality of some of those things that are compossible' (Lowe, 2011, p. 105).

For example, we observe Hesperus and Phosphorus and that their orbits coincide. Does this, *by itself*, allow us to conclude that Hesperus is Phosphorus? Following Lowe, I think not. The empirical observations alone do not secure that conclusion. The discovery that Hesperus is Phosphorus is not *solely* empirical, though it does play an important role. What happens is that we observe certain phenomena in the world, and those observations combined with a claim about whether spatiotemporal colocation implies identity for things like planets together allow us to reach our conclusion. That is, we need to also take a view about what spatiotemporal coincidence implies for entities of this sort.¹¹ As Lowe writes:

¹⁰ I am not here endorsing Lowe's whole metametaphysical view which also includes a strong commitment to essences. I will remain neutral about those elements of Lowe's metametaphysics here.

¹¹ We might, I suppose, try to establish that spatiotemporal coincidence implies identity for all physical objects. However, this is a controversial claim, and certainly there are those that do not accept that spatiotemporally coincidence implies identity for all physical objects, as the literature on the material composition and statues/lumps illustrates.

‘it is only because Hesperus and Phosphorus are taken to be planets and thereby material objects of the same kind that their spatiotemporal coincidence can be taken to imply their identity... the principle that distinct material objects of the same kind cannot coincide spatiotemporally is not an empirical one: it is an a priori one implied by what it is to be a material object of any kind’. (Lowe, 2013, p. 150)¹²

Similar claims, though negative, can be made concerning square circles. In order to discover whether there *are* square circles, we must first consider whether there *could* be square circles. Whatever our answer is to this question, we are taking a position on what is, or is not, possible—on the ways that the world could be and whether those ways include some entity being both a square and a circle. What view we take on these specific cases—on what we think is a possible way that the world might be—will also be heavily influenced by considering what is *compossible*. That is, to work out if it is genuinely possible that there are square circles will likely require us to consider various other concepts, most centrally that of ‘property’ to consider whether there are certain properties that cannot be coinstantiated by the same object at the same time.

There are two important questions that now need to be answered. First, is this a ‘substantive’ view of metaphysics? And, second, does this conception of metaphysics rely on, or presuppose access to, ‘epistemically metaphysical’ knowledge?

The first question can, in my view, be easily answered positively. Even if our ultimate aim is to know what the world is like, knowing how the world could or could not be is a valuable step in that direction. From a more pragmatic perspective, much of the metaphysical literature is filled with papers arguing that certain combinations of views are not possible rather than directly arguing for or against specific views. Thus, consideration of what the world could be like, and what combinations of commitments are compossible is at least part of the aim and activities of metaphysics. Of course, defining what counts as ‘substantive’ is not a simple task, but I suggest that any reasonable definition should be such that this conception of metaphysics is categorised as substantive.

¹²Note, Lowe connects this claim with his views about essence, but we need not accept essences to accept this role for metaphysical theorising.

The second question will take a little longer to answer. A deflationist might well argue that this conception of metaphysics is on just as shaky epistemic ground as other conceptions. After all, how could we ever come to know what are the genuine ways that reality might be? Does that not rely on us being able to come to know 'epistemically metaphysical' knowledge? I suspect this might be where Thomasson and I will disagree, but, for myself, I do not think this does require anything epistemically metaphysical. It requires only conceptual analysis and/or empirical work, and this can be seen by considering how we gain knowledge of what the world could be like.

A first way is that we might through some conceptual work come to realise that the commitments of a theory mandate certain other views. For example, given conceptual work, we might come to think that a theory that proposes a particular view about how objects persist requires us to also accept some theory within the metaphysics of time which is independently implausible. If this happened, it could lead us to think that that account of persistence is also less plausible on the grounds that it could only be true if some problematic account of the metaphysics of time were true also. Or we might use conceptual work to arrive at the view that some combination of entities cannot co-exist, as in the case of square circles which we reject because we think, due our conceptual work, that the world cannot be such that it contains an object that is both a square and a circle at the same time. We do not think square circles are impossible merely because we have not observed any in the world. Rather their impossibility is arrived at given certain views about the nature of the properties of 'being a circle' and 'being a square' (and perhaps some additional claims about how objects have or instantiate properties). These would be therefore appear to be instances of conceptual work providing insights into what is possible and/or compossible.

Or it might be that new empirical data might lead to new views about what is possible and compossible.¹³ Empirical findings might indicate that some ways that we thought the world could be are not genuine ways

¹³ I am happy to accept that it might be the case that the majority of the work of the metaphysicians is on the conceptual side of this. I illustrate the empirical side here to show how it is the case that knowledge of what is possible and compossible can be gained by conceptual *and/or* empirical means.

after all. For instance, to its supporters, phlogiston theories described possible ways that the world might be. Indeed, they may have even thought that the world could *only* be such that phlogiston existed. Further empirical work showed this to be false, and that any theory that posits phlogiston as existing is not a description of a genuine way that the world can be. We came to conclude that such views are not descriptions of genuine ways that the world might be (at least significantly) on the basis of empirical work.¹⁴

Furthermore, this conception of metaphysics relies on no method or knowledge that the easy ontologist does not also rely on. As noted above, the easy ontologist wants to hold that the entities that we show to exist via easy inferences are genuine parts of the world—they are not ‘pleonastic entities’. The easy ontologist also holds that (co)application conditions should be reflective of the world to allow those concepts to play a role in our explanatory and predictive activities. And the easy ontologist holds that (co)application conditions ensure that the entities in the world that are referred to by our terms have the identity conditions, persistence conditions, and other features that they are supposed to have.

If we accept simple realism, then the world genuinely contains entities that are referred to by the term ‘table’ and those entities must have the right identity conditions, persistence conditions and other features that are supposed to characterise them. Those conditions are imposed by the world itself, not by our conceptual practices as easy ontology is not a form of linguistic idealism. In addition, the world must also contain all the other entities, again of the right sort, as required by the application and coapplication conditions of our other terms (or at least those who conditions are satisfied).

¹⁴ Some might object here that it could be that we cannot gain *any* knowledge into how the world might be. That is, we might take a radical sceptic view, and say that no amount of conceptual analysis could ever arrive at claims that we can take to be true about how the world itself might be. I accept that there could be such a radical sceptic response, and I will not seek to refute it here. My own view is that we can be reasonably sure about a number of claims about how the world *cannot* be. For example, I accept the law of non-contradiction. My view is that it is simply not possible that the world is such that the law of non-contradiction is false. Again, I will not argue for this here, but it illustrates how radical such a sceptical position would have to be. I also take it that Thomasson’s commitment to simple realism means that she will also wish to reject the sceptics claim that we cannot have any knowledge of the world or how it might be.

If we accept all of this, then to conclude that tables *do exist*, we must already have accepted a view such that entities like tables, with the right identity and persistence conditions as specified in the application and coapplication conditions of 'table', *could* exist. And that they can co-exist with those entities of the 'right sort' which fulfil the application conditions of all the other terms for which the application conditions are fulfilled. If I am right, this suggests that to accept the ontological commitments that come from easy ontology requires accepting (at least implicitly) a certain view about what could exist, and what could co-exist. Or, in my terms, a certain metaphysical view about how the world could be.

V

Where does this leave us? I have suggested that there is still room for substantive metaphysics, at least on a certain conception of metaphysics. Under this conception, in agreement with the easy ontologist, a (or even the) primary role of the metaphysician is to engage in conceptual analysis, and hence the concern that metaphysicians engage in 'mere' conceptual analysis is blunted. We should not be afraid of conceptual analysis as it is (at least partly) through this method that metaphysics engages in an investigation into the ways that reality might be. Furthermore, I have suggested that simple realism and our ability to engage in the sort of normative conceptual work assigned to metaphysicians by the easy ontologist actually implicitly relies on this sort of work. To be able to say what the application conditions for a term *should* be, we need to (implicitly or explicitly) accept that those conditions at least *could* be fulfilled, and hence that the world at least *could* contain entities of the 'right sort' to be the referents of those terms.

None of this has argued against core parts of the easy approach. I have not questioned the easy approach's core idea that to see if some entity exists, we should consider whether the application conditions for that term are fulfilled. I have not suggested that there is some 'substantive' criterion of existence of the sort that Thomasson rejects. The idea that we must consider what *could* exist does not require us to take a position on

what exists or *how* any thing exists. If wished, existence questions could still be deflated. And, if I am right, investigating the ways the world could be does not require any ‘epistemically metaphysical’ knowledge.

But, I still do not expect all easy ontologists to be persuaded by this. I imagine that claiming we can have knowledge of the possible ways that the world might be will still seem to be ‘epistemically metaphysical’ to some. My own view is that this is in fact something of a conciliatory proposal. I think (non-deflationary) metaphysicians can accept the claim that the primary role for metaphysics is to engage in conceptual analysis, and I think that the sort of normative conceptual work assigned to the metaphysician by Thomasson can be valuable in helping us clarify what could exist (and co-exist). But to do this, in my view, substantive metaphysical work, there is no need for ‘epistemically metaphysical’ knowledge and hence the metaphysician need not be afraid of conceptual analysis. At least so long as it is conceptual analysis that seeks to investigate the ways that the world could be.

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6

Modal Normativism and Metasemantics

Theodore D. Locke

Introduction

Modal normativism is an account of metaphysical modality developed by Amie Thomasson such that indicative modal claims involving adverbs such as “necessarily” and “possibly” do not describe modal features or possible worlds but instead express, mandate, or negotiate semantic rules of use.¹ For example, metaphysical claims made with declarative sentences such as

- (1) The statue of Venus de Milo necessarily has its shape
- (2) It is possible for a person to survive teletransportation

Express, mandate, or negotiate the rules of use for “statue” and “person”. It follows that we do not need to posit substantive modal properties or

¹Thomasson (2007, 2013, 2020a).

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substantive possible worlds that serve as truthmakers for modal claims. Furthermore, modal knowledge is primarily a matter of conceptual analysis and straightforward empirical inquiry. However, modal normativism faces important compositionality challenges: if the function of indicative modal claims is to express or mandate rules rather than describe anything, there is a worry that we cannot account for the semantic contribution of those claims in embedded contexts such as

- (3) Smith believes that it is possible for a person to survive teletransportation.

If I utter (3) it doesn't look like I am expressing or mandating any semantic rules but reporting on Smith's attitudes instead. In response, Thomasson separates questions about the *function* of modal vocabulary—i.e., what these terms do in our language—from questions about the *meaning* of modal vocabulary—i.e., their contribution to the semantic value or content of modal claims—and presents an inferentialist account of the meaning of modal adverbs in terms of introduction and elimination rules.² However, possible worlds semantics provides a standard and powerful model of the meaning of modal claims by characterizing the semantic contribution of modal adverbs as quantifiers over possible worlds—e.g., “necessarily, *P*” is true just in case *P* is true in every possible world.³ So, it looks as though modal normativism's commitment to an inferentialist account of the meaning of modal claims comes with a significant cost since it is in tension with standard accounts of the meaning of those claims.

In this essay, I will argue that modal normativism is not in fact committed to giving an inferentialist account of the meaning of modal expressions and argue that there are no tensions in accepting both modal normativism and possible worlds semantics. I will argue that by keeping the metaphysical insights of normativism at the level of *metasemantics*—i.e., at the level of accounts of what metaphysically explains facts about

² Thomasson (2013, pp. 149–150, 2020a, pp. 82–85).

³ Partee (1988), Partee et al. (1990), Fintel (2006), Hacquard (2011) and many standard textbooks in semantics.

the meaning of modal claims—it is open to the normativist to wholeheartedly accept possible worlds semantics and thus provide a straightforward response to compositionality challenges. After introducing normativism and compositionality challenges in more detail, I will argue that the normativist ought to offer an account of modality that is general enough to allow for the use of possible worlds semantics. After that, I will show that the primary way for the normativist to do this is to remain agnostic on first-order accounts of meaning for modal expressions while arguing for either of two metasemantic claims. The first is the more moderate claim that modal normativism as a metaphysical account of modality is perfectly consistent with a limited view of the semantic features possible worlds semantics seeks to model. The second is the more ambitious claim that modal normativism provides the best metaphysical explanation of the possible worlds semantic values of modal expressions. Either way, there is no tension in the normativist adopting possible worlds semantics. Finally, one might worry that an appeal to metaphysical explanation or possible worlds in the metalanguage reintroduces substantive metaphysics that undermines modal normativism, but I will argue that this is not the case.

Modal Normativism and Compositionality Challenges

Modal Normativism Vs. Modal Descriptivism

According to *modal descriptivism*, declarative sentences involving modal adverbs such as “necessarily, *P*” are attempting to track some modal feature of reality or track possible worlds. This approach is naturally paired with the additional assumption that modal features or possible worlds are truthmakers for modal claims. There is then further debate about the existence and nature of modal features and possible worlds: whether there are any actual modal features or properties; whether modal features or properties are primitive or reducible to something more fundamental; whether there are possible worlds; whether possible worlds are

abstract entities or are instead of the same kind as the actual world; or whether all talk of modality and possible worlds is literally false though perhaps a convenient fiction.

Modal normativism starts by rejecting modal descriptivism. Rather than attempting to describe modal features or truth at possible worlds, the function of metaphysical modal claims, e.g., (1) and (2) above, is to make explicit, endorse, or renegotiate semantic rules of use. Importantly, this is not to say that modal indicatives are about semantic rules and so about language. Claims about metaphysical possibility and necessity are typically made in the object language where the relevant terms are *used* rather than mentioned. Furthermore, modal claims are not made true by our linguistic conventions, i.e., the truth of a modal claim does not covary with linguistic conventions. This is because modal normativism also rejects the truthmaker assumptions that typically come along with descriptivism about modal indicatives. In turn, modal normativism comes with a number of methodological advantages. First, modal normativism avoids seemingly intractable problems such as determining whether it is primitive modal facts, or the modal properties of actual things, or substantive possible worlds that are the “real” truthmakers for our modal claims. Second, modal epistemology is straightforward in that we need nothing more than mastery of the relevant terms and concepts, ability to reason well, and ordinary empirical knowledge in order to secure knowledge of metaphysical modal truths.⁴

To see why it is important to be able to mandate semantic rules in the object language using modal indicatives, consider a semantic rule for “bachelor”

(4) Apply “bachelor” only if “unmarried” applies.

Note that (4) might be expressed in the object language as a universal indicative—

(5) All bachelors are unmarried

But it can also be expressed using a modal indicative—

⁴Ibid., pp. 162–165. See also Chap. 4 where Thomasson deals with objections surrounding *de re* modal claims and *a posteriori* necessities.

(6) Necessarily, all bachelors are unmarried.

Thomasson (2020a) argues that being able to express semantic rules such as (4) using modal indicatives like (6) allows us to reason with those rules in the object language by embedding them in, e.g., conditionals. Importantly, indicative modals also allow us to disambiguate between merely descriptive readings of (5), e.g., “All bachelors are unmarried (i.e., we have yet to encounter a married bachelor)” and the regulative reading conveyed by (6).⁵

The Compositionality Challenge

Intuitively, there is nothing semantically inappropriate with embedding modal indicatives in propositional attitude ascriptions, e.g., in (3) above. Furthermore, modal indicatives seem to be truth apt, e.g.,

(7) It is true that, necessarily, all bachelors are unmarried.

The compositionality challenge is to explain the semantic contribution of modal vocabulary in these contexts. Another part of the challenge is to explain how modal claims are involved in semantic entailments and valid inferences. This is clearly illustrated with a classic Frege-Geach problem where we consider an argument such as:

(8) If, necessarily, all bachelors are unmarried, then all bachelors are unmarried.

(9) Necessarily, all bachelors are unmarried.

Thus,

(10) All bachelors are unmarried.

This argument seems to be valid insofar as it preserves truth from the premises to the conclusion. The descriptivist response to

⁵Thomasson (2020a, pp. 59–68).

compositionality challenges provides invariant meanings for modal claims in terms of whatever it is those claims describe or are made true by. But modal normativism rejects descriptivism and argues that modal claims express or mandate semantic rules instead. However, assuming that modal claims lose their normative force when embedded, the normativist now encounters a dilemma. If the meaning of a modal indicative such as “necessarily, all bachelors are unmarried”, is provided by its normative function, then it looks as though the above argument is unsound since the conditional “cancels” out the normative function and so the antecedent of (8) is stripped of meaning. But, if we try to capture the semantic contribution of modal indicatives in terms of some kind of descriptive content, we undermine modal normativism’s rejection of modal descriptivism. So, the worry is that we end up with an implausible account of compositional meaning when we reject truth conditional accounts of meaning and assume that the meaning of modal claims is provided by their normative function.

Thomasson agrees that the right lesson here is that the meaning of modal indicatives cannot be provided by their normative function:

For non-descriptivist approaches to be plausible, this lesson must be taken on board, and some other account of the meaning of must be given. Yet, to retain the ontological and epistemological advantages the non-descriptivist sought, that meaning cannot be given by appealing to certain objects or properties the terms refer to. Another account of meaning is required (one that also preserves the validity of standard inferences made using sentences containing those terms). (Thomasson, 2020a, p. 41)

Thomasson goes on to argue that modal claims do in fact have an invariant meaning, which is given by the *inferential role* of modal vocabulary and sketches an account of the inferential role of “necessarily”. First, there is an introduction rule for “necessarily”:

-
- ϕ If ϕ is an object-language expression of an actual semantic rule (or a logical consequence of actual semantic rules), then you are entitled to introduce **Necessarily ϕ** , regardless of any subjunctive suppositions.
-

$\Box \phi$

For example, given that (5) is an object-language expression of the intra-linguistic rule (4), we are entitled to add “necessarily” and introduce (6). Thus, we make our semantic rules explicit while remaining in the object language, which in turn helps us distinguish regulative from merely descriptive readings of (5). Furthermore, given a deflationary account of truth such that all there is to the truth predicate is provided by instances of the T-schema *s is true iff p*, then if, necessarily, all bachelors are unmarried, it follows that “necessarily, all bachelors are unmarried” is true. The elimination rule for “necessarily” is:

•	
□ ϕ	If you have Necessarily ϕ as a premise, you may use ϕ as a premise in your reasoning anywhere, under any subjunctive suppositions.
•	
•	
<hr/>	
ϕ	

Thomasson then goes on to show how this elimination rule captures certain semantic entailments. For example, if as a matter of coincidence it is true that all actual cats are furry, it does not *semantically* follow that a given cat is furry. However, if it is true that all cats are necessarily mammals, then it does semantically follow that a given cat is a mammal since that all cats are mammals holds under any supposition.⁶

Why might these rules rather than some other rules provide the meaning of “necessarily”? For the normativist, the function of modal vocabulary—why it is useful for us to have terms like these in our language—should be our explanatory focal point insofar as the rules governing modal terms must enable the use of those terms to fulfil their function. The function of modal indicatives, in the context of metaphysics, is to make the regulative status of certain indicative claims explicit, convey permissions (e.g., “possibly, bachelors have roommates”), and to reason with rules while remaining in the object language.⁷ So, ultimately, normativism provides the following explanatory structure:

⁶Ibid., pp. 82–87.

⁷Ibid., pp. 78–82.

- (E1) The function of modal vocabulary explains why we are doing one thing (mandating rules) when using a modal term rather than another (describing modal facts);
- (E2) Our use of modal terms explains why we are following one set of rules for modal vocabulary rather than another;
- (E3) Thus, the function of modal vocabulary explains why we are following one set of rules (the introduction and elimination rules just sketched) rather than another.

As currently stands, inferential rules provide the meaning of modal terms, and ultimately what explains why modal terms mean one thing rather than another is their linguistic function. However, I claim that adopting an inferentialist account of the first-order meaning of modal terms is unnecessary. Later, I will argue that normativism is consistent with a more limited metasemantic view of what it is to assign semantic values to an expression, which leaves room for the use of possible worlds semantics. However, I will also present a more ambitious metasemantic project analogous to the explanatory structure just outlined where the fact that possible worlds are assigned as the semantic values of modal expressions is ultimately explained by the normative function of those expressions. Either way, modal normativism can answer the compositionality challenge straightforwardly by adopting possible worlds semantics. In order to further motivate these arguments, I will next argue that normativism ought to be compatible with possible worlds semantics on methodological grounds.

Truth Conditional Meanings and Modal Claims

A first-order semantic theory for a language is a scientific theory insofar as it aims to provide models of various features of *semantic competency* that are empirically adequate and predictive. We have already discussed how a semantic theory needs to account for the recognition of semantic entailments, including those involving modal indicatives. Another feature of semantic competency a theory should model are the facts about what sentences people accept or reject on semantic grounds, e.g.,

- (11) Comets necessarily travel below the speed of light
 (12) Comets are obligated to travel below the speed of light.

Both (11) and (12) are syntactically well-formed yet we might reasonably expect competent users of English to accept (11) and reject (12) on semantic grounds given the meaning of “obligated”. But perhaps the central feature of competency a semantic theory aims to model is *semantic productivity*. Consider the following:

- (13) It is not possible for a clay statue of Richard M. Nixon to survive being crushed in the circumstance of accidentally landing at the event horizon of a black hole after falling through a spontaneous worm-hole in the year 2340 ACE.

The idea is that competent language users know what would need to be the case in order for (13) to be true despite the fact that they have never encountered (13) before. It is argued that the best explanation of this kind of productivity—as well as acceptance judgments and the recognition of entailment and consistency relations—is *semantic compositionality*. That is, semantic competence is a matter of understanding the semantic values of subsentential expressions in a language as well as how those expressions compose to yield semantic values for sentences of that language.⁸

A standard way of modelling the compositional semantic value of modal adverbs such as “necessarily” and “possibly” uses indices generally thought of as “possible worlds”. To take one example, we start with an intensional model (where “model” is here being used in its logical sense) $M' = \langle I, D, R, \llbracket \dots \rrbracket, g \rangle$ such that I is a set of indices, which we might conveniently think of as a set of possible worlds, D is a domain of individuals, R is an accessibility relation on elements of I , g is an assignment

⁸ As argued in Yalcin (2014) and further elaborated in Rabern and Ball (2019), this is to focus on the theoretical role of *meaning as semantic value* in contrast to *meaning as content*, where the latter is characterized by its role in a theory of intentionality, communication, and the role of belief and desire in folk psychology. I am focusing on the former but will disambiguate when needed. Also, see fn.21.

function, and $\llbracket \dots \rrbracket$ is an interpretation function.⁹ We then characterize the semantic value of “necessarily” relative to a model M as follows:

- (14) $\llbracket \text{necessarily} \rrbracket^{g,i} = \Box\text{-operator}$ such that $\llbracket \Box \phi \rrbracket^{g,i} = 1$ iff $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{g,i^*} = 1$ for all i^* such that iRi^* .

In other words, the compositional value of “necessarily” is an operator on sentences that yields a semantic value of 1 just in case, given an assignment function g , the semantic value of the embedded sentence is 1 for every index related to the starting index. More colloquially, the semantic value of “necessarily” tells us a claim is necessarily true at the user’s world just in case that claim is true at every (related) possible world. However, later I will argue that it is a mistake to automatically assume that the indices used in this semantic model—which primarily aims at providing an empirically adequate and predictive account of our semantic competence with modal vocabulary—should be interpreted as possible worlds in any metaphysically loaded sense. It is a further question for natural language semanticists as to what kind of structure, if any, the indices need to have in order to fulfil their theoretical role in a semantic theory of modal claims.¹⁰ Nonetheless, I will continue to colloquially refer to these indices as “possible worlds”.

For now, I argue that the main reason modal normativism should leave room for possible worlds semantics stems from the motivated and pervasive use of possible worlds in semantic theories and a commitment to a form of methodological naturalism.¹¹ One reason semanticists model the semantic value of modal expressions in terms of quantification over possible worlds is that modals tend to show similar patterns of semantic entailment as quantifiers. For example, just as “All A s are B s” entails “It is not the case that there is an A that is not B ”, “Necessarily, P ” entails “It is not the case that possibly not P ”. So, if a semantic theory is to account for the recognition of entailment and consistency relations, and modal

⁹ Partee et al. (1990, pp. 415–416).

¹⁰ Partee (1988).

¹¹ Pérez Carballo (2014, pp. 123–124) makes a similar point regarding metanormative expressivism.

adverbs are recognized as having entailment relations that are structurally similar to quantifiers, then providing structurally analogous semantic models of quantifiers and modal adverbs makes sense. Another reason to model the semantic value of modal adverbs in terms of possible worlds is that the fruitfulness of possible worlds in natural language semantics also extends to modelling the semantic values of other expressions such as verb phrases (*seeks*), propositional attitudes (*believes*, *fears*, etc.), and certain adverb phrases (e.g., *reluctantly*).¹² A final reason is that possible worlds semantics potentially provides a unified model for a wide range of modal claims. Modal claims seem to come in different “flavors”—i.e., epistemic, circumstantial, deontic, etc. But it has been argued on semantic grounds that all of these claims must have the same underlying semantic structure, which utilizes possible worlds, where differences between flavors of modality come into the picture through covert or overt conversational background conditions.¹³ Metaphysical modality is presumably the most general flavor.¹⁴ And while the vocabulary of *modal metaphysics* arguably belongs to a technical language rather than natural language, it still seems appropriate to model the semantic value of philosophical claims involving modal terms using possible worlds.

Let *methodological naturalism* be an overall approach to philosophical inquiry such that philosophical theories should in some way be continuous with the methods and results provided by our best scientific theories.¹⁵ So far, we have seen that the use of indices typically thought of as “possible worlds” provides a powerful theoretical tool in modal semantics that gives us a wide-ranging picture of semantic competence with a large variety of modal expressions. In a sense this is unsurprising. Hacquard (2011) notes that

¹² Partee (1988, pp. 98–99).

¹³ Kratzer (1977) and Fintel (2006, p. 5). Hacquard (2011, pp. 20–26) gives an informative overview of theoretical and empirical reasons for and against this approach.

¹⁴ Metaphysical modality might be further divided into logical, mathematical, nomic, and essentialist flavors.

¹⁵ See Pérez Carballo (2014). Thomasson seems committed to methodological naturalism. For example, Thomasson suggests normativism fits with empirical observations that alethic, deontic, and epistemic modalities tend to come together across languages and that children tend to learn them at the same time and around the same age (2020a, p. 63).

modal vocabulary instantiates a remarkable human property. We can talk about states of affairs beyond the here and now: how the world would be if dinosaurs had not mostly died out, or if all of our needs or desires were to be realized. We can distinguish the merely possible from the necessary, the impossible from the unlikely (2).

Hacquard goes on to observe that

[p]ossible worlds allow us to formally model the displacing role of modals into states of affairs beyond the here and now (10).

I take the main point to be that humans have a remarkable ability to abstract from what is the case and trade in hypotheticals, and a primary way we manage this plentitude of hypotheticals in language is using modal vocabulary. So, it only makes sense that some sort of indexing device will provide an adequate model of the meaning of modal vocabulary. Thus, given a commitment to methodological naturalism and the motivated and pervasive use of possible worlds in semantics, modal normativism ought to be compatible with possible worlds semantics.

Modal Normativism and Metasemantics

I will now argue that (a) we can divide modal normativism into an account of the metaphysics of modality and an inferentialist account of the meaning of modal expressions, that (b) a commitment to the latter is optional when we look at modal normativism from the perspective of metasemantics, and so (c) modal normativism is compatible with possible worlds semantics. The upshot is not that possible worlds semantics provides the only or best account of the meaning of modal expressions. The upshot is that any semanticist who prefers working within a possible worlds framework is free to adopt normativism as a philosophical account of metaphysical modality and so reap the ontological, epistemological, and methodological benefits that follow.

Metasemantic Explanations

Before getting to the main argument, I will now say a bit about the relevant sense of *metasemantic explanation* I am working with and a bit about what the target explanandum is. On the first point, Pérez Carballo (2014) usefully distinguishes between two types of metasemantic questions. On the one hand, we might be offering an *interpretation* of linguistic hypotheses about the first-order semantic values of expressions in a language. That is, we are offering an account of what the relevant features of sentences are that a semantic theory is trying to model. On the other hand, we might be offering a more substantive *metaphysical explanation*, i.e., a non-causal account of what it is in virtue of that the relevant semantic features obtain. As we will see, there is a sense in which the second project is more ambitious and potentially risks raising epistemological and metaphysical questions that conflict with the methodological commitments of modal normativism. So, I will be sure to address this worry later.

It will also be helpful to get at least provisionally clear about what our explanandum is since that matters to the kind of metasemantic explanation we take to be relevant. If we treat languages as abstract objects, then we might interpret a hypothesis that an expression *S* in language *L* has the semantic value *M* as a claim about some necessary property of the language. Furthermore, we might go on and give a metasemantic account of what it is in virtue of that the expression *S* has this necessary property. However, Yalcin (2014, p. 35) argues that this mischaracterizes the goals of descriptive semantics, which is to model and explain *semantic competence*, i.e., semantic productivity, the recognition of entailment relations, etc. In this case, hypotheses about semantic values are interpreted as telling us that for competent users of language *L* an expression *S* has the semantic value *M*. So then we might go on and offer a metasemantic account of what it is in virtue of that expression *S* has the semantic value *M* for competent users of *L*. Importantly, the focus on user competence is not to take a firm stand on the existence of abstract objects or to assume some kind of conceptualism about semantics, i.e., that user competence works only in terms of internalized representations of semantic rules.¹⁶

¹⁶ See Higginbotham (1991, pp. 559–560).

Instead, the overall upshot is that our explanatory target should be user competence. Semanticists are of course free to appeal to the existence of abstract syntactic or semantic objects just as physicists can appeal to abstract objects such as numbers in their theories. We only need to insist that models of semantic value assignments be constrained and motivated by features of user competence, which might involve either mental and physical features of language users or, alternatively, other external features of the competent use of a language in some community.¹⁷ So, I will assume that the primary explanatory targets in metasemantics are semantic value assignments for competent users of a language.

In the case at hand, possible worlds semantics models the meaning of modal terms and sentences using quantification over indices—often thought of as possible worlds—which ideally captures important features of semantic competence with modal vocabulary. While talk of possible worlds might seem to be in tension with modal normativism, a point I will return to later, there is in fact no principled reason why a modal normativist cannot embrace possible worlds semantics as a first-order theory of the meaning of modal expressions. Echoing Chrisman (2012, p. 327), if we see modal descriptivism and normativism as competitors for the use of possible world semantics to model the meaning of modal expressions, then we are likely conflating a first-order theory of meaning with a foundational theory of meaning. But once we distinguish between first-order accounts of modal meaning from foundational accounts, it becomes clear that modal normativism as an account of the metaphysics of modality is compatible with possible worlds semantics. Instead, while there is no competition at the level of a first-order theory of meaning, there could be a genuine dispute between modal descriptivists and modal normativists at the level of metasemantics. That is, each might provide incompatible answers to a metasemantic question, which can be roughly stated as: Why does quantification over possible worlds model modal vocabulary for competent users, i.e., why should semanticists use an operator that evaluates embedded claims at different indices?

¹⁷ See Nefdt (2020).

Metasemantic Explanations: Ambitious (Modal) Descriptivism and Its Problems

Ambitious descriptivism—taken as a general metasemantic position that covers more than modal vocabulary—will argue that the best explanation for features of semantic competence like semantic productivity is that competent language users grasp how the expressions in their language need to *correspond* to the world in order to be satisfied. Thus, on this approach, the semantic value assignments of complex sentences are explained in terms of (i) the semantic values of its linguistic parts, (ii) how the linguistic parts are compositionally arranged, (iii) substantive semantic relations of reference or satisfaction that hold between the linguistic parts and things in the world, and (iv) some kind of structural isomorphism between the sentence and how things in the world relate to one another.¹⁸ However, at this point the ambitious descriptivist faces a dilemma: either their metasemantic explanation is incomplete or, if complete, it loses in terms of simplicity and tractability.

We might agree that the descriptivist explanation makes sense for certain fragments of language, e.g., claims about ordinary empirical phenomena. But when we try to apply the descriptivist explanation to modal claims we risk being unable to straightforwardly account for the semantic relations posited to hold between modal expressions and supposed worldly modal features, relations which are meant to explain the semantic value assignments of modal expressions. For example, consider a straightforward modal claim

- (15) It is possible for the Mona Lisa to survive being transported from Paris to New York.

One potential descriptivist explanation is that the semantic contribution of the modal adverb is explained in terms of some semantic relation it bears to a modal property instantiated by the painting. Another direction might be to explain the semantic contribution of the modal adverb along the lines of indexicals, which better fits with the idea that (15) is true just in case there is a possible world where the Mona Lisa still exists after

¹⁸ Burgess (2011) and Pérez Carballo (2014).

being transported to New York. In this explanation, the semantic contribution of the modal adverb is interpreted as indexing some substantive possible world where the Mona Lisa survives transport in the way that “here” indexes a concrete location when someone at the Louvre utters “The Mona Lisa is here”. But Chrisman (2016, p. 169) points out these descriptivist assumptions seem to conflict with standard accounts of the semantic values of modal claims which do not treat modal expressions as ordinary predicates or indexes on “concrete” reality but as operators that determine a point of evaluation for the embedded claim. Furthermore, note that both the modal property and substantive world explanations seem to raise questions even more intractable than the metasemantic question we are trying to answer—how possible worlds semantics fits into an overall account of semantic competence. If we think that the meaning of modal claims is grounded by a semantic relation to substantive modal facts (i.e., facts that cannot be accounted for with either conceptual analysis or straightforward empirical inquiry), it seems very unclear how these facts make any difference to whether a person counts as a competent user of modal claims.

The other problem for the descriptivist is, however, that if they refuse to take on semantic relations between modal expressions and some substantive modal feature, they end up with an incomplete or gerrymandered metasemantic explanation. It will be incomplete if they do not explain semantic competence with modal terms and sentences. In response, the descriptivist might try to offer a fictionalist explanation at the level of metasemantics. For example, the semantic value of modal vocabulary contributes to the semantic value of complex sentences in virtue of a background of pretense among competent users of modal vocabulary. The problem is that an explanation in terms of user pretense cannot (easily) be generalized to all expressions of the language. Thus, such an metasemantic explanation would fail to be unifying and descriptivist metasemantics would be gerrymandered. Granted these arguments are making some simplifications and a more subtle form of descriptivism might be able to respond. But, for now, my goal is simply to motivate thinking about alternative metasemantic approaches to modal vocabulary.

Metasemantic Explanations: Two Normativist Approaches

Above, I argued that modal normativism gains important methodological advantages by rejecting descriptivist assumptions. However, I claim that modal normativism does not need to abandon possible worlds semantics in order to keep those advantages. We can distinguish between two theses:

Modal normativism qua metaphysics of modality is a view about the nature of metaphysical necessity—once we have an account of the normative function of modal expressions there is nothing else to say about the nature of metaphysical possibility or necessity.

Modal normativism qua meaning is a view about the first-order meaning of modal expressions—the meaning of a modal expression just is its inferential role.

The first thesis is that there are no modal properties, abstracta, or worlds out there in any substantive sense, i.e., in any sense that they might serve to explain what makes our modal claims true or that constitute the modal joints of reality. The second thesis provides an account of the meaning modal vocabulary contributes to complex claims. In particular, semantic productivity is modeled on the basis of the inferential roles of modal expressions rather than on the basis of an operator that evaluates embedded claims at different indices (in a model). Thomasson introduces an inferentialist account of the first-order meaning of modal expressions because there is pressure to meet the compositionality challenge. However, insofar as the compositionality challenge is a challenge to account for the recognition of semantic entailments, valid inferences, and so on, then I claim the normativist can simply rely on possible worlds semantics. Further, the metaphysical issue of modality might simply be orthogonal to the issue of what semantic values are needed to model semantic competence with respect to modal expressions. Thus, normativism qua meaning is completely optional. However, in order to fully defend this claim, I need to explain how the normativist's metaphysical commitments are compatible with possible worlds semantics at the level of metasemantics.

The Moderate Approach

The first approach argues that normativism qua metaphysics of modality is perfectly consistent with a moderate view of which features of modal sentences are relevant to semantic competence and thus need to be reflected in possible worlds semantic models. The basic idea is to argue that descriptivism is overreaching with its metasemantic view of just what those features are. The moderate idea is that to give an expression a semantic value is simply to characterize all and only those features of an expression that contribute to semantic competence such as semantic productivity, semantic acceptability, the recognition of semantic entailments, and the recognition of valid inferences.¹⁹ Moreover, from the perspective of first-order semantic theorizing, whether the function of modal vocabulary is normative or descriptive simply makes no difference to whether possible worlds semantics provides a good model of features relevant to semantic competence. In particular, there is no need to invoke correspondence relations to explain how possible worlds semantics models modal vocabulary because, in general, such correspondence relations are not really relevant to *semantic* competence. All that matters, for example, is that possible worlds semantics provides an adequate model of, say, the recognition of entailment relations between claims of necessity and claims of possibility. So, descriptivism is incorrect insofar as it presupposes substantive relations of correspondence are constitutive of any semantic theorizing.²⁰ Thus, the normativist is free to make use of possible worlds semantics to address compositionality challenges.²¹

¹⁹ Pérez Carballo (2014, pp. 138–139) makes similar points about content.

²⁰ Burgess (2011).

²¹ Here I am focusing on compositionality challenges at the level of talk, but what about at the level of thought, i.e., content? For example, following Dorr (2002), we might raise the challenge of explaining what *reasons* someone might have to believe whatever thought is communicated with a modal claim. Suppose the communicative content of an utterance of “possibly, *p*” is modeled in terms of a non-empty set of worlds in which *p*. For any corresponding belief that *p* is possible, what reasons might there be to accept that belief on the normativist view? The normativist response is that for a competent user of modal terms, any hypothetical scenario that can be presented without violating the semantic rules that govern the use of *p* will count as a reason to believe that *p* is possible, i.e., that the set of worlds in which *p* is non-empty. See also Thomasson (2020a, pp. 162–163).

The Ambitious Approach

The second approach to explaining how the normativist's metaphysical commitments are compatible with possible worlds semantics is more ambitious. Following Chrisman's (2016) defense of an inferentialist metasemantic explanation of the meaning of "ought", the normativist can argue that the relevant feature of a modal sentence that is articulated using possible worlds semantics is its inferential role.²² Importantly, on this approach, we need not disagree that the semantic values of *some* sentences (e.g., "there is a dog in the park") covary with external features of the world nor disagree that the semantic values of *some* sentences covary with the thoughts those sentences express. However, on this approach we insist that *the explanatorily central* features of *all* declarative sentences that determine their truth conditions are the implicit and explicit inferential commitments that come with the use of those sentences. This gives us the following normativist thesis as a corollary.

Modal normativism qua foundational theory of meaning is a view about what explains the truth conditions or compositional value of modal expressions—the truth conditions or compositional values of modal expressions are metaphysically explained by the inferential role of modal expressions.

This approach is in line with the moderate approach in that it agrees that we do not need to posit semantic relations between modal expressions and worldly modal features to explain semantic competence. But this approach is more ambitious in that it proposes that the fact that the semantic values of modal adverbs are operators that evaluate embedded claims at different indices is *metaphysically explained* by the inferential practices of language users, practices characterized by the inferential role outlined in the above discussion of the normativist response to the compositionality challenge.

So, on this ambitious approach, the normativist's metaphysical explanation of semantic competence with modal expressions ultimately focuses

²²Chrisman (2016, pp. 184–189).

on the discursive function of modal expressions and the inferential role of those expressions. Consider again the examples from the outline of modal normativism above:

- (5) All bachelors are unmarried
- (6) Necessarily, all bachelors are unmarried

Using possible worlds semantics, the normativist will model the compositional value $\llbracket (6) \rrbracket = 1$ in terms of the semantic value $\llbracket (5) \rrbracket = 1$ holding at every point of evaluation in the index. However, the normativist's *metasemantic explanation* for this semantic fact—in particular why this is a model of the semantic value of (6) for competent users of modal vocabulary—ultimately comes down to the following. The function of (6) is to express or mandate that (5) is a semantic rule while remaining in the object language. This function is realized in a community of competent language users by the inferential role of modal expressions. Thus, when a language user asserts (6) they are committed to the elimination rule for “necessarily”. This means that they are committed to (5) regardless of any other subjunctive suppositions, i.e., regardless of any hypothetical scenario that might be considered.²³ Conversely, someone who has mastered the semantic rules for “bachelor” will recognize (5) as regulative (rather than merely descriptive) and so they will correctly apply or refuse to apply the term across the full range of relevant hypothetical scenarios. So, they will be committed to (6) by the introduction rule for “necessarily”. Thus, given the role of indices to formally model how hypotheticals are managed in competent language use, the fact that the semantic value of “necessarily” is a sentential operator that quantifies over all indices is metaphysically explained by the function and inferential role of modal expressions.

Overall, metasemantic inferentialism seems to have a number of advantages over metasemantic descriptivism. In my discussion of

²³ One wrinkle is the subjunctive supposition that there is a married bachelor, which would be a counterpossible supposition. In Locke (2019), I provide a normativist account of counterpossibles. Another wrinkle is someone who asserts (5) but insists that married bachelors are possible. On Thomasson's view, they are still subject to correction and if the person still insists, they might be seen as trying to negotiate new rules for “bachelor” (Thomasson, 2014, pp. 235–238).

ambitious descriptivism, I argued that metasemantic descriptivism risks providing either an incomplete, intractable, or gerrymandered explanation of semantic value assignments for competent users of a language. But for metasemantic inferentialism, all expressions in a language come with inferential commitments that can be used to ground truth conditional semantic values. Thus, metasemantic inferentialism has an explanatory advantage insofar as it can provide a more unified explanation of the semantic values assigned to a wide range of expressions by competent language users.²⁴ So, should the normativist fully embrace this more ambitious metasemantic project? While I think it is a project that should be pursued in more detail, I think there are two reasons to accept the more moderate approach for now.

The first reason is that just as I criticized the ambitious descriptivist for taking substantive semantic relations to be constitutive of adequate models of semantic values, the ambitious approach outlined here can be criticized for holding that inferential practices are constitutive of adequate models of semantic values, i.e., the inferentialist is overreaching with their metasemantic account of what the semantically relevant features of the expressions in a language are. At a minimum, what matters is that the semantic values assigned to modal claims by possible worlds semantics provide an adequate model of the relevant features of semantic competence, e.g., productivity, acceptability, entailment, etc. It might be that it simply doesn't matter to the empirical adequacy and predictive power of possible worlds semantics whether the function of modal claims is normative or descriptive. The second reason that caution is advisable stems from a point raised in Yalcin (2014)

Any clear statement of the problems of metasemantics is thus bound to be about as controversial as the picture of first-order semantic theory it assumes. And needless to say, there is not exactly consensus about just what picture of first-order semantic theory is the right one (17).

²⁴ Here, building on Thomasson (2020a), I have suggested how this works for modal expressions in metaphysics; see Chrisman (2016) for a metasemantic account of normative expressions and Warren (2020) for a metasemantic account of logical and mathematical expressions.

Our empirical understanding of semantic competence and communication is constantly growing and as such our philosophical pronouncements on the foundations of meaning should proceed with an appropriate amount of caution. So, while the details of the ambitious approach should be pursued, I recommend the normativist hold off on fully embracing it.

Objections: Substantivity in the Metalanguage

However, in this section I want to throw caution to the wind and consider two worries. First, the worry that an appeal to metaphysical explanation reintroduces substantive metaphysics at the level of metasemantics. Second, that the use of possible worlds in the metalanguage of possible worlds semantics also reintroduces substantive metaphysics. Either way, the methodological advantages of modal normativism are undercut.

Are Metaphysical Explanations Substantive?

Above, I suggested that a metasemantic explanation might be seen as a kind of metaphysical explanation insofar as it attempts to characterize some sort of *non-causal connection* between the explanandum—i.e., first-order facts about meaning—and some explanans, e.g., substantive word-world relations or inferential practices. More needs to be said, and there are different options for what this so-called non-causal connection might consist in—grounding, dependence, determination, reduction, essence, constitution, etc.²⁵ Arguably, modal normativism is part of an overall methodology such that a metaphysical question is answerable only if it can be answered through conceptual work and straightforward empirical inquiry. Thus, metasemantic explanations of modal meanings should not surpass these constraints.²⁶ So, our metasemantic explanations cannot

²⁵ See Brenner et al. (2021) for an overview.

²⁶ See, e.g., Thomasson (2009). Following Warren (2020, p. 18) we might also assume that naturalistically acceptable metasemantic explanations cannot attribute non-causal cognitive powers to users and that our metasemantic explanations cannot appeal to a realm of non-causal facts (which Thomasson would qualify as facts that cannot be explained through some form of conceptual analysis).

appeal to explanatory connections that are substantive, i.e., worldly relations or properties that float free of empirical and conceptual inquiry. For example, if we take the relation to be a metaphysical reduction of less fundamental semantic entities into some more fundamental metasemantic base, there is a worry that this will come along with a picture of reality as *layered* in some metaphysically substantial sense rather than merely being a pedagogically instructive metaphor for semantics belonging to a more general and unified theory of, say, human cognition.

Nonetheless, it is open to the normativist to offer an account of these proposed explanatory connections in a way that fits their methodological commitments. As I argue in Locke (2020), the best way for the normativist to account for these relations is to note their role in endorsing various conceptual connections between the explanans and explanandum, supplying empirical information where needed. On this approach, the focus on what makes an explanation of the form *q because p* an apt *metaphysical* explanation is typically conceptual in nature. For metasemantic explanations, then, we might say that there are certain conceptual connections between claims about the first-order semantic values of basic modal expressions and claims about the inferential role of modal adverbs such that the latter have some kind of conceptual priority over the former. However, I don't think that this is very plausible since the conceptual connections between our inferential practices with modal expressions and possible worlds semantics are nonexistent or way too tenuous to be informative.

I think a more promising direction to pursue is to think of metaphysical explanation along the lines of the unification of some domain of facts. In this case, an effective metaphysical explanation is one that, among other things, appeals to a set of premises from which we can derive results about a large number of seemingly diverse phenomena.²⁷ In this case, we might think of an effective metasemantic explanation as a set of premises from which we can derive results about a large number of seemingly diverse first-order semantic phenomena. What makes the explanation

²⁷ Kovacs (2019) develops a view along these lines.

metaphysical is that at least some of the premises are in some sense distinctively metaphysical, which for the normativist means that a conceptual truth is essentially involved somewhere in the explanans. Normativist metasemantic explanations of modal vocabulary will not appeal to premises involving unexplained reference magnets or substantive facts about fundamentality.²⁸ Instead, the relevant premise is the conceptual connection between the function of modal expressions and the inferential role that realizes that function. Given this conceptual premise, and relevant empirical information about semantic competence, we are able to derive (along the lines sketched in the above discussion of the ambitious inferentialist approach) compositional truth conditions in terms of quantification over indices for a wide-range of modal claims—e.g., about the metaphysically necessary properties of statues, social groups, chemical compounds, sets, logical operators, semantic values, etc.—and so provide a unified explanation of the first-order semantic values of modal claims in metaphysics. Thus, no appeal to substantive non-causal explanatory connections is required.

Using Talk of Possible Worlds in the Metalanguage

The second worry is that the use of possible worlds in the metalanguage of possible worlds semantics also reintroduces substantive metaphysics. Price (2011, pp. 214–218) makes a distinction between modest and immodest linguistic theories. An immodest linguistic theory is a theory that introduces theoretical vocabulary which does not correspond to linguistic concepts that already belong to the object language. For example, ordinary English in some sense already involves concepts of *truth*, *reference*, and *meaning*, and these concepts are often appealed to in philosophical accounts of semantic value and content. But some philosophical accounts of semantic value and content will take these concepts to pick out substantive semantic relations, e.g., word-world relations, that are indispensable to semantic theorizing. In these cases, theoretical uses of *truth*, *reference*, and *meaning* are immodest insofar as these uses deviate

²⁸ Though see Thomasson (2020b) for an account of how these notions can be read conceptually.

from our ordinary concepts. Alternatively, a modest use of these concepts can be found in deflationism where everything we might want to say about the concepts of *truth*, *reference*, and *meaning* is exhausted by schemas such as, e.g., *s is true iff p*.

So far, I have assumed that a first-order semantic theory aims to provide empirically adequate and predictive models of various features of semantic competency. I then supposed that possible worlds semantics does just this for modal terms and then argued that this poses no problem for modal normativism. But suppose that our semantic theory covering modal claims involves a hypothesis roughly stated as:

- (16) “It is possible for a person to survive teletransportation” is true iff there is a possible world where a person survives teletransportation.

Arguably, the introduction of talk of possible worlds in the metalanguage is not modest. For one, it isn’t clear that talk of possible worlds is part of natural language practices.²⁹ So, does this mean that we are thereby committed to problematic possible worlds in the metalanguage? If so, it seems that this instance of immodesty conflicts with normativism. The first reason the answer is “no” follows from a general point made by Yalcin (2018), which is that we should not interpret or explicate terms used in the metalanguage on the assumption that we are already semantically competent with those terms. So, we should be weary of unreflective interpretations of the righthand side of (16) in terms of some metaphysically loaded or pretheoretic understanding of “worlds”. After all, part of what we are trying to understand is semantic competence with modal expressions or the role of modal expressions in communication, belief, decision making, etc. and we cannot assume that competence in the metalanguage.

Of course, “possible worlds” seems to be a technical term introduced by metaphysicians on philosophical grounds. But it isn’t likely that

²⁹ Cf. Moltmann (2017). Though I think it is not hard to find analogues in ordinary talk of *ways things could be*—e.g., “there are many different ways my life could have gone after graduation”—and *possible scenarios*—e.g., “I can imagine many possible scenarios in which the merger will be delayed”. These uses can be seen as pleonastic derivations from basic modal claims. See Thomasson (2020a) and Locke (forthcoming).

linguists are using the metaphysician's possible worlds to *translate* modal claims into some deeper theoretical language that gives us a better understanding of reality.³⁰ Arguably, Lewis (1986) thought an extensional system of possible worlds provided a more robust philosophical characterization of modal claims than quantified modal logic, but there are well-known ontological and epistemological challenges that come with this view. Instead, it seems best to think of the metalanguage of possible worlds semantics as a technical language used to model semantic values *for the purposes of* understanding semantic competence. For example, Partee (1988) claims that

the value of possible worlds for linguistic semantics is largely independent of metaphysical issues. Linguists, qua linguists, tend to be instrumentalists about metaphysics, in the sense that they will tend to judge competing foundational theories more by their fruitfulness in helping to lead to insightful explanations of linguistic phenomena than by any other kinds of arguments (107).

In that case, we should pause before rushing to substantive characterizations of the possible worlds used in modelling the semantic values and content of modal expressions. Thus, normativism is free to accept the immodest use of theoretical vocabulary—in this case “possible worlds”—that does not correspond to ordinary concepts so long as we are using that vocabulary to raise questions that can be understood and answered by conceptual analysis and straightforward empirical inquiry.

Conclusion

I have argued that modal normativism can retain its metaphysical and epistemological insights without taking on commitments about the best first-order semantic theory of modal claims. This means that (natural language) semanticists who prefer working in possible worlds frameworks

³⁰ For example, Donald Davidson suggests that “if we understand our metalanguage, we are using a system of concepts and a language which is the one for which we really want a theory, for it is this richer system that is our natural one”—quoted in Yalcin (2018, p. 73).

can use those theoretical tools while accepting the philosophical insights of modal normativism. Again, I have only argued that modal normativism is compatible with possible worlds semantics and not that the latter is the best semantic theory for modal expressions. As emphasized by Yalcin (2014), we should keep in mind that semantics is a developing science and as such an appropriate amount of caution is needed before rushing to any philosophical conclusions about the foundations of semantics.

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7

Thomasson on Modal Language

Matti Eklund

Introduction

In many of her writings, Amie Thomasson has sought to challenge orthodox conceptions of metaphysics. Most prominently, she has defended an “easy ontology” view on the nature of ontological questions.¹ While I myself am somewhat attracted to something like Thomasson’s outlook, I have elsewhere criticized Thomasson’s specific view and her arguments for it.² More recently, most prominently in her (2020) book, Thomasson has turned to the issue of metaphysical modality.³ The overall tenor of her view on modality is the same as the tenor of her view on ontology: on Thomasson’s view, theorists see substantive metaphysical issues where

¹ See Thomasson (2014).

² See Eklund (2016, 2017).

³ In what follows all references will be to Thomasson (2020) except where specified.

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there are none. I think Thomasson's view on modality faces many severe problems, and in the following I will go through them. Chief among the problems I go on to discuss is that Thomasson's account of the meanings of modal expressions does not solve the problems she intends it to solve (among them solving the Frege-Geach problem), that there is no significant ordinary practice of making metaphysically modal claims in the first place, and that the general problem she identifies and seeks to solve goes beyond discourse about metaphysical modality so a theory focused on metaphysical modal discourse is not general enough to deal with the problem.

Thomasson's View on Modality

Modal discourse concerns what necessarily is the case, what possibly is the case, what might be the case, what must be the case, what can be the case, what would be the case, etc. As is well known, and as I will get back to, it seems that we can express many different sorts of things using modal expressions. We can make paradigmatically normative claims ("you must save that drowning man!"), we can make epistemic claims ("the keys must be in the car"), we can make claims about what is compatible with the laws of nature ("nothing can travel faster than the speed of light") and about what is metaphysically necessary and possible ("2+2 must be 4, and would be so even if the laws of nature were different").

In her (2020), Thomasson deals primarily with metaphysical modality—matters of the last kind mentioned. Thomasson notes that there are seeming metaphysical and epistemological problems concerning metaphysical modality. What in the world can make such metaphysically modal claims true? How can we have knowledge of what metaphysically must and might be the case, as opposed to knowledge merely of what actually is the case?

Thomasson's solution is to appeal to what she calls *normativism*. Here is how she introduces the view:

I call the view "modal normativism" since, on this view, basic metaphysical modal claims do not have the function of tracking or describing special

modal features of this world—or other possible worlds. Instead, on this view, modal language serves the function of mandating, conveying, or renegotiating rules or norms in particularly advantageous ways.⁴

As indicated by how Thomasson characterizes the view, much of her discussion concerns the *function* of having metaphysically modal vocabulary in our language. She thinks the function is normative. She notes that addressing the issue of the function of this vocabulary does not immediately amount to addressing the issue of what *meanings* the relevant expressions have, and she separately addresses the question of meaning, but her view is that attending to the question of the function serves important role in theorizing about the meaning of the relevant expressions.

The relation between Thomasson's account of metaphysical modality and the more orthodox accounts she opposes is somewhat delicate to describe. As we will see, Thomasson too allows that modal claims are true and false. But she does say, to repeat, that “basic metaphysical modal claims do not have the function of tracking or describing special modal features of this world”, and later she speaks of modal statements being true or false “without their having to be made so by modal features of the world”.⁵ This is suggestive of what the difference may be. I believe there is more to problematize here, but for the purposes of my discussion I will treat the difference between Thomasson and the orthodoxy as passably clear.

As noted, metaphysical modality is just one kind of modality. One may think that the correct theory about how modal vocabulary works must be a properly unified account. Thomasson stresses this herself, and takes it to be a point in favor of her theory that it promises to provide such an account. Moreover, and relatedly, one may think that some of the problems pertaining to the metaphysically modal also pertain to other kinds of modality. One may for example think that nomological necessity presents the same sorts of philosophical problems.

Before proceeding, I should mention some difficulties regarding how best to talk about the matters at issue. First, in the quoted passage,

⁴p. 15.

⁵p. 86.

Thomasson describes the target of her account as “metaphysical modal claims” and as “modal language” (where this must be understood as metaphysical modal language). But elsewhere she speaks of “metaphysical modal expressions”, “metaphysical modal terms”, “metaphysical modal vocabulary” and “metaphysical modal terminology”.⁶ It is convenient to speak in both ways and when discussing Thomasson I may occasionally do the same. But formulations of the latter kind, where specific expressions are called metaphysically modal, are problematic, for metaphysical modality is typically expressed by the very same expressions that are used to express modality of other kinds, so the expressions are not dedicated to the metaphysically modal. In an account of the expressions/terms/vocabulary/terminology at issue, a central desideratum may be to account for how these expressions can be used to express different kinds of modal claims. As mentioned, Thomasson herself brings up this desideratum.⁷ Second, while it of course is standard to speak of the kind of modality that Thomasson is concerned with as metaphysical, the terminology is somewhat unfortunate. It is used in part to contrast metaphysical modality with deontic and epistemic modality—but also nomological modality contrasts with deontic and epistemic modality through at least on the face of it being concerned with the way the world is, by contrast with how it ought to be and with what is compatible with what we know. Sometimes metaphysical modality and nomological modality are grouped together under the heading of *alethic* modality, and grouping these kinds of modality under the same heading makes good sense.

Central to Thomasson’s discussion is the point that not all terminology serves a “descriptive” function. And a general idea is that certain metaphysical problems arise because of mistaken assumptions to the effect that a descriptive function is served. This idea has been implemented elsewhere in the literature. One prominent example is non-cognitivism in metaethics. Non-cognitivists prominently hold that it is given the

⁶ See pp. 16, 18, 52, 58, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 77, 81, 82, 85, and 138.

⁷ Of course, there are some dedicated metaphysical modal expressions—“metaphysically necessary”, “metaphysically possible”, etc.—but they are complex and somewhat technical. Thomasson herself focuses on simple modal expressions like “necessary” and “possible”.

assumption that “good” and “right” are descriptive that metaphysical problems regarding the normative arise and once we see that these expressions serve a non-descriptive function the metaphysical problems are avoided. Thomasson seeks to defend an analogous view on metaphysically modal vocabulary, and to put it to the same use. But while Thomasson may be right that we should be skeptical of the idea that all superficially descriptive discourse really serves a descriptive function, I have doubts regarding what actually follows from this. And I have some specific doubts about the application of this general idea to the case of metaphysical modality.

Here is the plan for this paper. In the section “[Function and Meaning](#)”, I discuss the distinction between the function of some expressions and the meanings of these expressions, and use this to present some problems for Thomasson. I also highlight that there are central questions about meaning that her account fails to address. In the section “[The Frege-Geach Problem](#)”, I criticize her attempt to deal with the Frege-Geach problem, as it arises for her account. In the section “[Metaphysical Modality and Ordinary Language](#)”, I raise a general methodological problem for Thomasson: we hardly ever speak of what is metaphysically necessary and possible in ordinary discourse. In the section “[Metaphysical Modality and Weaker Modalities](#)”, I bring up the desideratum of a unified account of modality and discuss how Thomasson proposes to deal with nomic modality and other weaker alethic modalities. In the section “[Necessity and Analyticity](#)”, I note that given the way Thomasson herself brings up the problem that animates the book, it does not have to do with metaphysically modal discourse so much as with more general issues such as how an empiricist can account for the metaphysics and epistemology of, e.g., logical and mathematical truths. I go on to note that one can glean from Thomasson’s discussion also a suggestion for how to deal with such issues: the suggestion amounts to a theory of analyticity. I close by discussing this theory of analyticity, and comparing it to the theory of modality that Thomasson offers.

Function and Meaning

As already indicated, claims about the function of metaphysically modal talk are central in Thomasson's account. Thomasson sums up her claims about the function and use of metaphysically modal vocabulary as follows:

Function: Having metaphysical modal terms fulfills several functions:

1. "Necessarily" makes explicit that the expression has regulative status.
2. Modal terms enable us to make explicit our ways of reasoning with rules.
3. "Possibly" enables us to convey permissions as well as requirements.

Use: Basic (unembedded) claims of metaphysical necessity are characteristically used to convey, enforce, and/ or advocate for semantic rules or their consequences (while *using* those very terms in object-language indicatives).⁸

As Thomasson notes, and stresses, these claims about function and use do not yet amount to a theory of the *meanings* of the expressions in question.⁹ To give an account of what functions some expressions serve and of how they are used is not immediately to give a theory of the meanings of these expressions. And it is reasonable to take the theory of the meanings of the expressions to be the more pressing issue. If I hold, regarding some seemingly metaphysically problematic discourse, that the discourse has some non-descriptive function, but the meanings of the sentences are of the orthodox descriptive kind, I seem not to have evaded the metaphysical problems. So long as some of these sentences are true, we can ask what the world must be like in order for them to be true.

Much of Thomasson's rhetoric when she motivates her normativist view revolves around what she calls the "descriptivist assumption". This is the assumption that modal discourse has the "function" of "*describing* either some features of our world, or features of other (possible) worlds".¹⁰ She finds this assumption problematic:

⁸ p. 81f.

⁹ p. 79.

¹⁰ p. 52.

As Ryle [...] noted, we have reason to look for a non-descriptive story particularly in cases where the descriptivist assumption leads us to puzzles, problems, or paradoxes—for example, where ontological placement problems arise in figuring out what the “entities” described could be, or how they could relate to physical objects; where epistemological puzzles arise because we do not seem to have the same way of “detecting” the relevant facts as we do for straightforward empirical truths; where “motivational” puzzles arise about how such properties or objects could do the job they are supposed to do (say, of motivating action, norming our belief, guiding our credences, or guiding our theorizing). Some areas of discourse for which one or more of these problems have classically arisen—and for which alternative, non-descriptive views have been developed—include morality, truth, mathematics, probability, meaning, and modality.¹¹

But—as, again to stress, Thomasson herself notes—it is one thing to describe the function of a certain discourse and another to say what kinds of meanings sentences belonging to the discourse have. Any view on the meanings of these sentences given which their truth demands something of the world, one can discuss the demands and whether they are met. It does not matter whether the basic function or purpose of having these expressions in our language is to describe the world.

On some views, prominently fictionalist views, an account of what the sentences of some discourse semantically express is distinctly unimportant in an overall account of the commitments of the discourse: for what the sentences are used to communicate is something different from what the sentences semantically express.¹² But Thomasson does not emulate that fictionalist strategy, and for her it then seems to remain important what is semantically expressed by uses of the sentences.¹³

By Thomasson’s own lights, what is important for her to deny is that metaphysically modal sentences have meanings of such kinds that their truths demand something of the world that might be held to be, for metaphysical reasons, problematic. *That* is the relevant “descriptivist”

¹¹ p. 55f.

¹² For an overview of fictionalism, see Eklund (2019).

¹³ In her (2013), Thomasson criticizes fictionalism as a strategy in metaphysics.

assumption. To deny that assumption it is not sufficient to deny that modal discourse has a descriptive *function*.

Let me then turn to Thomasson's actual account of meaning. When Thomasson discusses meaning, she invokes inferentialism: the view that the meanings of the terms in question are given by inference rules. The connection between the function and the inference rules is this:

The two parts of the analysis are closely related. As [Michael] Williams makes clear, the analysis is still *functionally* driven: the content-determining component articulates the *rules* that the term follows that enable it to serve the *functions* identified in the functional component (as well as enabling it to be *used* in these characteristic ways). That enables us to make clear why we would want to have a term that followed these inferential rules.¹⁴

The inference rules themselves are the following:

(I) If *p* is an object-language expression of an actual semantic rule (or a logical consequence of actual semantic rules), then you are entitled to introduce *Necessarily p*, regardless of any subjunctive suppositions.¹⁵

(E) If you have *Necessarily p* as a premise, you may use *p* as a premise in your reasoning anywhere, under any subjunctive suppositions.¹⁶

One concern about these rules relates to a point I made before: it seems to be the same expressions we use when expressing metaphysically modal claims as when we express other kinds of modal claims. It then seems odd to give a semantic account of “Necessarily” given which what it means is, in all contexts, *metaphysically necessarily*. A semantic account like this makes good sense only against the backdrop of a view according to which, implausibly, “necessarily” is simply ambiguous and we are giving an account of one of the meanings it is associated with. But I will not discuss

¹⁴p. 80.

¹⁵p. 83.

¹⁶p. 84. I should note that Thomasson's rule E seems to run into obvious problems with counterpossibles, and generally, reasoning under necessarily false suppositions. Not everything that is necessary still holds under a necessarily false supposition. Thomasson (p. 142f) says that her account is of use also regarding the hyperintensional, and she refers to Theodore Locke's (2019) work. Locke does indeed seek to apply Thomasson-style ideas to the hyperintensional, but he does not refer to the specific rules I and E, and he does not suggest any other such specific rules.

this concern further. It could be that the account Thomasson gives is compatible with a more plausible semantics of “necessarily”, and can be seen as an account of what “necessarily” semantically expresses in contexts where it expresses metaphysical necessity, and I will set this specific problem aside.

Inferentialist accounts like the one Thomasson proposes do not generally preclude that the expressions governed by the inference rules in question stand for entities in the world, such that familiar metaphysical questions can be asked about these entities. Thomasson’s rules are for the adverb “necessarily”, but they could equally well have been proposed for the predicate “is necessary”—Thomasson does not emphasize the “necessarily”/ “is necessary” distinction. If they are proposed for this predicate, the following question would be natural: which property does “is necessary” stand for, such that these rules are valid? What is more, the sorts of properties that ordinary descriptivists about the modal say that “is necessary” stands for do seem to be excellent candidates for being what “is necessary” stands for, given that these are the rules governing it. For example, if “p is necessary” means that p has the property of being true in every so-called possible world, on any standard construal of “possible world”, these rules are certainly validated.

Perhaps anticipating concerns like this, Thomasson also appeals to deflationism about truth:

Adopting a deflationary theory of truth also enables us to classify modal statements as true or false. We can begin from “All bachelors are men,” and (since that claim is an object- language expression of a semantic rule) rule (I) licenses us to add “necessarily” and assert “Necessarily, all bachelors are men.” On the deflationary view, the concept of truth is simply governed by the equivalence schema: $\langle p \rangle$ is true if and only if p, so we can recognize the equivalence of this with “‘Necessarily, all bachelors are men’ is true.” The uncontroversial equivalence schema applies just as well to modal as non-modal indicatives, so there is no problem in allowing that modal claims may be true. Once we have allowed that basic modal claims may be true or false, it is clear that they may be used in standard forms of truth-conditional reasoning.¹⁷

¹⁷ p. 86f. Thomasson uses “ $\langle p \rangle$ ” as short for: the proposition that p.

Thomasson offers no independent defense of the kind of deflationism she describes. Nor does she elaborate on what exact deflationist thesis she relies on, beyond what she says here. Perhaps Thomasson is relying on the pair of theses that a deflationist theory of truth holds *across the board* and, furthermore, that (therefore) no claim is made true by features of the world in the way a correspondence theory demands.¹⁸ But if this is what she relies on then that would seem by itself to do all the work in avoiding a traditional modal metaphysics. No claims specifically pertaining to the function and meaning of metaphysically modal discourse are needed. Moreover, importantly, it should be noted that the second claim goes beyond the first. One can in principle think that deflationism provides the correct account of the concept of truth and that nothing about the concept of truth in any way requires that truths have truthmakers, but still hold that in fact truths often or always have truthmakers.

Other theses Thomasson might be relying on are more specific to the modal case. Maybe the view is only that a deflationary theory of truth holds for some kinds of claims, among them metaphysically modal claims. Or maybe the view is that while a deflationary theory of truth holds across the board some claims still need truthmakers, but metaphysically modal claims are not among them. But any more specific claim of this kind would surely need to be accompanied by an account of what makes metaphysically modal claims special. Why does a deflationary theory of truth hold for them? Why do they not need truthmakers? Nothing about the inference rules themselves suggests anything about why the claims would be special. Again to stress, the thesis that the claims have a non-descriptive function may be special but if this function is not reflected in what contents the claims have, or the actual meanings of relevant sentences, how is this relevant to what sort of thing is needed for the claims or sentences to be true?

¹⁸ It is by no means obvious that just because the concept of truth is “governed by the equivalence schema”, statements are not generally made true by corresponding features of the world. All that follows is that there is nothing about the concept of truth that this demands that this is so.

The Frege-Geach Problem

Thomasson gives an account of the meanings of the modal expressions involved in part because she seeks a way around the well-known Frege-Geach problem. Her view is that the way to deal with this problem is to give an account not just of use but also of meaning:

The Frege-Geach problem, in its basic form, is that one cannot give an account of the meaning of a troublesome term by saying what it is *used to do* (say, treating the meaning of “good” as given by noting that the term is characteristically used to commend), since “good” may also appear embedded in the context of conditionals (“if this is good, we should buy it”) or negations (“what he did was not good”). In such cases “good” is not used to commend at all. But we must assume it has the same meaning in these contexts in order to make sense of the validity of simple modus ponens arguments involving the term (“if this is good, we should buy it,” “this is good,” so “we should buy it”).¹⁹

In its original formulation, [the Frege-Geach problem] was raised against attempts to give the *meaning* of a term by appeal to its *use*. As Searle put it, many analyses go astray by [conflating] giving an analysis of what speech act an expression is commonly *used* to perform (e.g., that “good” is used to commend or “true” to endorse a statement) with what the word *means* [...] Peter Geach similarly sums up the error as attempting “to account for the *use* of a term ‘P’ concerning a thing as being a *performance* of some other nature than describing the thing”...[italics Thomasson’s]. For any given term may be used in a variety of ways, and yet we think the meaning remains constant.²⁰

Some care is needed regarding why exactly the Frege-Geach problem arises.²¹ Some of Thomasson’s formulations suggest that she thinks the problem arises insofar as we do not distinguish between an account of meaning and an account of use. But this does not go to the heart of it. The view that “good” is used to commend is not even satisfactory as a

¹⁹ p. 78.

²⁰ p. 79.

²¹ For further discussion of the Frege-Geach problem, see my (2009).

general account of its use. It may apply to its use in “this is good” but it does not work regarding its use in “if this is good, we should buy it”.

While noting that to give a functional account is not yet to give an account of meaning, Thomasson stresses the following:

[Giving this functional analysis] does provide the basis for giving a meaning analysis: we can give the meaning by giving the rules of use that enable the term to fulfill its function—rules that remain constant even in embedded contexts. Since we also believe modal claims and reason with them, whatever account we give should also enable us to make sense of how these beliefs and this reasoning are possible.

The best way to meet this challenge seems to me to combine the modal normativist account of the *function* of modal language with a deflationary inferentialist approach to its *meaning*.²²

She then goes on to present the inference rules I and E, quoted earlier.

Here is one thing I find peculiar about the strategy. The Frege-Geach problem is fundamentally about *embedding*: how do the expressions concerned work in more complex contexts? But the rules I and E do not immediately help with that. Thomasson stresses the supposed fact that the problem is a matter of accounting for meaning and not only use. But at bottom embedding is what is at issue.

This complaint about rules I and E may seem unfair. After all, these rules have the same general form as other rules inferentialists appeal to when giving their preferred accounts of meaning. They are introduction and elimination rules. And it is not as if inferentialists do or need to give separate accounts of how expressions work in sentences embedded in conditionals, disjunctions, etc. However, other inferentialist accounts work because they provide recipes for understanding how the expressions characterized work also in more complex sentences. By contrast, armed only with I and E, a speaker may not know what to do with “necessarily” as it occurs in more complex sentences, for example sentences of the form “If necessarily P, then Q”. Let me explain. One way, although perhaps not the only way, for an inferentialist account to have the requisite generality

²²p. 79.

and explain also how the expressions introduced function in complex sentences, is for the account to determine semantic values—contributions to truth conditions. Introduction and elimination rules for an expression determine how that expression contributes to the truth conditions of the simplest sentences of which they are part. Roughly, the contribution to truth conditions is whatever in needs to be in order to make the inference rules apt. Just to take a simple, familiar example: the rules for “&” are

From p, q to infer: $p \& q$

From $p \& q$ to infer p and q , respectively,

and the semantic value for “&” that renders these rules apt is the standard truth function associated with conjunction. The truth conditions of the simplest sentences of which the expression is part then in turn help determine the truth conditions of more complex sentence. However, Thomasson does not provide an account of truth conditions of sentences containing “necessarily”, except for appealing to the equivalence between “ p ” and “the proposition that p is true”. (She could say something along the lines of: “necessarily” (and “necessary”) has the semantic value it needs to have in order for the rules to come out correct. Compare discussion above. But she does not. And if she did, then the differences between her account and more orthodox accounts would become less clear.)

The point I am raising regarding Thomasson is essentially just an application of Jamie Dreier’s “hiyo”-argument.²³ Dreier imagines that we introduce a convention where instead of saying “Hiyo Bob” we say “Bob is hiyo”. He notes that given a suitable deflationary account of truth, we may say such things as “It is true that Bob is hiyo”. But this leaves it fundamentally unclear how “Bob is hiyo” could function when embedded: what could a sentence of the form “if Bob is hiyo then...” even mean? Similarly, Thomasson’s inference rules together with a deflationary account of truth do not explain how conditionals of the form “if necessarily P , then...” work. Thomasson does bring up the “hiyo” argument. I quote in full what she says:

²³Dreier (1996).

But while [Dreier's] problem is a legitimate one, it is not a threat for the [normativist] account of modality. The view here is that statements expressing metaphysical necessities give us ways of conveying rules in object-language indicatives. But rules (even in their more overt forms) are always usable in making inferences when expressed in indicative form (in imperative form they can't be embedded in the antecedents of conditionals, but they are in the consequents). We make inferences using rules when we say, for example, "If the white player must move first then Julie must move first," "If players must wear helmets then I'm not going to play," and so on. Expressions of rules (unlike acts of accosting) already are suited to figure in inferences, so there is no threat of failure here as there is in the "hiyo" case.²⁴

But first, Thomasson's response to Dreier's problem just amounts to saying that "the white player must move first" as a matter of fact can figure meaningfully in antecedents of conditionals. But that was never at issue. The issue is whether Thomasson's account of such sentences respects this fact. And second, again to stress, it is natural to wonder how Thomasson's inference rules help with how "necessarily" (*metaphysically* necessarily) functions in complex sentences, Thomasson does not really address that issue, either in her response to Dreier's problem or elsewhere. She says that "expressions of rules" already are suited to figure in inferences. But what are so suited are explicit expressions of rules: "If the rules of chess say that....", which are about what the rules say. Thomasson's distinctive view is that certain modal statements serve as *expressions* of rules without being *about* rules, and still are suited to figure in inferences.

Metaphysical Modality and Ordinary Language

Let me now turn to a different matter—a more general, methodological problem with Thomasson's discussion. One central point that Thomasson makes is that not all ordinary discourse that is superficially descriptive really has a descriptive function. But even someone who agrees with Thomasson about that general claim may have reason to doubt its application to the metaphysically modal. A striking difference between the

²⁴p. 88.

moral “good” and “right” on the one hand (to relate to one case where some vocabulary famously has been argued not to have a descriptive function) and the metaphysically modal vocabulary like “must” on the other is that whereas the former undeniably are part of ordinary discourse, the latter at most play a peripheral role in ordinary discourse. We philosophers regularly use “must” to express metaphysical necessity. But how often does this happen in ordinary discourse? Thomasson provides few actual examples. And I think many of us as teachers have found that while it certainly is possible to get undergraduates to glom onto what metaphysical modality is, it takes a good deal of work. (For example, one might get them to agree that in some sense not even laws of nature are necessary, while getting them to agree that some claims, such as logical and mathematical truths, still are necessary in this sense.)

One might even worry that there is no such thing as the use and function of metaphysically modal vocabulary in ordinary discourse at all. Those who use metaphysically modal vocabulary are philosophers, and philosophers who undeniably use in for descriptive purposes. Then to say, with Thomasson, that the function is non-descriptive seems odd.²⁵

We certainly seem to use, in ordinary language, sentences that express metaphysically necessary truths. And there may be a question of what function utterances of such sentences serve. But investigating this is different from what Thomasson officially focuses on, which is modal discourse itself. The fact that I use a sentence which expresses something with a given modal property (e.g. what it expresses is metaphysically possible) is different from me saying something about what modal property

²⁵Thomasson does say,

There are interesting interpretive questions about whether a given philosopher, on a given occasion, uses a metaphysical modal claim descriptively—one can’t assume they are always used that way, even in metaphysics. In Thomasson (2017) I discuss certain historical cases in which it is not so obvious that metaphysical modal claims are used descriptively. (p. 69fn24)

But the only “historical cases” I can see that Thomasson discusses in her (2017) are debates over works of art, and what she argues is that some such debates are best understood as instances of metalinguistic negotiation. Debates over art may plausibly be held to be a special case, and moreover, metalinguistic negotiation may be had about everything so the point says little about metaphysically modal discourse specifically.

something has. I will get back to similar issues in the section “[Necessity and Analyticity](#)”, where I discuss analyticity.

Even if one thinks that the worry just mentioned is exaggerated—perhaps it happens in ordinary discourse that we use modal vocabulary and mean to express something about what is metaphysically necessary and possible—one may think, less radically, that expressing claims about metaphysical modality in ordinary discourse is marginal and serves as a generalization of more ordinary uses of modal vocabulary, like when I say “I can’t eat another bite” even when it clearly is metaphysically possible for me to eat another bite. There is then room in principle to account for metaphysically modal discourse by appeal to ordinary function, but the investigation would naturally need to start with the more common kinds of uses. Thomasson doesn’t conduct her investigation into modal vocabulary in that way. Her discussion is not very much focused on specific examples, but where she does discuss examples she tends to go straight for the metaphysically modal.

It may be suggested that if there is no ordinary practice of speaking of metaphysical modality, then Thomasson could just change her strategy: instead of presenting a theory of how ordinary metaphysically modal discourse works she could present a proposal for how to devise metaphysically modal discourse. But whatever the virtues of such a strategy may be, it is a very different strategy from the one actually pursued by Thomasson.

Metaphysical Modality and Weaker Modalities

As Thomasson herself recognizes, there are many different kinds of uses of modal vocabulary, and all things equal a unified account is preferable. She mentions as a consideration in favor of her view that she gives a unified account of modal vocabulary when it is used normatively and of such vocabulary when it is used to express metaphysical modality:

We thus have hope of gaining a unified understanding of modal terms: all are involved in enabling us to explicitly express and reason with rules and permissions. The ability to provide a unified account gives an important advantage, since it enables us to explain why these terms (for alethic,

deontic, and epistemic modalities) tend to come together across a wide range of languages [...] and why children tend to learn to use modal terms for obligation, necessity, and possibility at around the same age [...] These commonalities would be masked by descriptive approaches to metaphysical modal statements, which would take claims of metaphysical necessity and possibility to be descriptions of features of the world, while “may,” “must,” and “shall” are more naturally taken as issuing permissions or obligations.²⁶

Thomasson writes as if she presupposes that a non-descriptive view is correct regarding deontic modal talk. Just to make a sociological point, many theorists would disagree—or at least would disagree if what is at issue is the *meaning* of such talk. I assume everyone would agree that when one describes the *function* of deontic modal discourse, one must centrally appeal to the non-descriptive. For example, one may issue permissions and obligations. But the step from there to a claim about meaning and content, to the effect that deontic claims do not have descriptive meanings of ordinary kinds, would be resisted.

But deontic and metaphysically modal uses of modals are not all the uses there are. Thomasson also brings up nomological necessity, and says, e.g.,

Ryle [...] took statements of nomological necessities to serve as inference tickets, entitling us to make inferences, while Sellars [...] similarly took statements of scientific laws to serve the function of justifying or endorsing inferences. Despite their differences, these suggestions share a common theme: the idea that the function of modal discourse is, broadly speaking, normative—whether it has to do with conveying rules of reasoning, or speaking, of making empirical inferences, or adjusting our expectations and explanations.²⁷

If we take a normativist approach, we can, for example, roughly take causal laws as norms for making empirical inferences based on empirical evidence—not as descriptions of some sort of special modal properties in the world, or as empirical generalizations requiring truthmakers.²⁸

²⁶ p. 63. The works Thomasson refers to in this connection are Papafragou (1998) and Wells (1985).

²⁷ p. 57.

²⁸ p. 122.

It is not clear to what extent Thomasson actually endorses the claims about nomological necessity she describes here. There is for example no defense of them.²⁹ But it seems crucial for her that claims like the ones made by Ryle and by Sellars about nomological necessity are indeed acceptable. Given the seeming similarities between talk of nomological necessity and of metaphysical necessity it would be odd to give different accounts of these kinds of talk.

Moreover, nomological necessity is not the only weaker necessity on the worldly side. When I say “I can’t eat another bite”, I hardly mean that it is nomologically impossible to do so (let alone metaphysically impossible). Ryle and Sellars focused on laws, and it was statements of laws that were supposed to serve as inference tickets. It is hard to see how to apply that idea to my statement about my inability to eat another bite.³⁰

Thomasson discusses necessary existence claims as a possible counterexample to her theory about metaphysically modal discourse. She mentions for example “God exists”. Many would be apt to hold that if God exists then God’s existence is metaphysically necessary, but “God exists” hardly records a semantic rule. Thomasson responds to this possible objection by saying that God’s existence would be nomologically necessary rather than metaphysically necessary. She does not do much to defend this response. The response seems to have little more to recommend it than that this may be what she has to say to defend her theory. I suspect many who consider the matter would find it natural to think that

²⁹ While there are the approving nods to Ryle and Sellars, Thomasson also says:

there would still be some progress, even if the view developed here about claims of *metaphysical* necessity did require a descriptive account of claims of *physical* necessity. It is beyond the scope of this book to adjudicate among competing views of physical necessities. But it is worth noting that there are available and plausible views of physical necessity claims that do not treat them as descriptive— indeed, non- descriptivist views of modality were first developed to address the status of scientific laws. (p. 121)

But this kind of passage is in tension with Thomasson’s aim to give a unified account of modal talk. And it would offhand be more odd to treat metaphysical and paradigmatically nomological modal talk differently than it would be to treat metaphysical and paradigmatically normative modal talk differently.

³⁰ It is also hard to see how to extend Thomasson’s account to epistemic modality, as in “the keys might be on the table”. There is plausibility to the idea that an utterance of this sentence serves to recommend looking on the table. But what is the underlying “rule” in this case?

God could change the laws of nature and thus what is nomologically necessary, even while God himself exists regardless of what the laws of nature are, if God exists at all.³¹

Necessity and Analyticity

In this section, I will turn to a structural problem that affects Thomasson's discussion. When discussing precursors of the kind of view she seeks to defend, Thomasson starts as follows:

Empiricists face challenges in accounting for modal truths precisely because *modal* features of the world do not seem to be empirically detectable. As David Hume argued, we cannot be thought to know *necessary* matters of fact (or rather: to know that any matter of fact holds necessarily) on the basis of experience of the world. For however well a statement may be confirmed through experience, that only shows that it *does* (so far) hold, not that it *must* hold.

This, of course, leaves a significant problem in understanding our knowledge of the truths of mathematics and logic.³²

The view Thomasson goes on to describe and defend, which concerns the function, use and meaning of modal vocabulary, is presented as a response to this problem.

But strikingly, the problem she starts out by presenting is not immediately bound up with modal vocabulary. The empiricist does, as she notes, have a problem regarding our knowledge of the truths of mathematics and logic. But while these truths may *be* necessary, no modal vocabulary is needed in *stating* them. The empiricist has a problem regarding our knowledge not just of “Necessarily $2+2=4$ ” but also of “ $2+2=4$ ”. Thomasson suggests that the best course of action for the empiricist is “to

³¹ There are also other purported examples of entities whose existence would be necessary, for example mathematical objects such as numbers. Thomasson's preferred way of dealing with them is by appeal to the “easy approach” to ontology which she has defended elsewhere. (See especially her (2014).) She (reasonably) thinks that this strategy does not extend to the God case, so by her own lights she needs to deal with that case in some different way.

³² p. 21.

deny that the necessary truths of logic or mathematics are factual claims at all—that is, in effect, to take a non-descriptivist approach to modal discourse”.³³ When she suggests that “the necessary truths of logic and mathematics” are not “factual”, I take it that the suggestion to the effect that the truths of logic and mathematics, which are necessary, are not factual. But if that is the suggestion, a “non-descriptivist approach to modal discourse” is not a way of making good on it. Again, the truths of logic and mathematics, although themselves necessary, are not themselves part of modal discourse. “Necessarily, $2+2=4$ ” is part of modal discourse; “ $2+2=4$ ” is not. (Compare: while “Matti is sitting at t ” expresses something that is possibly true, “Matti is sitting at t ” is not itself part of modal discourse although “Possibly, Matti is sitting at t ” is.)

Similar issues arise regarding other parts of Thomasson’s discussion. She later says, describing the view of the positivists, that “The basic statement of the positivist view of necessity, and often the only one passed down to us, is that “the truths of logic and mathematics are analytic propositions or tautologies” (Ayer, 1936/1952, p. 77)—statements that thus say nothing about the world”.³⁴ But again, a theory about the truths of logic and mathematics is hardly a theory of necessity, even though the truths of logic and mathematics are necessary.

The problems Thomasson aims to deal with seem clearly to go beyond our modal talk. But then theory merely about modal talk, as the theory Thomasson proposes, is not really responsive to the problem. What would promise to deal with the problems regarding the truths of logic and mathematics is a suitable theory of analyticity (whatever in the end the fate of such a theory). If these truths are analytic, then, one may think, the epistemology of these truths is straightforward: we know them by virtue of our semantic competence. A better statement of the positivist view of *necessity* is that all necessary truths are analytic (and maybe more strongly that this is what it is for them to be necessary).³⁵ Given that the

³³p. 23.

³⁴p. 24.

³⁵And of course the positivists also relied on specific conceptions of what analyticity is.

truths of logic and mathematics are necessary, this applies also to them. But the view is not specific to logic and mathematics.

Actually, a theory of analyticity of the kind that can seem to do the trick can be extracted from Thomasson's discussion of necessity.³⁶ Recall Thomasson's rule (I) governing the necessity operator:

(I) If p is an object-language expression of an actual semantic rule (or a logical consequence of actual semantic rules), then you are entitled to introduce *Necessarily* p , regardless of any subjunctive suppositions.

Since *Necessarily*, p entails p , it seems that given that Thomasson says this about "Necessarily" she should also be happy with the following principle:

(*) If p is an object-language expression of an actual semantic rule (or a logical consequence of actual semantic rules), then you are entitled to introduce p , regardless of any subjunctive suppositions,

Thomasson seems to be committed to the view that if a sentence is an object-language expression of a semantic rule, then it is true. The contrary view threatens to be in tension with (*). Here is an auxiliary claim: a sentence that is an object-language expression of a semantic rule does not need anything to make it true. Thomasson is arguably committed to this claim too. Witness again how she takes her account of "necessarily" together with deflationism to have the consequence that modal statements can be true "without their having to be made true by modal features of the world". Together, the assumptions stated provide the materials for a theory of analyticity: a sentence is analytic just in case it is an object-language expression of a semantic

³⁶In earlier work (2007a, 2007b), Thomasson focused on analyticity. In my (2017) I criticized what she then said about that matter.

rule (and hence is true without there being anything that makes it so.)³⁷

I believe that both the claims underlying this theory of analyticity are problematic. But what is important for present purposes is just that Thomasson is committed to both. And what is more, it seems that given this theory of analyticity one can further account for metaphysical necessity as follows. The account is: metaphysically necessary statements are all analytic in this sense, and so are claims to the effect that these statements are in fact necessary. Given this account, there is no obvious need to

³⁷Appeal to this theory of analyticity also helps with another problem regarding Thomasson's account. Suppose that Thomasson is right about our metaphysically modal vocabulary. One can think that we might still introduce a notion of being what one may call *factually metaphysically necessary*, and of course also *factually metaphysically possible*, where this is metaphysical necessity and possibility understood as Thomasson's opponent wants to understand it. The fact that we do not ordinarily express these notions does not mean that they cannot be introduced, and understood. I have the sense that I understand them, and my sense that I understand them does not seem to me to be bound up with a theory to the effect that ordinary modal vocabulary expresses factual metaphysical modality. And even assuming that Thomasson has a nice account of the metaphysical necessity of logical and mathematical truths, in the ordinary sense of "metaphysical necessity", the truths can still seem factually metaphysically necessary, and accounting for their factual metaphysical necessity can seem as problematic as it ever did.

Thomasson brings up a version of this objection (p. 58fn9), saying that Michaela McSweeney raised it to her. Here is her response:

An initial response is to ask for more information: What would these "schmodal" terms be, how would they function, what rules would they follow? If I am right that our actual modal terms serve a *normative* function, it is hard to see how any descriptively functioning terms could be closely related enough to them to count as "modal" at all. Suppose someone said, "OK, I see how our salutation terms function. But now I want to introduce *schmal*utation terms, which are like those, but function descriptively—to talk about the *schmal*utational features of reality." I think we would have no idea what these could be, or by what rights we would come to think there was any relation (other than phonetic) between the introduced terms and our familiar salutation terms.

This is a reasonable first response. But I think there is an obvious reply in turn. In the case of metaphysical modality, as opposed to the case of salutation, we need not turn to exercises of imagination to come up with factual alternatives. Just consider any of the orthodox accounts of metaphysical modality that Thomasson takes herself to oppose. Even if Thomasson is right in holding that such accounts fail as accounts of metaphysical modality they can well succeed as accounts of something or other—and this something would be factual metaphysical modality. So despite Thomasson's attempted response the problem stands. But, returning to the theme of analyticity: a theory of analyticity of the kind sketched promises to explain the factual metaphysical necessity of these truths and thus to serve as a response also to this problem.

provide a separate account of what necessity is. Any account given which analytic statements are necessary will do.

The theory of analyticity invites the question: why ever bother to utter sentences with this status? A more general version of what Thomasson describes as her theory of the function of modal discourse can serve as an answer to this question: the utterances of analytic sentences can serve normative purposes.

The theory of analyticity that I have briefly described involves reliance on a number of controversial claims. There is the commitment to the idea of semantic rules, and to “object-language expressions” of semantic rules. There is the commitment to the claim that when *p* is such an object-language expression, *p*’s truth does not demand anything of the world. Each of these claims may be problematic—I have raised a number of problems in earlier sections—but they are no more problematic in the general case of analyticity than in the specific case of modal vocabulary.

Moreover, whatever in the end to say about this theory of analyticity, it is in some ways in *better* shape than Thomasson’s theory of metaphysical necessity, for some concerns about the latter theory are no longer relevant. The complaint against Thomasson’s theory of metaphysical necessity deriving from the fact that we seldom or never express claims about metaphysical necessity in ordinary language has no counterpart in the case of analyticity: for the theory of analyticity is not committed to there being any ordinary expression that expresses analyticity. And the concern that Thomasson’s theory of metaphysical necessity cannot be generalized in a natural way to weaker alethic necessities likewise has no counterpart.

Let me close by emphasizing a concern that applies both to Thomasson’s explicit theory about modal discourse and to the theory of analyticity that I have extracted from her discussion of necessity. This concern relates to something that I have stressed in a number of works. Even granted that some sort of notion of semantic rule makes good sense, semantic rules may be incompatible—and they may be incompatible even while the practice of speaking the language characterized by these rules is a broadly successful practice. But if there can be incompatible semantic rules, then their corresponding object-language expressions cannot all be true. Compare rules of games. It could be that the rules of a game—baseball,

or Dungeons & Dragons—are subtly inconsistent. Situations can arise where what one rule dictates is incompatible with what another rule dictates. In those situations, players of the game cannot abide by both rules. What about when this happens in the case of language use? A toy example would involve a predicate *F* where one rule says that anything that is *G* is *F* and another says that anything that is *H* is non-*F*—and then it turns out that some things are both *G* and *H*. In situations like this, principle (*), which Thomasson apparently is committed to, leads to trouble. It licenses both “all *G*s are *F*” and “all *H*s are not-*F*”, which together with the empirical premise “some *G*s and *H*” entails “some things are both *F* and not-*F*”. Some restriction of principle (*) is necessary.³⁸

Concluding Remarks

I have discussed various problems regarding Thomasson’s theory of metaphysically modal discourse. In a way the most basic problem is the one stressed in the last section: a theory of the kind Thomasson develops does not even promise to deal with the problems that motivate it, for the problems are more general. But in the last section I also made a constructive point: a nearby theory of analyticity would deal with these problems. I presented problems for this theory of analyticity, but I would not rule out that a revised theory could get around these problems.

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³⁸ See, e.g., Eklund (2002, 2007, 2019b). In ch. 8 of her (2014), Thomasson discusses some cases of terms introduced by inconsistent stipulations. This is in the context of discussing her approach to ontology, and the question of under what conditions terms refer. She outlines conditions under which terms fail to refer even given her easy approach to ontology. Even granted that her response is successful in the context of the discussion of ontology (for some relevant discussion see my (2017)), the problem I present in the main text still stands. The response does not address the issue of how (*) can be maintained given the possibility of inconsistent stipulations.

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8

Thomasson's Social Ontology

Åsa Burman

Introduction: Thomassonian Social Ontology

Over the course of thirty years, Amie Thomasson has made substantial contributions to a wide range of philosophical topics from general metaphysics and meta-metaphysics to artifacts and fiction. In doing so, she has incrementally developed a philosophical system that includes substantive accounts of ordinary objects, and modality and the methodological framework of “the easy approach to ontology.”¹ This work is much discussed and debated. What is perhaps less known is her important contribution to social metaphysics. Unlike her other work, these efforts are not concentrated in a single volume but appear in several articles and

¹ See for instance Thomasson's *Ordinary Objects* (2007) for her account of inanimate objects, *Ontology Made Easy* (2015) for her development of the easy approach to ontology, and *Norms and Necessity* (2020) for her normative approach to metaphysical modality statements.

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book chapters. My first objective is thus to draw out the core features of this contribution and show that these writings contain a general theory of social ontology that is robust enough to be called Thomassonian social ontology. This is an interesting alternative to other general and better-known theories in social ontology, such as John Searle's theory of social reality (1995, 2010), and Margaret Gilbert's plural subject theory (1989, 1990). In fact, Thomassonian social ontology offers certain advantages over Searle's early theory, since it can accommodate abstract social objects and opaque kinds of social facts. In addition, it can capture a wider range of social groups than Gilbert's account while still answering the question of what these different social groups have in common. In short, I want to show that social ontologists should seriously consider this alternative framework and that it deserves as much attention as Thomasson's other philosophical work.

The first section characterizes Thomassonian social ontology by drawing out its core features, such as an emphasis on rules and norms and methodological commitments to the easy approach to ontology and pluralism. In addition, I discuss those core features' central benefits, such as the ability to capture many different kinds of social phenomena. The second section describes Thomasson's new account of social groups—an account that shifts from *shared intentions* to *norms* as the unifying feature of central social groups (2019). The third section creates a debate between “early Thomasson” and “later Thomasson.” I develop the objection, inspired by early Thomasson, that the new account of social groups is too narrow since it cannot accommodate opaque kinds of social groups. Still, these can be central social groups of great importance to our lives. The chapter's final section suggests that one way of overcoming this objection is to replace the core feature of norms as the unifying feature of central social groups with another: pluralism. Allowing for even greater pluralism with respect to social groups enables accommodating both transparent kinds of social groups (unified by norms) and opaque kinds of social groups (not unified by norms).

The Rule-based Account of Social Phenomena

Thomasson entered the world of social ontology from the philosophical study of fiction (1999). In “Foundations for a Social Ontology” (2003), she lays out and begins to solve two puzzles:

The existence of a social world raises both the metaphysical puzzle: how can there be a “reality” of facts and objects that are genuinely created by human intentionality? and the epistemological puzzle: how can such a product of human intentionality include objective facts available for investigation and discovery by the social sciences? (Thomasson, 2003, p. 269)

Thomasson forcefully argues that Searle's (1995) theory is too narrow to fully solve either puzzle and then offers a positive proposal. The core notion in her proposal is *rules*. In contrast to Searle's one constitutive rule, it contains three rules: singular rules, universal rules, and existential rules. I call this *the rule-based account of social phenomena*, which Thomasson develops with the metaphysical and epistemological puzzle in mind. More specifically, it aims to solve the problem of abstract social objects and the problem of opaque kinds of social facts.

The problem of abstract social objects is related to the metaphysical puzzle. A theory of social ontology must explain the existence of both abstract and concrete social objects. Abstract social objects are “abstract in the sense of not being identifiable with any particular material object” (Thomasson, 2003, p. 273). In contrast, concrete social objects are identifiable with a particular material object. Examples of abstract social objects are laws like the U.S. Constitution and corporations like General Motors. Thomasson argues that Searle's theory can accommodate concrete but not abstract social objects. A central tenet of Searle's theory is the “logical priority of brute facts over institutional facts,” by which all social and institutional facts bottom out in brute physical facts. Social and institutional objects thus become merely physical objects or persons overlaid with a new function (Searle, 1995, pp. 34–35, 56–57). This model works well for one type of example—concrete social or institutional objects—that Searle uses in his theorizing, but it does not work for other kinds of examples such as abstract social objects, since they are not

simply physical objects overlaid with a new function. They are a new entity. Hence, Searle's theory is too narrow to fully solve the metaphysical puzzle.

The problem of opaque kinds of social facts is related to the epistemological puzzle. A theory of social ontology needs to be able to explain discoveries of both types, or kinds, of facts and tokens of facts. Thomasson points out an ambiguity in Searle's constitutive rule of the form: X counts as Y in context C. This sometimes refers to a particular instance or a token of a type, such as a particular coin, and sometimes refers to the type or kind of thing, such as money. To properly explain discoveries in the social sciences, one needs to show how there can be not only transparent but also opaque kinds of social facts. Roughly speaking, transparent social facts are the kinds of facts that people in a particular society know about, whereas opaque social facts are unknown to the members of a society. Thomasson argues that Searle's theory cannot account for opaque kinds of social facts due to two other central tenets: that concepts that refer to social phenomena are self-referential, and that the relation of what seems to be the case is prior to what is the case holds for all observer-relative features, including institutional facts (Thomasson, 2003). But the existence of opaque kinds of social facts is required to explain the possibility of discoveries and thus to solve the epistemological puzzle:

But the idea that all social concepts are self-referential entails that there cannot be social facts of any *kind* whose existence members of that society do not know about—for if there are social facts of a given kind F, people must accept that certain things (or things of certain sorts) are F (and, since their collective acceptance makes it so, they must collectively be right about what things or sorts of things are F). But this severely limits the role the social sciences can play in expanding human knowledge—many of the discoveries of greatest moment in the social sciences are of things such as economic cycles, class systems, and power structures, that are capable of existing even if no one believes that anything of the kind exists, or even if no one entertains the relevant concept at all or has prior beliefs about anything of the kind. (Thomasson, 2003, p. 275)

These two central problems—abstract social objects and opaque kinds of social facts—caused debate and significant changes in Searle's theory.² But there was less discussion of Thomasson's own solution, the rule-based account of social phenomena, to which we now turn.

Thomasson draws attention to parallels between rules in the study of make-believe and “fictional truths” (while denying that social and institutional facts are purely fictional) on the one hand and social reality on the other (2003, pp. 280–282). She introduces two constitutive rules (1, 2) and one existential rule (3):

Singular Rule: 1. (Of *a*) We collectively accept: *Sa* (where “*S*” names a social feature).

Universal Rule: 2. For all *x*, we collectively accept that (if *x* meets all conditions in *C*, then *Sx*).

Existential Rule: 3. We collectively accept that (if all conditions *C* obtain, then there is some *x* such that *Sx*).

Singular rules explain the creation and existence of tokens of social facts and institutional facts, such as the fact that this particular person is our leader or the token social object of that leader. Universal rules explain the creation and existence of types of social and institutional facts and types of social objects, such as the fact that the Euro is a valid currency and types of social objects like laws. Distinguishing between singular and universal constitutive rules in this way thus removes the ambiguity in Searle's original formulation. But these rules still do not fully solve the metaphysical puzzle: they only explain the existence of concrete social and institutional facts and concrete social objects due to their reliance on physical objects being overlaid with a new function. Existential rules are needed to explain the creation and existence of abstract social objects. In this latter case, the collective acceptance of the rule means that the participants can create *new* social objects like corporations and laws by employing the rule that entails the existence of social objects that are not

² See for instance the debate between John Searle and Barry Smith on the so-called “free-standing Y-terms,” similar to abstract social objects (2003), and my suggestion (2007) that opaque kinds of social facts, referred to as macro-facts, are reducible to a collection of facts at the micro-level, a solution later adopted by Searle (2010).

identifiable with any particular material object; that is, they are abstract. Introducing multiple forms of rules thus allows Thomasson to solve the metaphysical puzzle.

But the epistemological puzzle remains. Note that singular rules do not allow for the possibility of discoveries from the internal viewpoint of the members of a society since they need to have beliefs about a particular person being the leader for that person to actually be the leader. While a few people could be mistaken about a particular person being their leader, that is not true of the vast majority of people. Universal rules, however, do allow for the possibility of discoveries of tokens of facts from the internal viewpoint. If people have accepted the rule that whoever pulls a sword from a stone is the king, they might not yet know that say Arthur has indeed pulled Excalibur from the stone. But neither of these types of rules can allow for discoveries of opaque *kinds* of social facts. Thomasson introduces the distinction between epistemic and conceptual opacity:

Call a kind F of social entities “epistemically opaque” if things of that kind are capable of existing even if no one believes that anything of kind F exists, and “conceptually opaque” if things of that kind are capable of existing even if no one has any F-regarding beliefs whatsoever. (Thomasson, 2003, pp. 275–276)

The real challenge of the epistemological puzzle is to explain how there can be discoveries of new kinds of social objects and kinds of social facts; that is, how to allow for discoveries of *conceptually opaque kinds of social facts*. Thomasson uses the existential rule in combination with what are known as generated social objects to do this. She draws a distinction between “created” and “generated” social facts and objects where the former are intentionally created and the latter are unintended byproducts of the former (Thomasson, 2003, p. 278). Recall that the existential rule can explain how new social objects are created. Using the distinction between constructed and generated social objects and her easy approach to ontology, Thomasson solves the metaphysical puzzle by showing the existence of opaque kinds of social facts: “Once a social world is constructed, there will be all sorts of interesting patterns and causal relations within it—economic cycles, patterns of human settlement and property use, of human

behavior, of distribution of goods and status, and so on, many of which the participants in the relevant society may lack any concepts of or beliefs about" (p. 288). She continues: "In the case of generated as constructed social entities, whatever the conditions are that are criterial for being of a certain social kind, we have reason to say that there *really are* things of that kind (that we are not merely pretending) as long as we have reason to think that those conditions are fulfilled" (p. 288).

This account begins to solve the epistemological puzzle since it allows for the possibility of genuine discoveries of conceptually opaque kinds of social facts, such as discovering that the economy is in a state of recession before anyone had that belief or that a certain society is racist before anyone had beliefs about racism. In sum, the rule-based account of social phenomena is a promising candidate for solving both the metaphysical and the epistemological puzzles.

This discussion of the rule-based account illustrates the core features of Thomasson's social ontology. While the two central notions of collective intentionality and rules do much of the theoretical work, there are three other things one can learn about Thomasson's social ontology. First, she starts from more diverse examples with respect to both *content* and *form* than many other social ontologists. They vary in content by ranging from phenomena studied in political science, such as nations and laws, and sociology, such as class structures, to feminist theory, such as gender relations. They vary in form by covering abstract and concrete social objects, transparent and opaque kinds of social facts, types and tokens of facts, and constructed and generated social objects. Consequently, there is less risk of unduly narrowing the social world. Second, Thomasson takes the differences between different kinds of social objects and social facts seriously and offers a pluralistic account of rules to accommodate these differences. Pluralism is thus another core feature. Third, she takes a clear stand on her philosophical method, with the central claim that all well-formed existence questions can be resolved by conceptual analysis and/or empirical work (2015). This notion was applied, for instance, in giving an account of how conceptually opaque kinds of social facts can exist. So, another core feature is adopting the easy approach to ontology. Let us turn to how these core features show up in Thomasson's recent account of social groups that she refers to as *the normative conception of social groups* (2019).

The Normative Conception of Social Groups

The notion of a social group is central to contemporary social ontology. Much of the philosophical debate has revolved around two questions: (1) Are there any social groups? (2) Given that social groups exist, what are social groups?

Thomasson offers novel responses to these questions. The first, she argues, is simply misguided. Using the easy approach to ontology, the answer is a straightforward yes. If one can provide even a single example of a collection of individuals that meets the conditions for a social group, then the answer is yes. And there are in fact many such cases; consider the faculty senate or the climate committee of a philosophy department (Thomasson, 2019, pp. 4830–4833). This illustrates the point made above about how Thomasson's methodological commitments inform her account.

According to Thomasson, the central question is the second one: What are social groups? In setting out to answer this question, she makes the methodological point that “social group” is not a frequent term in everyday talk; rather, it is a technical term. Consequently, our linguistic intuitions might not lead us to an answer as follows: “For the general term ‘social group’ seems like a term of art—not a well-used concept we can analyze, or can presuppose corresponds to a real kind we can investigate” (Thomasson, 2019, p. 4830). But specific social groups—the faculty senate, the climate committee, women, and so on—are used in everyday talk. Hence, it is better to start by analyzing particular social groups that we use in our everyday talk before moving on to answer the question of whether there is a unity behind the different kinds of central social groups (ibid). Thomasson answers in the affirmative and suggests that norms are the answer:

In short, the social groups that are most important to us in our lives together have a shared normative structure. Yet we can note this commonality while still respecting important differences across different kinds of social groups. We can also identify what distinguishes all of these social groups from arbitrary assemblages of people, or groups of people who merely share some physical characteristic(s). (Thomasson, 2019, p. 4840)

Call this the normative conception of social groups. There are three kinds of norms—internal, external, and structuring—that can be used to distinguish between different kinds of social groups. An internal norm is a shared understanding of how members of a particular group “are to behave, regard themselves and other group members,” while public external norms are “norms regarding how members of that group are to be treated, regarded, behaved towards by those who are not members of the group” (Thomasson, 2019, p. 4839). For example, a religious community is a social group characterized mainly by internal norms, while races and genders are social groups characterized mainly by external norms. The notion of a structuring norm is borrowed from Katherine Ritchie; such norms “place different group members at different nodes, with different norms regarding those who occupy different nodes” (Thomasson, 2019, p. 4838). For example, a formal organization such as a university or the military is characterized mainly by structuring norms. Thomasson offers no definition of the general term “social norm,” relying instead on Christina Bicchieri’s account (2006) that regards norms as “prescriptions and proscriptions of how one is to act (including in this how one is to think, feel, regard an individual or situation), in various contexts, towards others of various sorts, etc., and the corresponding expectations” (Thomasson, 2019, p. 4841). This understanding of norm is broad indeed; it includes formal and informal social norms, explicit and implicit social norms, norms stemming from human design and planning, and norms not stemming from human design and planning. Norms need not be rationally justified or efficient; nor do they need to be morally justified. There is thus an important distinction in this view between social and moral norms.

Let us return to the second question: What are social groups? Much work in social ontology has used “shared intentions” as an answer, but we have seen that Thomasson shifts the focus from shared intentions to social norms. This makes her account broader than, for instance, Margaret Gilbert’s plural subject account. To demonstrate this, let us turn to Katherine Ritchie’s two types of groups, a distinction that Thomasson cites approvingly:

Type 1 groups (including teams, clubs, committees, and courts) are ‘structured wholes’, where the nodes of the structure are occupied by some members and stand in required relations. Type 2 groups (including racial groups, gender groups, sexual orientation groups), by contrast, don’t require structural organization and are identified by a ‘shared feature.’ Type 1 groups require structural-functional organization, their members must have collective intentionality, may freely choose whether to belong to the group, and needn’t share any (other) features with the group members. By contrast, none of these applies to members of Type 2 groups. (Ritchie, 2015, p. 314 referred to in Thomasson, 2019, p. 4835)

Thomasson argues that Margaret Gilbert’s plural subject account of social groups is too narrow since it cannot account for type 2 groups. Drawing on the core feature of pluralism, Thomasson’s diagnosis is that this problem stems from not considering that terms for different social groups have different application conditions. So, some groups are indeed created and continue to exist due to shared intentions, but others do not follow that pattern.

This results in one condition of adequacy for Thomasson’s own account: it needs to accommodate both type 1 and type 2 groups. The account must be neither too narrow nor too broad. Avoiding an overly broad approach means that one should be able to distinguish a collection of individuals that have social significance from a random collection of individuals and from a collection of individuals that are united by a natural feature that has no social significance, such as having hazel eyes. In line with this, Ritchie’s type 2 groups are united by a socially constructed, and not a natural, feature. The other condition of adequacy is that the account needs to explain the centrality of social groups to our practical agency. Thomasson emphasizes that membership in social groups is central to our self-identity, to how others treat us, and to how we treat others. Thomasson offers an elegant explanation of the importance of social groups by asking what an individual would lack without access to the concepts of various social groups. Her answer is that “an individual who lacked all social group concepts would, quite simply, have no idea how she was to act, what was expected of her, or how to understand the reactions of others” (2019, p. 4838).

Can the normative conception meet these conditions of adequacy? That is, can it take both type 1 and type 2 groups into account while at the same time avoiding an overly narrow or an overly broad account, and explain the centrality of social groups to our practical agency? Using three different kinds of norms means that the normative conception of social groups is broader than some existing accounts, including Gilbert's, and can consequently accommodate type 1 groups (such as clubs and teams) and type 2 groups (such as racial and gender groups). Thus, her account does not appear to be too narrow. At the same time, it is not too broad since it can distinguish collections of individuals who form social groups that are governed by norms from random collections of individuals and from collections of individuals united by a natural feature that lacks social significance. Therefore, it appears to meet the first condition of adequacy.

In addition, using three kinds of norms and the general notion of a social norm also means that one can respect differences between different kinds of groups (i.e., their different application conditions) while maintaining that central social groups are unified by norms. The second condition of adequacy—accounting for the centrality of social groups to our practical agency—is met by showing how we are subject and responsive to norms, whether we detest or approve of them.

Returning to the first objective and drawing out the core features of Thomasson's social ontology to make her contribution more explicit, one can note the following: just as collective intentionality and rules did much of the theoretical work in the rule-based account of social objects, norms—more precisely three types of norms (internal, external, and structuring)—do much of the theoretical work for social groups. So we can add norms as a central notion in Thomassonian social ontology. The core feature of pluralism shows up again, for example, in using three kinds of norms and emphasizing that different social group terms have different application conditions, which respects the important differences that exist between different kinds of social groups. Even the core methodological feature of the easy approach to ontology figures here in the argument that the first question (of whether there any social groups) is simply misguided since it has a straightforward affirmative answer. In parallel to her insightful discussion of social objects, Thomasson starts from a variety of examples of different kinds of social groups to broaden our

understanding of social groups by shifting from shared intentions to norms as the unifying feature.

There is an additional core feature of Thomassonian social ontology that has not yet been addressed: the function-first approach to language and the related use of conceptual engineering. In discussing other accounts of social groups, such as Gilbert's plural subject theory and Sally Haslanger's account of gender and race, Thomasson contends that these theorists might not genuinely disagree with each other about the essence of social groups. Rather, they could be viewed as being involved in different philosophical projects and thus offering answers to different questions. Gilbert, for instance, could be regarded as offering a concept that is especially apt for assigning group beliefs and group responsibility, while Haslanger provides concepts that aid in fighting social injustice. Thomasson continues by suggesting that it is more fruitful to be involved in the function-first approach and asks what different *functions* a particular notion of a social group serve, or more generally, for what reason or purpose should we have the concept of a social group. In Haslanger's case, the concepts of gender and race should aid us in combating social injustice, an aim that Thomasson appears to share (Thomasson, 2019, p. 4843, 4845).

It appears that the normative conception of social groups can fulfill this purpose. There is a distinction between social and moral norms, and the gap between them can be used to criticize unjust social norms. Thomasson adds another benefit: using norms as the central notion offers a solution to the co-location problem of social groups; that is, how the same individuals can be part of different social groups. The explanation is that these same individuals are subject to different norms and thus make up different groups (2019, p. 4843). These are important benefits.

But there is a central difficulty with the normative conception of social groups: since it cannot account for opaque kinds of social groups, it is not quite broad enough. The implication is that the normative conception is too narrow even by its own standards because it does not meet its own conditions of adequacy. I develop this objection in the next section.

The Normative Conception of Social Groups is Overly Narrow

Let us begin with a recent example. During the most intense phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, Swedish newspapers reported that the risk of being infected with coronavirus and the risk of dying from such an infection varied widely—by as much as a factor of three—across different areas of Stockholm. The Public Health Agency of Sweden launched an information campaign about COVID-19 in several languages after statistics showed that people from an immigrant background were significantly overrepresented in those infected with and dying from COVID-19. However, some reporters and people from these neighborhoods pointed out that the issue was not language; rather, many people living in these areas simply could not work from home. Their jobs, such as working in eldercare and driving buses or metro trains to get other people to and from work, required them to leave home and mix with others. In addition, the high degree of cramped housing in these neighborhoods was noted. One reporter concluded that what appeared to be an issue about language, race, and ethnicity was really about economic class.

This example reinforces the importance of material conditions and their connection to a person's chances in life—or even of staying alive, as with COVID-19. One's relationship to the means of production determined whether one could work from home and hence whether one had an increased likelihood of becoming infected due to the need to work elsewhere (and perhaps take public transportation to get there). One's relationship to the means of production would also affect one's likelihood of being able to afford a car and thus decrease the likelihood of getting infected. Finally, that relationship also profoundly affects one's living situation and how crowded it is. Some facts about this case are examples of institutional facts, such as the fact that someone is employed as a bus driver rather than a university professor. Other facts about this case seemed to be opaque to the Swedish people prior to the publication of the data, such as the fact that an individual belonging to the working class in Stockholm had a greater risk of becoming infected with and dying from COVID-19 than individuals belonging to Stockholm's middle and upper classes.

Economic class understood as one's relation to the means of production should be distinguished from social class and other kinds of social groups governed by norms. Economic class works in other ways and differs significantly from these social groups: its effects on our life chances are not due to norms but rather to one's position in the capitalist system. This is illustrated by the COVID-19 example, where material conditions like cramped housing and being required to mix with others—rather than social norms—were the primary explanation for the different life chances of individuals in Stockholm.³

In this example, norms do not play the key role of affecting life chances but rather one's position in the capitalist system, which is an example of a generated social phenomenon that depends on constructed social phenomena like money, factory owners, and factory workers, among others. Consequently, neither workers nor capitalists are random collections of individuals or collections of individuals based on a natural feature without social significance; rather, each group is a collection of individuals united by a socially constructed feature and each is of enormous social importance. In short, they are examples of type 2 groups. But the normative conception of social groups has difficulties including social groups united by material conditions rather than social norms.

This objection can be further developed. Assume that prior to the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* by Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx (1848) and *Das Kapital* by Marx (1867), the notion of “economic class” was conceptually and epistemically opaque. Yet, according to Thomasson, different economic classes such as capitalists and workers still existed. Recall her earlier statement and think of economic classes as social entities:

In the case of generated as constructed social entities, whatever the conditions are that are criterial for being of a certain social kind, we have reason to say that there really are things of that kind (that we are not merely pretending) as long as we have reason to think that conditions are fulfilled. (Thomasson, 2003, p. 288)

³This example comes from my *Nonideal Social Ontology* (2023) where I argue that economic class has been excluded from many theories and discussions in social ontology, and that this is a serious limitation. I also clarify the distinction between economic class and social class.

Assume further that one's life chances were greatly affected by one's position in the capitalist system. For example, patterns regarding lifespans correlate with being a factory worker or a factory owner, with the former running a much higher risk of workplace accidents, cramped living arrangements, and having less food available.

But opaque kinds of social groups, like economic classes in our example, are necessarily excluded as counting as a social group on the normative conception. The reason is that norms are understood as "prescriptions and proscriptions of how one is to act." Even though there need be no conscious acknowledgment of how these norms affect oneself and others, there does need to be at least some kind of awareness, however implicit, that an individual belongs to certain social groups if the norm is to play any role at all. But the possibility of discovering opaque kinds of social groups implies that there could be no such awareness prior to the discovery. Another way to put this point is to say that the possibility of opaque kinds of social groups (perhaps united by material conditions) runs counter to this very idea. If people in a certain society do not have access to a given group concept, such as economic class and the fact that individuals in their society belong to different economic classes, and thus suffer from conceptual opacity in that regard, they cannot hold themselves and others accountable to social norms governing economic classes. We might even assume that there are no social norms that correlate with different economic classes but are united by purely material conditions.

My diagnosis is that Thomasson, like many other social ontologists, has overly relied on people's attitudes in her analysis of social groups. This excludes economic class and some opaque kinds of social groups that do not depend on attitudes, but are still socially significant, and significant to the work of the social sciences. Still, they are type 2 groups in Ritchie's classification.⁴ Furthermore, recall Thomasson's objection against Gilbert's plural subject theory, that it is overly narrow since it cannot

⁴Thomasson explicitly denies that the normative conception should provide jointly necessary and sufficient conditions for *all* social groups—that she is searching for the essence of social groups. So it is not an objection to her account that it excludes some groups that we intuitively take to be social groups. Rather, her account should be taken to answer the question: what function do particular social groups concepts have for our shared lives together? And the answer is that they give our lives a normative structure.

accommodate type 2 groups. The upshot is that the normative conception of social groups cannot account for important type 2 groups, such as social groups purely united by material conditions (even if they are transparent) and opaque kinds of social groups such as economic classes before a certain point in time.

This objection calls into question whether the normative conception can meet its own conditions of adequacy. More precisely, it calls into question whether this account can accommodate central type 2 groups since economic classes are not social groups according to the normative conception, even though economic classes depend on social arrangements and are thus neither random collections of individuals nor united by a natural feature. Furthermore, it calls into question the centrality of norms since, at least for opaque kinds of economic classes, they are not united by norms but rather by material conditions. Still, these groups have an enormous impact on our life chances. It also casts doubt on whether the normative conception alone is sufficient for criticizing unjust social arrangements, since economic class is central to this purpose. I take this objection to be central; it needs to be answered before we can take Thomassonian social ontology fully onboard.

One route is to deny that economic classes are social groups, but this approach appears to be in tension with a purpose of the normative conception, which is to be fruitful for criticizing unjust social arrangements. More importantly, denying that economic classes are social groups would be in conflict with the conception of type 2 groups that Thomasson has adopted. In addition, given Thomasson's emphasis on the importance of opaque kinds of social facts and the distinction between constructed and generated social objects, it would be odd to exclude opaque kinds of social groups that depend on both constructed and generated social objects.

Fortunately, there are conceptual resources like pluralism and the function-first approach within Thomassonian social ontology that offer another, more plausible route. This involves limiting the normative conception of social groups to some transparent social groups and still maintaining that the unifying feature of these groups are norms. At the same time, one would take the differences between groups seriously and employ the idea that different social group terms—even within type 2 groups

such as races, genders and economic classes—have different application conditions. In short, one would maintain that transparent social group terms have different application conditions than opaque social groups terms (and different types of opaque groups terms likely have different application conditions). This even more pluralistic approach to social groups—the one's united by norms and the one's not united by norms but other socially constructed features—would respect the differences between different kinds of social groups. It would also expand the conception of type 2 social groups to include opaque kinds of social groups, and (even transparent) groups united by material conditions rather than norms, thus offering a more comprehensive account.

This route is also in line with the function-first approach and conceptual engineering: if we are mainly interested in how social groups affect our practical agency with respect to self-identity and how others treat us and how we treat others, employing the concept of transparent social groups unified by norms is a promising approach. If we are mainly interested in how the social world is working on us in ever more elusive ways and in how material conditions affect the life chances of individuals, using the concept of opaque kinds of social groups unified by material conditions is a fruitful way forward. My view is that it would be both fruitful and in line with Thomasson's overall philosophical project to downplay norms and valorize pluralism even further, thus offering a genuinely pluralistic account of social groups.

Conclusion: A Plea for Even More Pluralism

A couple of years ago, I listened to a lecture by the physicist Max Tegmark, who vividly showed how our perception of the universe has kept expanding from the very narrow geocentric model to the slightly less narrow heliocentric model to an increasingly broader view that contained more and more galaxies and structures we could scarcely conceive. Analogously, our view of the social world continues to expand. The early days of social ontology featured a rather narrow view of social phenomena as transparent, concrete, and constructed. Amie Thomasson's work in social ontology has contributed to a more expansive view of social phenomena as

including opaque, abstract, and generated phenomena. In parallel, her normative conception of social groups is more expansive than accounts that rely on shared intentions as their unifying feature. This means that an interesting alternative to other, better-known accounts in social ontology has emerged: Thomassonian social ontology.

My first objective in this chapter was to distill the core features of this approach, which employs three central notions to do the theoretical work: collective intentionality, rules, and norms. The former two are used in accommodating transparent and opaque and concrete and abstract social phenomena, while norms are used in answering the following question: What function(s) do and should our social groups concepts serve? These notions combine methodological commitments to pluralism, the easy approach to ontology, and a certain view of language: the function-first approach and its close companion, conceptual engineering. This means that Thomasson not only provides substantial accounts of social objects and social groups but also that these accounts are informed by specific views on philosophical method and philosophy of language. It seems to me that this work is a crucial part of building a philosophical system.

My second objective was to show that the normative conception of social groups is too narrow since it cannot account for opaque kinds of social groups nor for transparent groups united purely by material conditions. I demonstrated this concern by arguing that the notion of a norm excludes some social groups such as opaque economic classes (before a certain point in time) or even transparent economic classes since they are united by material conditions rather than social norms. Still, these are type 2 social groups of great importance to our lives. Given Thomasson's critique of Gilbert's plural subject theory and her own purposes, it is important to accommodate these kinds of groups. In doing so, one needs to downplay the importance of norms and offer an even more pluralistic account of social groups. Another way to put this point is that one might imagine early Thomasson asking her later self: Can your normative conception of social groups really take opaque kinds of social groups into account?

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9

Easy Social Ontology

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Introduction

Although there is already an important discussion regarding *social ontology* (a first-order investigation about social entities, e.g., social objects, social events, social relations, and social categories), not much attention has been paid to *social meta-ontology* (a second-order inquiry concerning what it means and how to answer whether there are any such entities). With the intention to contribute towards bringing the latter into the philosophical spotlight, I submit here a brief survey of the meta-ontological issues about two specific kinds of social entities, viz., social and institutional practices.

In general terms, my aim in this chapter is to present Amie Thomasson's easy approach to ontology as a compelling view to deal with existence questions about social entities. Of the few prominent social ontologists who have engaged with this topic, most seem to prefer a 'serious' meta-ontological approach (e.g., Tuomela, 1984; Hacking, 1999; Epstein,

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2015; and Lawson, 2016). According to their views, to answer ontological questions about social entities we first need to establish a *robust* criterion of existence (e.g., being posited by our best social scientific theories; or being ‘constructed’ through a certain causal mechanism; or holding a structuralist, grounding/anchoring, relation to more fundamental entities; or being produced via some ‘emergence’ process) and then to investigate whether such-and-such putative social entity satisfies it. However, as I shall contend, there remains underexplored the ‘easy’ approach developed by Thomasson, according to which ontological disputes are easily answered by means of conceptual analysis and empirical investigation.

Though not all participants in meta-ontological disputes agree with Thomasson’s view, I think there are good reasons to regard it as an important contender in social meta-ontology, at least by those who are not yet committed to denying the plausibility of a *deflationary* metametaphysics.

In arguing for this, I structure the chapter as follows. First, I introduce the meta-ontological discussion in contemporary social ontology (section “[Social Ontology and Social Meta-Ontology](#)”). Then, I examine Thomasson’s easy ontology (section “[The Easy Approach to Ontology](#)”) and extend her account to the social domain (section “[Easy Social Ontology](#)”). Though she has already applied the ‘easy’ approach to the ontological debate about artifacts and social groups, my goal here is to present it as a promising theory that accounts also for other salient social entities; in particular, social and institutional practices. While evaluating the merits of this approach, I engage (however briefly) with the metametaphysical discussion about the ‘reality’ of our social world (section “[The Prospects for Social Realism](#)”). I defend here that, although an *easy social ontology* recognises the mind-dependent nature of social entities, it does not deny their reality (i.e., social entities are as real as any other, mind-independent entity). I close the chapter (section “[Conclusions](#)”) with a summary.

Social Ontology and Social Meta-Ontology

To begin with, let me introduce some conceptual clarifications. While social ontology is concerned with “the study of the nature and properties of the social world” (Epstein, 2018), social *meta*-ontology deals with the

conceptual and methodological disputes regarding ontological questions about social entities. That is, whereas social ontology has to do with what there socially is, social meta-ontology has to do with what it means and how to decide whether there is anything social.

To understand the difference between these two levels of investigation, we may start by looking at some specific discussions within the former. The first thing to notice is that social ontology does indeed fall within the scope of metaphysics (see Mason & Ritchie, 2021 for an argument). Although some philosophers, especially those with strong naturalist, reductionist, or otherwise eliminativist tendencies, would more likely prefer not to include any social entity within the world's furniture, the main reasons they have for holding this attitude seem to be at best idiosyncratic. For example, since social entities are taken to be mind-dependent (i.e., their existence depends on there being intentional mental states), but only mind-independent entities (such as rocks, mountains, and subatomic particles) are considered to be real and, therefore, the only subject matter of metaphysics, then social entities are excluded from metaphysical debates. However, as Mason and Ritchie (2021, p. 317) argue, this is simply a prejudice. For one thing, there are many entities typically included in metaphysics which are not at all mind-independent (e.g., chemical compositions, mathematics, and mental states themselves).¹

That social ontology is part of metaphysics is reinforced by what Epstein (2018) says are some of its most prominent research questions: *what are social groups and are there any?*, *what are the constituents or building blocks of institutions (e.g., language, money, and law)?*, and *do social kinds (like gender, race, and disability) pick out essential properties?* Granted, social ontologists are far from reaching an overall agreement about the answers to these questions; however, they all acknowledge that engaging in such discussions is crucial for getting to grips with our (social) world.

Yet, as it happens with metaphysics, ontological issues can also be looked at from a higher perspective. This second-order inquiry is what meta-ontology is concerned with. To answer *what is there?*, for instance, we first need to decide both what 'what is there?' means, and what the

¹I come back to this below, when discussing Thomasson's 'simple realism' concerning mind-dependent entities (see section "[The Prospects for Social Realism](#)").

best way to answer ‘what is there?’ is (see van Inwagen, 2001, p. 13). Although there are currently various alternatives within contemporary meta-ontology which aim to answer these questions,² a sophisticated but still straightforward view is Thomasson’s *easy ontology*. According to her approach, for example, to answer *are there chairs?* we first need to clarify our sortal term ‘chair’ (i.e., to elucidate the semantic rules that constitute its ordinary meaning) and then to investigate whether there is anything to which our term ‘chair’ refers.

While I consider Thomasson’s easy approach a serious contender in meta-ontological debates, I believe it can be further strengthened by extending its application to other ontological domains. My goal in this chapter is precisely to extend her view to social meta-ontology. In particular, I consider below how it can provide us with the conceptual and methodological tools that we need to answer ontological questions about social and institutional practices. I shall begin in the next section by explaining her easy ontology.

The Easy Approach to Ontology

Through various works (especially her 2007a, 2015), Thomasson has championed what she calls an *easy* approach to ontology, viz., a deflationary view about the methodology needed to answer ontological (or existence) questions. Unlike robust alternatives, which suggest that there is a substantive criterion of existence (e.g., having causal efficacy, or being mind-independent, or being posited by our best scientific theories, etc) that we should appeal to when deciding whether there is such-and-such entity (e.g., numbers, propositions, artifacts, etc), the easy approach tells us that we can resolve ontological queries simply by means of conceptual analysis and empirical investigation (see Thomasson, 2015, p. 20).

Although usually misconstrued, the easy approach is not a deflationary view about *ontology* (i.e., that the entities that we can account for are language-created), but a deflationary view about *meta-ontology* (i.e., that

² See Eklund (2006) and Berto and Plebani (2015) for an overview.

answering ontological questions does not require anything other than conceptual competence and relevant information about the world) (Thomasson, 2015, p. 121). To appreciate its advantages, I presently explain its main elements.

Existence and Reference

Thomasson starts her project by elucidating the semantic relationship between our terms ‘exist’ and ‘refer’ (2008, pp. 64–67). According to her view, we can move up and down from reference claims (at the meta-language level) to existence claims (at the object-language level). That is, we can translate *salva veritate* claims about reference into claims about existence. So, for example, if it is true that our term ‘K’ refers, then (via semantic descent) it is also true that Ks exist. She makes this explicit by introducing the following principle (2008, p. 65):

(E) Ks exist iff ‘K’ refers³

Thus, if there is some *x* to which we can refer by ‘K’, then we have that *Kx* exists, which can be read (in quantificational terms) as $\exists x (Kx)$ (Thomasson, 2008, p. 67). Now, while (E) says what it is for Ks to exist, it does not say what it is for ‘K’ to refer. Taking ‘K’ as a sortal term (by means of which we can refer to entities of a given kind), then it must be associated to certain semantic rules of use, a subset of which establish *conditions of application* (i.e., conditions for the correct application of the term on a particular occasion).⁴ Thomasson expresses this requirement as follows (2008, p. 67):

(R) ‘K’ refers iff the application conditions for ‘K’ are fulfilled

³I am assuming here both that the ‘K’ term exists (within the relevant linguistic framework) and that it works rigidly (i.e., its meaning remains constant across possible worlds). To appreciate the relevance of these assumptions, see Thomasson (2008, pp. 64–65, 2015, p. 86).

⁴On ‘sortal terms’, see Thomasson (2009a, p. 4 and 2015, pp. 224–225). In general, as Thomasson elaborates, sortal terms do not only come with application, but also with co-application conditions (2007a, pp. 39–44). However, since the first are concerned with existence conditions while the second with identity conditions (2007a, pp. 55–56), I only focus here on the former.

Here, to determine whether the conditions for the application of ‘K’ are fulfilled, we need to carry out both conceptual analysis (to clarify what those application conditions are) and empirical investigation (to decide if there is something that satisfies such conditions). Given the logical connection or *analytic entailment* between these principles, we can see how this methodology is indeed very straightforward: by (E) and (R), we have that existence claims amount simply to true claims about the satisfaction of application conditions (2008, p. 74).

For Thomasson, ‘analytic entailment’ means the semantic consequences that follow from certain true statements (in virtue of the constitutive meaning of the terms involved) (2007a, p. 37). Thus, for example, she says: “It is in part constitutive of the meaning of ‘house’ that all houses are buildings, so that the truth of ‘X bought a house’ is sufficient for the truth of ‘X bought a building’: if we know the truth of the first, the meaning of the terms, and have reasoning abilities, we can infer the truth of the second claim on that basis alone” (2007a, p. 28).⁵

Based on this, Thomasson introduces what she calls ‘transformation rules’ (2009a, p. 5). A transformation rule, in general, says that if such-and-such conditions are met, then there is an entity of kind K (e.g., if there are particles arranged tablewise, then there is a table). So, by following this rule, we can analytically get the existence of Ks from the satisfaction of such-and-such conditions (Thomasson, 2009a, p. 14).

Thus, the transformed sentence ‘there are Ks’ or ‘Ks exist’ can be derived analytically from a sentence that does not quantify over any Ks; that is, the basic sentence ‘such-and-such conditions are met’ does not require for its truth that there be any Ks. However, since the truth of the basic sentence is sufficient for the truth of the transformed sentence, the application of the ‘K’ term to whatever satisfies those conditions guarantees that ‘K’ refers and so that Ks exist (Thomasson, 2007a, p. 163).

As we can see from this, then, the only way an ontological claim can be truth-evaluable (and the only way to consider an ontological question *answerable*)⁶ is if it is “paired with a term or terms that come with

⁵ For a defence of this view of analytic entailments against various criticisms, particularly Quine’s objection to the analytic/synthetic distinction, see Thomasson (2007a, Ch 2).

⁶ On answerable and unanswerable ontological questions, see Thomasson (2009b).

application conditions, so that their truth may be evaluated by way of establishing whether or not those application conditions are satisfied” (Thomasson, 2009a, p. 6). Importantly, though, this requirement does not deny that such conditions may be vague, indeterminate, or otherwise subject to further interpretation. Let me explain.

Conceptual Analysis and Conceptual Engineering

In response to the ‘Bad Company’ objection (i.e., that certain conceptual truths, as it happens with certain abstraction principles, may lead to various problems, including self-contradictions, paradoxes, and even denials of well-known empirical truths), Thomasson has argued that ‘well-formed’ terms (e.g., ‘fork’, ‘table’, and ‘painting’) are not only meant to satisfy certain formal constraints (e.g., consistency, generality, and conservativeness), but are also susceptible of descriptive and normative analysis (2009a, pp. 10–11). For instance, if the semantic rules (including the application conditions) associated to the sortal term ‘fork’ are not clear enough for a competent speaker to decide in a particular situation if it refers or not, then they should be interpreted (i.e., they should be clarified in such a way that they provide the speaker with a coherent set of constitutive norms for the use of the term) (*idem*). So, it is in recognising the importance of clarifying the semantic content of a term that Thomasson goes on to argue that the easy approach to ontology should be accompanied by a fitting account of *conceptual analysis* and *conceptual engineering*. I briefly consider both in this subsection.

Following Carnap, Thomasson believes that the combination of conceptual analysis and empirical investigation can help us resolve ontological disputes (2015, p. 12). That is, although she does not deny that some of our sortal terms suffer from indeterminacy, she does hold that by analysing the norms that constitute their meaning we can clarify their application conditions, and then by investigating if they are satisfied on a particular occasion we can decide whether or not there are things of a certain kind. However, in acknowledging its importance, Thomasson also appreciates that conceptual analysis is not an easy task (2017a, p. 7, 2017b, p. 365). Indeed, as she says, this is precisely where the serious

work of philosophers lies: in settling ontological disputes, there is no need for any serious ‘metaphysical’ investigation, although there may be some further conceptual clarification required (2015, p. 195).

As we know, though, this is something that some heavyweight metaphysicians, such as Schaffer (2009), deRosset (2013), Yablo (2014), van Inwagen (2020), and Button (2020), do not agree with. For them, for instance, conceptual truths play either no role or, at best, a minor role in fixing ontological truths (and so, they would say, their ‘serious work’ involves much more than conceptual analysis). Yet, what this ideology seems to ignore is that, as Carnap suggests, it is only by sharing some semantic criteria that we can evaluate our assertions (including ontological claims) (1950).⁷

In keeping with this Carnapian attitude, Thomasson sustains that conceptual analysis can help us ‘discover’ conceptual truths (i.e., the constitutive norms for the use of a term), which not only determine its application and co-application conditions, but also “[t]ogether, these semantic rules for use fix the basic modal facts for the thing(s) the term is to refer to (should it succeed in referring at all)” (2012, p. 178). This corresponds to what she has recently developed into a ‘normativist’ approach to metaphysical modal facts (see Thomasson, 2020b).

While there is no space here to go into any details about this approach, this quick presentation illustrates very clearly the predominant role that conceptual analysis has within Thomasson’s theory. Namely, conceptual analysis, which may also involve analysing linguistic normative practices (2012, p. 195), can equip competent speakers with basic ontological and modal knowledge (i.e., existence, identity, and persistence conditions) about a certain kind of entity.

Yet, strictly speaking, conceptual analysis is mainly descriptive. That is, it focuses on what the rules of use associated to a certain term are. However, in some cases, dealing with conceptual issues requires also a normative approach, for it may not be enough to determine the term’s semantic rules of use, but also to decide how the term ought to be used

⁷This is what Ebbs calls ‘Carnap’s motivating attitude’, viz., “that there is no point in saying two investigators agree or disagree unless they can be seen to share criteria for evaluating their assertions” (2017, p. 27).

(i.e., which semantic rules should be followed). Developing a compelling account of this is the end goal of contemporary *conceptual engineering* (see Cappelen, 2018; Chalmers, 2020), and it is a challenge that Thomasson has met by offering a ‘pragmatic’ approach to normative conceptual analysis (2017a, 2017b, 2020a, 2021).

Simply put, Thomasson argues that when it comes to deciding whether or not to introduce a term (with such-and-such associated semantic rules) into our linguistic framework, we should expect the answer to be linked to pragmatic considerations; particularly, regarding its function within the language (2017b, p. 374, 378). Thus, for example, to answer the normative conceptual question about, e.g., whether and how to use the term ‘fork’, we should look at its *linguistic function*,⁸ which in turn requires addressing some further, general issues, such as:

Why is it useful to have the relevant term in our vocabulary (or concept in our repertoire)? What role does this concept play (perhaps along with allied terms and concepts) in our overall conceptual system? What we would be missing if we lacked such a term or concept? What did having that concept do for societies that enabled them to carry on and reproduce their conceptual system, including use of the concept at issue? (2017b, p. 374, n. 8)

Clearly, although responding to these questions is not always easy, there is still no reason to appeal to any ‘metaphysical’ discoveries in order to figure out the answer. What we do need is something much simpler, viz., to recognise, as Thomasson does, that terms (along with their associated semantic rules of use) are created, can change, and have multiple functions (2021, p. 5). However, while these are common assumptions within conceptual engineering scholarship, not all views can fully account for them. For example, as Thomasson notes, only if we give up the idea that concepts have their intension and extension essentially, can we accept the possibility of conceptual change (2021, p. 6). For if terms had their meanings fixed once and for all, then there would be no chance for any normative conceptual question.

⁸By elaborating on ‘linguistic functions’, Thomasson takes care of the objections of ‘arbitrariness’ and ‘subjectivity’ raised against the pragmatic approach (see 2017b, pp. 373–375).

In explaining further how we can change our concepts, Thomasson has more recently suggested that we proceed by re-engineering *words* (understood as abstract cultural artifacts associated with social norms of use) (2021, p. 1, 13). Her idea here is that changing the norms of use that constitute the meaning of a word amounts to changing, at least partially, the (formal, material, and pragmatic) inferential profile of the term (2021, p. 15). And this can occur either implicitly (due to informal linguistic change) or explicitly (by institutional amendment). Yet, in either case, modifying the word's meaning has practical rather than merely semantic consequences.

Easy Social Ontology

As we have seen, deflating meta-ontology in the way that Thomasson does rests heavily on conceptual analysis and conceptual engineering, on the one hand, and empirical investigation, on the other. It starts with determining (descriptively or normatively) the constitutive semantic rules for the use of our sortal term (e.g., 'fork') and then investigating whether there is anything to which this term can correctly apply. As such, then, the consequence of employing this methodology to solve existence (or ontological) questions is, as Thomasson has it, that there is no need for any "distinctively philosophical work", except insofar as this might involve conceptual clarification (2009a, p. 1).

But how exactly can this help us with social meta-ontology? What is the relevance of this deflationary approach in dealing with existence questions about social entities? Can we use Thomasson's easy approach to handle contemporary issues within social ontology? In the rest of this chapter, I submit a first attempt at answering these questions by introducing an *easy social ontology*.

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, Thomasson is not unfamiliar with current debates within social ontology. In fact, she has made significant impact on various discussions within this area; specifically, regarding the metaphysics and epistemology of social constructionism (2003a), the reality of human kinds (2003b), the metametaphysics of ordinary objects (2007a), the mind-dependence nature of artifacts

(2007b), the normative character of artificial objects (2014), and the ontology of social groups (2019). However, despite all this, I believe there is still some room for further research and adaptation. In particular, I think we can extend Thomasson's deflationary programme to account for the ontology of social and institutional practices (i.e., to explain *what it takes for such-and-such social or institutional practice to exist*).

The Ontology of Social and Institutional Practices

In dealing with the general ontological question 'are there social groups?', Thomasson says that the answer "is an easy and obvious 'yes'" (2019, p. 4829). Although "the notion of 'social group' may be a term of art", she adds, "our terms for clubs and courts, races and genders, are not" (2019, p. 4830). So, it seems to be enough to look around and see, e.g., the Marshall Chess Club or the US Supreme Court to realise that, in fact, there are social groups.

Similarly, I think that the answer to the general ontological question 'are there social/institutional practices?' is an easy and obvious 'yes'. Surely, we do not often talk in terms of 'social practice' or 'institutional practice'; however, as soon as we come across, e.g., people queuing at a bus stop or MPs attending Parliamentary sittings, we accept that there are such things as social and institutional practices.

But to understand exactly how easy it is to answer the ontological question, we first need to elucidate what social and institutional practices are (or, in other words, what social and institutional practice terms are about). By employing important resources within contemporary social ontology and collective intentionality, I aim to provide here a general characterisation of social and institutional practices, based on which, following Thomasson's easy approach, I suggest how we can answer the ontological question about their existence.

I start then by clarifying what social and institutional practices are. Elsewhere (viz., Garcia-Godinez, 2021), I have characterised *social practices* as informal group actions governed by collectively accepted standards that establish defeasible conditions for their performance, and *institutional practices* as formal group actions governed by official

guidelines that establish defeasible conditions for their performance. The informal/formal distinction is intended to represent the nature of the norms governing the corresponding group actions (viz., in some cases, such norms need only be collectively accepted, whereas in some others, they need also be enacted by following a certain procedure). Moreover, since these norms govern recurrent, rather than one-off, group actions, they usually introduce a term (if not a whole language framework) that helps in typifying the relevant conduct for its transmission and further performance (e.g., ‘queueing’, ‘dating’, ‘playing football’, ‘voting’, ‘chairing a meeting’, ‘attending a Parliamentary sitting’, ‘deliberating in a jury trial’, etc.).

As such, then, under this understanding, social and institutional practices are *concrete* (or spatiotemporally located) entities. That is, unlike those other views (e.g., Turner (1994), Polanyi (2009), and Haslanger (2018)), which take social practices to be some kind of *abstract* object (e.g., ‘tacit knowledge’, ‘presuppositions’, or ‘patterns of learned behaviour’), this characterisation focuses instead on the actual occurrence of particular events, viz., actions intentionally performed by an agent.⁹

Indeed, this is what Schatzki (1996), Reckwitz (2002), and McMillan (2018) argue. However, although their views elucidate better our understanding of the kind (or category) of entity that social/institutional practice terms refer to, they all fall short of realising that there is another, crucial element that calls for explanation, viz., that social/institutional practices are not only constituted by actions, but by *group* actions (i.e., actions performed by group agents).

In accounting for the ontological significance of group action and group agency, Tuomela (2002, 2007, 2013) has advanced what I take to be the most accurate analysis of social/institutional practices. Without going into so much detail, let me present some of its core elements.

⁹This is not to say, though, that we cannot think of a social/institutional practice as a *type* of social behaviour (e.g., when thinking about the norms of football); however, what I am interested in here is in tackling existence questions about particular instantiations or *tokens* of social/institutional practices (e.g., our football game last weekend). So, although much of the discussion on social metaphysics, as David-Hillel Ruben (1982, p. 298) has long since noticed, has been focused on ‘the reality or ideality of types’ rather than on ‘particular social substances’, I attempt here to motivate some further research on this latter topic. Thanks to Amie Thomasson for suggesting that I clarify this point.

First, in holding that the actions constituting social/institutional practices are performed by group agents, Tuomela is not committed to acknowledging the existence of spooky entities (i.e., intentional agents over and above individuals). Indeed, as he argues, group agents are functionally relevant, but not ontologically irreducible (2007, p. 20, 124). That is, the notion of ‘group agent’ is relevant for the explanation of a particular kind of action (viz., an action performed by group members according to a group reason), but it refers to an entity that is ontologically dependent on non-group facts (2013, p. 52).

When the group members of a group *G*, for example, collectively accept to φ (e.g., form a queue or sit in a Parliamentary meeting), they collectively commit themselves to act in accordance with the norms governing the corresponding type of action. The content of this commitment is what Tuomela calls ‘group reason’ (see 2013, p. x). Now, when the *G*-members effectively act based on their group reason, we can truly say that they act as a group agent. Functionally speaking, then, the action can be attributed to *G* (as opposed to the *G*-members individually), although the events constituting the group action, ontologically speaking, bottoms out at the level of actions performed by individual agents (see 2007, Ch 6 and 2013, Ch 2).

Second, in analysing the conditions for a group to perform (or be correctly attributed with the performance of) an action, Tuomela has developed a structuralist account of social and institutional groups in terms of roles (or positions) and internal relations amongst them (2013, pp. 21–22).¹⁰ With this, his account, on the one hand, rules out non-structured groups as genuine social/institutional group agents (capable of action), and, on the other, emphasises the normative character of organised groups.

As for the first, Tuomela seems to think that non-structured groups lack the capacity to perform (intentional) actions, since they do not have,

¹⁰ More recently, Ritchie (2018, 2020) has also submitted a structuralist account of organised social groups (i.e., groups organised according to a socially constructed group structure). However, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Garcia-Godinez, 2020), Ritchie’s view is deficient in one important respect, viz., it does not recognise (at least explicitly) the authoritative construction of certain social structures, which in turn prevents it from explaining the nature of institutional groups (as organised social groups formally constructed based on authoritative decisions).

by definition, the minimum organisation that group members need to cooperate and coordinate with each other in order to contribute collectively towards the realisation of the group action. Thus, for example, the Americans, the black people, the LGBTQ+ community, and the middle class do not count under this characterisation as social/institutional groups. (Although they can always organise themselves into, e.g., political parties, associations, clubs, or gangs, and then instantiate a certain group structure based on which their members can all participate in the performance of a group action).

As for the second, Tuomela anticipates one of the main arguments of Thomasson's ontological normativism about social groups. As Thomasson puts it, the function of social group concepts is "to give normative structure to our lives together" (2019, p. 4829), which is something that Tuomela also emphasises. He has suggested that the purpose of a social/institutional group is to bind people together normatively according to a certain group structure (2013, p. 9). So, although Thomasson is talking about 'social group concepts' whereas Tuomela is talking about 'social/institutional groups', the crucial point they both want to make is that this kind of groups organises a number of people by introducing some form of normative structure into their lives. For example, two people can organise themselves in a certain way by instantiating the social/institutional structure of a 'couple'/'married couple' and act according to their corresponding roles (see also Ritchie, 2020).

The last element of Tuomela's analysis of social/institutional practices that I want to mention here is concerned with the role of collective intentionality. Famously, Tuomela has offered a comprehensive analysis of we-intentionality involved in social (or group) contexts, including participation in social and institutional practices (see 2002, Ch 2, 2007, Ch 4, and 2013, Ch 3). As it is almost impossible to summarise Tuomela's theory of collective intentionality in such a short space, I shall only focus on one of its salient features (viz., acting intentionally for a group reason).

In various places, Tuomela has discussed what it is for a group (i.e., an organised group) to act for a group reason. As mentioned above, this has

to do with *the content* of a collective commitment.¹¹ If the group members (i.e., those instantiating a group structure) collectively accept to φ together, then they are all collectively committed to φ , and so have a (collectively constructed) group reason to act (viz., to carry out the activities conducive to the satisfaction of the action-type ' φ ').

Although the group reason is normatively relevant because it creates a link amongst group members (in the sense that they are all committed to its satisfaction), it also has ontological relevance, viz., it establishes what it is for the organised group (at least under normal or non-exceptional circumstances) to perform an action of the appropriate type. Now, in much the same way as Thomasson (2007) explains the creation of artifacts, we can also account for the 'creation' of group actions.¹² As she says, an agent can create (or construct) an artifact (e.g., a chair or a table) if, and only if, they succeed in producing an object that satisfies the description associated to the sortal or artifact-type ('chair' or 'table') (2007b, p. 72). Here, the relevant description amounts to a set of semantic rules that constitute the meaning of the sortal term. Similarly, for an agent to successfully perform an action of a certain type ('dating', 'playing chess', etc), they too must satisfy the associated type-description (see also Davidson, 1963).

¹¹ I should clarify something here before proceeding. In the general discussion about collective intentionality, the main theories are usually classified into three views, viz., the *subject*, the *content*, and the *mode* views. One holds a subject view if, e.g., one thinks that the collective element of a collective intention is the subject (e.g., *we* intend to φ). Gilbert's (2013) collectivist theory is here a prime example. On the other hand, one takes a content view if, e.g., one thinks that the collective element of a collective intention is the content (e.g., I intend *that we- φ*). Bratman's (1999) individualist theory is perhaps the most important representative. And finally, one supports the mode view if, e.g., one thinks that the collective element of a collective intention is the mode in which the intention is held (viz., I *we-intend* that we- φ). Tuomela's (2007) we-mode account is commonly seen as the paradigm. Yet, this classification is not incompatible with what I am saying in the main text (viz., that a group reason has to do with *the content* of a collective commitment), for the group reason is only part of the collective intention (not the collective intention itself). Thus, for Tuomela, a collective intention (held either in the I-mode or in the we-mode) can have a collective content (e.g., a group reason), without this making the theory purely individualistic (as in Bratman's case).

¹² However similar, I do not intend with this to follow Evnine's (2016) hylomorphic theory of actions. In fact, as I have maintained elsewhere (Garcia-Godinez, 2022), I do not agree with his treatment of 'actions' as 'artifacts', since they belong to different ontological categories (viz., events and objects, respectively).

When it comes to social or institutional practices, the description consists in informal or formal norms, respectively, governing the recurrent group action. In the informal case (e.g., queueing at a bus stop or playing football in the street), group members need only follow the general standards that are collectively accepted (within the group context) as determining what it is to engage as a group in such an action. However, in the formal case (e.g., chairing a meeting or deliberating in a jury trial), the group members must rather comply with very specific (and usually codified) guidelines that establish exactly how it is that they can each contribute to the performance of the group action.

Yet, regardless of these differences, the (informal/formal) description associated to an action-type satisfies important, general features. Firstly, it is socially created (i.e., it is introduced as a consequence of the recurrent performance of similar conducts); and secondly, it is susceptible of being both learned and communicated. This second aspect is as important as the first, because the persistence of the action-type (and, with it, the persistence of the conditions for the realisation of appropriate action-tokens) depends precisely on its being effectively transmitted. I presently elaborate on this by bringing Thomasson's discussion about conceptual analysis and conceptual engineering back to the forefront.

The Function of Social and Institutional Practice Terms

In general, we can say that the function of social/institutional practice terms (e.g., 'queueing', 'dating', 'voting', 'deliberating in a jury trial', etc) is to give normative structure to the activities that people perform together (i.e., as a group). Although individuals (and groups thereof) can always perform an action for which they do not have any particular term, to the extent that the action is important, productive, enjoyable, or otherwise worth keeping, they are more likely to introduce a term to talk and think about it. So, we can conjecture that the existence of social/institutional practice terms depends on how significant or useful it is for the group to perform (and keep performing) an action of a certain type by following certain shared constitutive norms.

And here is where both conceptual analysis and conceptual engineering become crucial. On the one hand, to find out what specific activities a group member *qua* group member is meant to perform in order to contribute to the realisation of a social/institutional practice, one needs to elucidate the corresponding concept. (And this is true not only of current, but also past social/institutional practices, the constitutive activities of which can no longer be observed).

By analysing the semantic rules for the use of a social/institutional practice term, both participants and non-participants can get to know what the conditions for bringing into existence an action of the relevant type are. Of course, they do not need to think in such terms when elucidating the concept, although this ontological knowledge would follow (analytically) anyway. Think, e.g., of dating. If anyone wants to know what 'dating' is, they should proceed by analysing the rules of use commonly associated to this term. And by doing this, they will gain important knowledge regarding what it is for an organised group (e.g., a couple) to participate in such an action, which is precisely the kind of knowledge that we need in order to establish the conditions for the existence of a social practice of this type.

But conceptual analysis, as seen above, is not only descriptive, but also normative. In this case, it does not matter too much how people *use* a certain concept (i.e., what semantic rules are commonly associated to it), but whether and how they *ought to use* it (i.e., which semantic rules should be associated to it).

Thus, for instance, when we engage in the conceptual engineering of 'dating', we bring to the discussion much more than simply a declarative statement about its associated type-description. We proceed in a more normative way, viz., we argue for what should or should not be allowed when people are having a date, how they are to behave with one another, what expectations they can each legitimately have for their participation, and even how other people are meant to treat them, etc. Furthermore, to evaluate the various possibilities open to each conceptual modification, we may also consider the moral, political, and legal consequences of a proposed alternative, and so on.

It is then through conceptual analysis and conceptual engineering that we can elucidate and choose the semantic rules for the use of a social/

institutional practice concept, which in turn amounts to clarifying and deciding the informal/formal constitutive norms governing the social/institutional practice itself. However, although in some cases such clarification and decision are done explicitly (e.g., by enacting a code of practice), they can also occur implicitly (e.g., by introducing subtle variations in the environmental conditions; for example, more or less social endorsement).

In any case, though, conceptual analysis and conceptual engineering are necessary for the preservation (via transmission) of the relevant term. That is, they provide group members with the conceptual information they need to share (and modify) the normative structure of the activities that they can perform together.

The Prospects for Social Realism

To finish sketching how Thomasson's easy approach to ontology can help us answer existence questions about social and institutional practices, let me consider a common concern usually raised against those views that hold that social (as opposed to natural) entities exist, viz., *how real such entities can be if they all depend on human intentionality*. To address this point directly in relation to social and institutional practices, I shall utilise some of the resources already developed by Thomasson in her discussion about artifacts and human kinds.

Since standard metaphysical realism is committed to the idea that any kind of entity that is not strictly mind-independent cannot be taken to be real (see Miller, 2022), the problem with accepting the existence of social entities is that they fail to meet this criterion. Moreover, since social (as opposed to natural) sciences are meant to account for genuine, objective facts about our social world, if there is nothing real to discover there, we would have to accept that social sciences lack epistemic value. So, as Thomasson puts it: "the very idea that social reality is created by human intentionality is in tension with the view that it can include objective facts available for the investigation and discovery by the social sciences" (2003a, p. 270).

But the truth is that we do not need to surrender to such a pessimistic metaphysical perspective. For one, 'standard metaphysical realism' (as

characterised here) is not universally endorsed. For example, as Thomasson says:

A general realist position, however, requires only that the realist hold that there are *some* things and kinds that exist independently of the mental—not that everything is independent. Thus many realists are willing to accept that, along with independent natural kinds and objects, there are also (e.g.) institutional objects and artifacts that neither exist nor have their natures independently of all human beliefs, representations and practices. (2003b, p. 580)

Thus, on such a moderate alternative, we need not give up the idea that social entities exist and are as real as natural (mind-independent) entities. We can rather accept that mind-independence is not an across-the-board criterion for determining what *really* exists. Again, to put it in Thomasson's words: "the mind-dependence of artifacts and artifactual kinds should in no way be taken to interfere with accepting that such entities really exist" (2007b, p. 54).

Indeed, following Searle (1995, p. 10), we can say that such entities are *epistemically objective* (and so, available to genuine discovery), while also *ontologically subjective* (i.e., dependent on human intentionality). That is, although there being any kind of social entity (from rustic artifacts to highly sophisticated institutions) requires some form of collective intentionality (in particular, the collective acceptance of certain constitutive norms), what it takes for such an entity to exist, as well as for it to have such-and-such properties (e.g., colour, weight, density, etc) is also determined by its physical (mind-independent) nature. So, for instance, it is not only true of natural kinds (like proteins) that we can discover their chemical composition, but also of social kinds (e.g., a wooden table or a plastic fork).

But even if this is so with artifacts and other artifactual kinds (e.g., artworks), it may not be clear how it ensures the reality of social and institutional practices. Firstly, because here we are talking about events (rather than objects); and secondly, because the physical nature of events (viz., their causal relation) is not itself sufficient to determine their membership within a social kind (viz., an action-type). Thus, I shall conclude

the chapter by briefly considering how a ‘constructivist’ approach can account for the reality of social and institutional practices.

The Constructivist Approach to Social and Institutional Practices

As seen above, social and institutional practices consist in actions performed by group agents according to group reasons. As I presently discuss, this implies that they are social constructions, the reality of which can be elucidated in terms of a general view of *social constructionism*. Though, before moving to this, let me clarify one thing.

Although social/institutional practices are ultimately actions; and actions are events, the former are not identical (or even reducible) to the latter. Some events can happen without anyone intending that they happen (e.g., the Moon orbits the Earth and the rain falls from the sky, without anyone aiming towards that end). On the contrary, an action (e.g., congratulating someone or scoring a goal) requires that an agent (i.e., an entity with intentionality capacity) produce a change in the state of a certain object according to a certain description (or a way of thinking or representing what to do and how) (see Davidson, 1963 and Ludwig, 2016, Ch 2).¹³

Following from this reasoning, we can account for the reality of social/institutional practices by elaborating on the conditions under which group agents can *construct* them (where ‘construction’ requires an agent acting intentionally according to a certain description). As a result of the characterisation of social and institutional practices that I introduced in the previous section, their construction then requires that a group agent brings about an event that satisfies (to an important extent at least) a shared description associated to a social/institutional practice term (e.g., ‘dating’, ‘queueing’, ‘chairing a meeting’, etc).

¹³ Of course, there are *unintentional* actions as well (e.g., one can kick a ball or switch a light on without intending to do so). Nevertheless, this does not affect the crucial point here: for any of those actions to be intentionally performed by an agent, there must be a description that establishes what it is for her to perform an action of the relevant kind. Strictly speaking, an agent is the author only of those intentional actions that she performs (although she may be found liable for the consequences that her unintentional actions produce).

Importantly, this description plays both an ontological and normative role. That is, it establishes the criteria for determining, on the one hand, what changes an organised group is meant to produce in order for them to count as an event with such-and-such characteristics; and, on the other, what the group ought to do in order to perform a practice of the relevant kind. Yet, since the description consists in the informal/formal norms that govern the social/institutional practice, it is, as Thomasson explains in relation to sortal terms in general, subject not only to clarification (via conceptual analysis), but also to change or revision (via conceptual engineering).

With all this, we have that social and institutional practices are *real* events intentionally produced by group agents when acting according to the norms associated to a social or institutional practice term, respectively. This mirrors the two-step methodology that Thomasson employs to account for the reality of artifacts (and other social objects): an agent constructs an artifact by producing an object that satisfies (to a large extent at least) a certain description associated to an artifact-type (2007b, pp. 72–73).

Yet, as it also happens with artifacts and artifactual kinds, there remain some genuine discoveries to make about social/institutional practices (see Thomasson, 2003a). For example, we can discover what is involved in their performance, what norms participants are meant to follow, who can be a participant, what skills they need to display, and what artifactual and non-artifactual objects should be employed and for what purposes, etc. Additionally, social/institutional practices can give rise to non-intended results, such as power relations, discrimination, inequality, scarcity, but also comradeship, praise, and competence, for which, as Thomasson (2003a, p. 275) would say, no one needs to have any prior beliefs about their existence.

In the end, to the extent that social and institutional practices impact on our physical and non-physical world, we are justified in admitting that they are real entities that produce real consequences. This, I reckon, should be enough, at least *prima facie*, to recognise the need of having a systematic though easy account of their ontology.

Conclusions

The main purpose of this chapter was to explore the possibility of extending Thomasson's easy approach to ontology to deal with existence questions about social and institutional practices. I started by introducing both her transformative strategy (viz., that we can derive ontological claims from claims about reference via semantic descent) as well as the role that conceptual analysis and conceptual engineering play in her meta-ontology (viz., that we can elucidate and revise the conceptual truths of our linguistic frameworks). Then, I moved to the specific discussion about the ontology of social and institutional practices. By elaborating on Tuomela's account of group agents, groups reasons, and group actions, I provided a characterisation of both social and institutional practices, and explained in which way they can be considered social constructions.

Since social/institutional practices require for their existence that appropriate group members act in accordance with a collectively constructed group reason, this highlights the importance of there being both a group structure (based on which group members can organise themselves in order to coordinate and cooperate with each other) and a shared description (that determines, however vaguely, the success conditions for the performance of the relevant kind of action).

Crucially, though, social and institutional practices are not only collective (as opposed to individual) constructions; they are also the means through which groups of various sizes can construct other social/institutional entities (intentionally or not), e.g., public artifacts, social relations, normative orders, and legal systems. Moreover, since social and institutional practices carry normativity from inside (as they all require the following of constitutive norms), this is what explains the normative character of those social entities that we create through their performance (see Thomasson, 2014, p. 47).

Ultimately, by following Thomasson's meta-ontology, we can account not only for the existence (and the nature—although this would require a separate discussion about modal issues) of such things as artifacts and social groups, but also of social and institutional practices, without this

requiring any ‘serious’ metaphysical work. Instead, we can simply “determine what it would take for there to be such an entity, [and] then attempt to establish whether those criteria are fulfilled” (Thomasson, 2007b, p. 72). So, with this chapter I hope to have demonstrated the fruitfulness of taking the easy approach to social ontology (i.e., *easy social ontology*) for understanding the construction of our social world.

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10

Artifacts and the Limits of Agentic Authority

Kathrin Koslicki

Author-Intention-Based Accounts of Artifacts and Prototype Production

Proponents of author-intention-based accounts of artifacts hold that an artifact *is* what its original author(s) *intended* it to be. (“Author” is here used broadly to include the artifact’s original designer, inventor, maker, builder, producer, etc., i.e., those agents who are in some sense responsible for the creation of an artifact or artifact-kind.) According to this approach, an artifact’s kind-membership and its essential features are determined, either directly or indirectly, by the content of the intentions guiding the artifact’s original author in their creative act of producing the artifact in question (Baker (2004), (2007); Dipert (1993); Evnine (2016); Hilpinen (1993), (2011); Thomasson (2003), (2007), (2009), (2014)). According to Amie Thomasson, for example, an artifact of kind K is essentially a product of a largely successful intention to create something

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of kind K (Thomasson (2003: 592-602). A maker has the relevant intention (viz., a largely successful intention to create something of kind K) if and only if she has a substantive concept of the nature of Ks which largely matches that of prior makers of Ks (if any), and she intends to realize that concept by imposing K-relevant features. The K-relevant features in question can be functional, structural, historical, aesthetic, or of various other sorts or combinations.

The characterization just given does not apply to the case of prototype production, since in this case there are, as of yet, no prior exemplars of the artifact kind in question.¹ In such a case, according to Thomasson, the author must still have a substantive concept of what she intends to create, and this substantive concept specifies what the K-relevant features are. Whether the agent succeeds in producing a K can then be evaluated relative to whether what she produces actually instantiates the K-relevant features that are part of the concept guiding the agent in her creative act. Thomasson characterizes the relation between such an agent and the outcome of her intended action as follows:

In this case, clearly, there is no question of the artisan getting it right or wrong about what it would take to be a K, what features are K-relevant. At this stage, what is relevant to being a K is purely a matter for *invention* or stipulation by the artisan based on her goals or intentions; she is not trying to discover what makes something a K (so that she could then be said to get it right or wrong); instead, she is delineating a new kind by establishing success criteria for her activity. Thus she creates not only an artifact, but delineates a new artifactual *kind*, complete with normative success conditions for creating something of that kind (Thomasson, 2007: 60).

It is possible for an agent who attempts to produce a novel prototype to experience certain kinds of failure, according to Thomasson: for example, the outcome of her attempted creative act can fail to match the K-relevant features that are specified by the substantive concept guiding

¹ Preston (2013) describes a prototype as “the first full-scale model of a type or design of thing to be produced” (ibid: 164). While many prototypes do not involve significant innovation, as Preston notes, some of them do, namely prototypes which either implement a completely novel function or those which implement an existing function in a completely novel way (ibid: 165). In what follows, my focus is primarily on such novel, i.e., genuinely innovative, prototypes.

her creative act; and the agent can even fail to know whether or not she managed to follow through on her creative intentions successfully. But there are other kinds of mistakes and errors from which such an agent is shielded, in Thomasson's view, since it is the agent herself, through the substantive concept guiding her performance, who stipulatively sets the normative success conditions for her own attempted act of creation. For this reason, the relation such an agent bears to the outcome of her own action is comparable to that, say, of a parent who is naming their own child, rather than to that of a scientist who is investigating a chemical or biological kind. In the same way as a parent who names their own child cannot be wrong about what their child's name is, so an agent engaged in the attempted creation of a novel prototype similarly cannot be mistaken about what it is to be a K. In contrast, a scientist who is concerned with the study of a chemical or biological kind is not in the same way protected from massive error as to what features are relevant to determining membership in the natural kind in question (Thomasson, 2007: 60-61).

In what follows, I argue that the process of prototype production in fact allows for various sources of errors and failures on the part of agents attempting to carry out their creative intentions that are not adequately accommodated by author-intention-based accounts. The possibility of this kind of divergence between the intentions of authors and the outcome of their creative efforts calls for a different conception of prototype-production and of the nature of artifacts more generally. A natural candidate for such an alternative approach is Beth Preston's user-based account, according to which an artifact's kind-relevant features are determined by the practices of users and reproducers (Preston, 2013). As will emerge below, however, a user-based approach, like its author-intention-based counterparts, also suffers from an overly agent-centric orientation: despite their many interesting differences, both types of frameworks, for this reason, run into difficulties with scenarios in which the attitudes or dispositions of the relevant agents, whether they are authors, users or reproducers, do not serve as a reliable guide on which to base an artifact's classification as a member of a certain artifact kind. Such alternative categorizations, which conflict with both author-intentions and user-practices, demonstrate the need for a more object-centered alternative perspective concerning prototype production and the nature of artifacts

more generally. In the present context, my main focus is on establishing the negative point that existing frameworks do not provide us with the resources for non-agent-centric classifications of artifacts. The positive side of my proposal which explores a more object-centered approach to prototype production and the nature of artifacts more generally is developed elsewhere (see especially Koslicki and Massin, 2023).

Challenges for Author-Intention-Based Accounts

Author-intentions, as I have argued elsewhere, are in a number of respects not nearly as powerful and discriminating as accounts like Thomasson's make them out to be (Koslicki, 2018: Section 8.4, pp. 226-237). In what follows, I briefly describe four objections to author-intention-based accounts raised there. Below, we will take up the first objection in more detail, specifically as it pertains to the phenomenon of prototype production.

(1) User-Intentions. It appears to be possible, under certain circumstances, for the intentions or practices of the later users of an artifact to override the original author-intentions in determining what features are relevant to an artifact's membership in a certain artifact kind. Hilary Kornblith, for example, uses the following illustration to make this point:

[T]he person who first made carabiners may have had quite a different intention in making them than the users do in using them, and if the maker, now long gone, is the only one who ever had that intention, and all of the users have a different intention, then arguably the intentions which are connected to making the kind what it is are probably those of the users rather than the maker. [...] The maker could not insist, 'I know what these things are; after all, I made them', since the term is part of a public language which the maker cannot constrain through a sheer act of will (Kornblith, 2007: 145).

In the scenario Kornblith imagines the original author who created the first carabiner is the sole agent who ever intended that carabiners be used

to perform a function *F* (e.g., to serve as emergency brass knuckles to be used in self-defense), while every subsequent user intends that the device in question be used to perform a different function *F'* (e.g., as a quick and reversible connector of components notably in safety-critical systems). In these circumstances, so Kornblith reasons, it is plausible to think that the author's original intention, that carabiners have the kind-associated function *F*, is overridden by the intentions of subsequent users, according to whom carabiners have the kind-associated function *F'*. Author-intention-based accounts, however, are committed to holding that carabiners continue to have the kind-associated function *F*, rather than *F'*, despite the fact that no one other than their original author ever thought that carabiners should be used in the first way, and every subsequent user has employed them with the intention that they be used in the second way.

(2) Easy Ontology. Author-intention-based accounts are susceptible to the worry that, given their perspective, it might just be too easy to create new artifacts or artifact kinds. These approaches allow, for example, that in certain instances (e.g., "ready-mades" or "found objects"), a new artifact or artifact kind can be created by an agent simply by uttering certain words, thinking certain thoughts, or by inducing merely relational but non-intrinsic changes in the artifact's constituting matter. In certain scenarios, however, agents appear to be unable to bring into existence a new artifact or artifact kind by employing these methods. To illustrate, consider an agent who (for whatever reason) attempts to "convert" a pen into a thermometer merely by uttering certain words (e.g., "Let this be a thermometer!"), thinking certain thoughts (e.g., "I would really like it if this pen became a thermometer"), or by bringing about relational but non-intrinsic changes to the alleged artifact's constituting matter (e.g., by using a hook and a string to hang the item up on a wall near a window). In this case, the result of the agent's attempt to exercise their would-be creative intention is not a new item, a thermometer, albeit perhaps one that is *defective* or *malfunctioning*; rather, much more plausibly, the agent's attempted act of creation was simply unsuccessful and nothing new has been brought into existence at all. As it stands, however, it is unclear how author-intention-based accounts can provide systematic and principled criteria on the basis of which to distinguish successful acts of creation from other occasions on which an agent fails to exercise their would-be

creative intentions successfully and no new artifact or artifact kind is produced.²

(3) Mass-Production. In cases of mass-production, a single act of creation, governed by a single creative intention, can apparently lead to the production of multiple artifacts. To illustrate, on a given occasion, a baker can successfully execute their intention to bake twelve cookies, without being guided by a separate creative intention that is directed at each of the twelve cookies. In such a case, author-intention-based accounts seem to lack the resources needed to differentiate one cookie from another on the basis of their essential properties, given that (by hypothesis) neither the act of creation nor the creative intention governing it can apparently serve as a basis to distinguish individual cookies from one another. In such cases, Evnine (2016) assigns only a “collective” essence to the dozen cookies as a totality, without recognizing each cookie as having its own individual essence. As a consequence, no principled distinction can be drawn between individual mass-produced artifacts that result from the execution of a single non-individuating creative intention.³

(4) Scope. Intentional creative acts performed by human agents can sometimes leave in their wake unintended by-products, such as sawdust, pollution, trash, or scrap metal. In addition, a product can at times be brought into existence through non-intentional human activities, e.g., a drawing that results from mere “doodling”, a trail that is created when many walkers independently choose the same path, or a village that emerges over time when many houses are built in close vicinity to one another without an overarching plan. In other cases, non-human animals appear to be able to engage in purpose-driven productive activities which can give rise, for example, to birds’ nests, spider webs, or beaver dams. Finally, the domain of artworks presents us with cases in which human agents appear to engage in intentional productive activities whose results

²The concern that insufficient restrictions are placed on artifact-creation is examined in more detail, specifically as it pertains to Lynne Rudder Baker’s account, for example, in Baker (2002), (2004), (2007); Evnine (2016, especially pp. 110-118); Koslicki (2021); Sider (2002); and Zimmerman (2002).

³For further discussion of the phenomenon of mass-production and the difficulties it raises for author-intention-based accounts, see Evnine (2019).

are at least not obviously directed at the resolution of practical problems. Depending on the details of particular accounts, not all of these entities are classified as artifacts by author-intention-based approaches. Since the entities in question also do not obviously fit into previously recognized natural (e.g., physical, chemical, or biological) kinds, we are therefore left with a whole host of cases whose ontological status remains, as of yet, unsettled.

I take the foregoing considerations to indicate that author-intentions do not always possess the discriminating power and the authority that is ascribed to them by author-intention-based accounts to determine an artifact's kind-relevant features. As we have noted, it appears to be possible that the kind-determining work in question can sometimes be taken over by user-intentions and practices. Moreover, an appeal to author-intentions by itself turns out not to be sufficient to impose reasonable constraints on when an agent does or does not succeed in exercising their would-be creative intentions to produce a new artifact or artifact kind. The discriminating power of author-intentions is furthermore called into question by the phenomenon of mass-production where multiple artifacts are brought into existence as a result of a single non-individuating creative intention. Finally, author-intention-based accounts fail to deliver classificatory judgments in a range of cases which one might expect to be adjudicated by a successful theory of artifacts.

Can User-Intentions Override Author-Intentions?

As noted above, the process of prototype production in particular seems to allow for various sorts of deviations not recognized by author-intention-based accounts between an agent's creative intentions and the outcome of the agent's attempt to execute these intentions. To arrive at a more plausible and realistic conception of prototype production and, hence, of the nature of artifacts more generally, we must therefore develop a clearer understanding of the success and failure conditions governing agents who are engaged in prototype production, i.e., agents who are attempting

to bring into existence not only a new concrete particular object but also simultaneously a new artifact kind. In fact, it appears to be possible for an agent, who is engaged in prototype production, to succeed in producing an artifact belonging to a new artifact kind K_1 , even if she intends to produce an artifact belonging to a different not-yet-established artifact kind, K_2 . Such a scenario, as it stands, cannot be accommodated by author-intention-based accounts like Thomasson's, since an agent engaged in prototype production cannot simultaneously succeed in producing an artifact belonging to a new artifact kind and be radically mistaken about the nature of the artifact she managed to produce.

To illustrate, consider the following case involving Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone, discussed in Koslicki (2018):

Suppose that Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, initially intended his new device to be used as an aid for the hearing-impaired, while later users came to think of the telephone as a certain kind of long-distance communication device which allows two or more users (whether they are hearing-impaired or not) to carry on a conversation even when they are far apart. Given author-intention-based accounts of artifact-essences, assuming that Alexander Graham Bell in fact intended the device he invented to have a certain function, viz., to aid the hearing-impaired, and assuming that there is no obvious reason to think that Bell's original author-intentions misfired during the production of the first prototype, then the device Bell invented *is* in fact a hearing-aid (and essentially so); and the same applies to every subsequent device which is successfully produced with the intention of being of the same type as the device Bell invented. Proponents of this view are committed to holding that the intentions of later users cannot override Bell's original author-intentions, according to which the device he invented is a kind of hearing-aid, and lead to a re-classification of the telephone as a certain kind of long-distance communication device. But the scenario under consideration suggests that it is in fact possible, under certain circumstances, for the intentions of later users to override the intentions of the original author as to how the device he or she has invented, designed or produced is to be used (Koslicki, 2018: 227-228).⁴

⁴The example is borrowed from Carrara & Vermaas (2009: 135), who suggest that the above description is historically accurate.

When discussing this case in Koslicki (2018), I consider several strategies which seem to be open to author-intention-based accounts to respond to the scenario just described: (i) the generalization strategy; (ii) the supplementation strategy; (iii) the disjunctive strategy; and (iv) the creation strategy.⁵

(i) The generalization strategy. The first strategy recommends re-describing the relevant author-intention in a way that is sufficiently general to avoid any apparent incompatibility between author-intentions and user-intentions. To illustrate, in the case at hand, the creative act in question might be characterized as being governed only by a general intention to the effect that the resulting device be used to convert sound into electronic signals, leaving open whether, once so converted, these electronic signals are then put to use to facilitate long-distance communication or to aid the hearing-impaired.

(ii) The supplementation strategy. The second strategy proposes to supplement the function specified by the original author-intentions with an additional function determined by the intentions and practices of later users. Thus, if later users employ the device Alexander Graham Bell invented primarily for the purposes of facilitating long-distance communication, then this use should be taken to specify a second function that is simply added to the original function which was determined by Alexander Graham Bell's author-intention, viz., that the device in question be used as a kind of hearing-aid. The result is an artifact that has either a single complex function (viz., to serve as a device that converts sound into electronic signals either for the purposes of long-distance communication or to aid the hearing-impaired) or two functions (viz., to be used as a long-distance communication device and to be used as a hearing-aid).

(iii) The disjunctive strategy. The third strategy retains the basic idea that an artifact's kind-relevant features are determined by agent-intentions, but removes the exclusive focus on the intentions of the original author. Instead, this strategy allows that an artifact's kind-relevant features can

⁵ Koslicki (2018: 228-229). The fourth strategy (Koslicki (2018: 229, fn. 11) was suggested to me by Simon Evnine (personal communication), who has since developed this line of reasoning further in Evnine (2022). We will have occasion to consider this response in more detail shortly.

also be determined by the intentions of other relevant agents, e.g., later users who establish a dominant practice to employ the device in question in a way that diverges from the use initially foreseen by the device's author. The disjunctive strategy thus opens up the possibility that the telephone could be classified as a long-distance communication device, in line with the intentions and practices of later users, rather than as a hearing-aid, following Alexander Graham Bell's original author-intentions.

(iv) The creation strategy. According to the fourth strategy, agents whom we might otherwise characterize as the later users of an already existing artifact would, in some cases, count as having themselves created a new artifact or artifact kind. To illustrate, given this strategy, we might redescribe the scenario cited above as involving two distinct kinds of artifacts, both of which are referred to as "telephones": the first kind of telephone was invented by Alexander Graham Bell for the purpose of amplifying sound to aid the hearing-impaired; the second kind of telephone was brought into existence by later users when they repurposed Alexander Graham Bell's original telephone and endowed it with a different function, viz., to facilitate long-distance communication.

As I observe in Koslicki (2018), the first three strategies do not yield satisfying responses to scenarios, such as that considered above, in which user-intentions appear to be able to override author-intentions in determining an artifact's kind-relevant features. The generalization strategy threatens to mischaracterize particular acts of creation as being governed by a more general intention (e.g., to build a device which converts sound into electronic signals), when the agent in question was in fact guided by a more specific intention (viz., to build a device which amplifies sound to aid the hearing-impaired). The supplementation strategy leads to the counterintuitive result that all those devices to which we now refer as "hearing-aids" are in fact classified as belonging to the same kind as the devices, currently known as "telephones", which facilitate long-distance communication, with the former being actually more in line with Bell's original author-intention than the latter. The disjunctive strategy is problematic in that it offers no resolution in cases in which original author-intentions seem to conflict with those of later users when it comes to an

artifact's kind-relevant features.⁶ While these three strategies therefore do not provide promising author-intention-based responses to the first objection, the creation strategy deserves closer attention, in particular given its recent development in Evnine (2022).

The Creation Strategy: Historicity and Counter-Use

Above, we discussed the concern, raised against author-intention-based accounts, that user-intentions and practices, under certain conditions, can apparently override the intentions of original authors in determining an artifact's kind-relevant features. In response to this challenge, Evnine (2022) develops a version of the creation strategy which extends the account previously offered in Evnine (2016) in two ways: first, by introducing the idea of "*historicity*", according to which an artifact essentially depends on certain of its salient historical and contemporary properties; and, secondly, by making room for the possibility that some instances of "*counter-using*" an existing artifact can themselves result in the creation of a new artifact or artifact kind.

Evnine's first extension, centered on the notion of "*historicity*", is based on the idea that an artifact in a certain sense "has history in it" (Evnine, 2022: 8). When Evnine speaks of an artifact's historicity, he has in mind a certain subset of the properties belonging to an artifact, its "*Common Salient Properties*" (CSP), namely those among the artifact's historical and contemporary properties that can be reasonably expected to be widely known and regarded as salient. Evnine's proposal is that an artifact essentially depends on having the properties in its CSP. To illustrate, if it is a widely known and salient fact about a particular Zippo lighter that this lighter was in Franklin D. Roosevelt's pocket at the time of his assassination, then the property in question (viz., of having been in Roosevelt's

⁶We will have occasion below to consider in more detail a non-intention-based account of artifacts developed in Preston (2013), according to which questions concerning an artifact's kind-membership are resolved by appeal to user-practices, rather than by looking to the content of the intention guiding an artifact's original author in their creative act. (See also, for example, Preston (2009), (2018))

pocket at the time of his assassination), according to Evnine's proposal, belongs to the lighter's CSP and is therefore essential to the lighter.⁷

Secondly, by making room for the phenomenon of "*counter-use*", Evnine allows that the users of a pre-existing artifact can, in some cases, themselves become the authors of a new artifact or artifact kind. "*Counter-use*", as this notion is understood by Evnine, is a practice guided by a deliberate intention, typically (but not necessarily) held collectively by a community of agents, whose aim is to change existing norms governing the use of an object or type of object.⁸ To illustrate, suppose that a community of speakers standardly uses a particular word as a slur, i.e., in a derogatory way. A different community of speakers can then come along and initiate a practice of counter-using the existing word in a non-derogatory way. If the new practice takes hold and brings with it a different CSP, then counter-using the existing word has in effect ushered in the creation of a new word, with the same spelling and pronunciation as the old word, but with a different non-derogatory function. The standard use of the new word is now in line with the intentions of its authors, i.e., the community of agents who established the practice of using the first word in a non-standard way.

Evnine's extended account, when applied to the scenario discussed above, yields the following implementation of the creation strategy. Following the successful execution of his original author-intention, Alexander Graham Bell brings into existence a device, which comes to be known as a "telephone", whose function is to amplify sound to aid the hearing-impaired. Subsequently, a community of agents establishes a practice of counter-using this device in a non-standard way, not in line with Bell's original author-intentions, namely to facilitate long-distance communication among agents independently of whether they are hearing-impaired. Assuming that this new practice becomes established and leads to a reconfigured CSP, a new device, also known as a

⁷The example and Evnine's inspiration here come from a passage from Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, though the character speaking in the passage in question in fact intends to poke fun at the notion of "historicity", the idea that "a thing has history in it" (Dick, 1962: 63).

⁸Evnine's notion of "counter-use" is modeled after Sara Ahmed's notion of "queer-use", which concerns "how things can be used in ways other than for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended" (Ahmed, 2019: 199).

“telephone”, comes into existence, whose function is to facilitate long-distance communication.

More generally, given Evnine’s extended theory, when an existing artifact is counter-used in ways that are incompatible with its standard use, e.g., the use it was intended to have by its original author(s), and provided that the practice in question takes hold and leads to a re-configured CSP, a new artifact or artifact kind is brought into existence whose standard use now aligns with the intentions of the former counter-users who have themselves become authors of the new artifact or artifact kind. The overall structure of Evnine’s response to scenarios in which user-intention can apparently override original author-intentions in determining an artifact’s kind-relevant features is thus to insert an additional layer of creation, now involving those agents who were previously designated as counter-users of an already existing artifact. The authority assigned to author-intentions in determining an artifact’s kind-relevant features can thereby be preserved in a way that appears to be compatible with the basic outlines of an author-intention-based account of artifacts.

A User-Based Account of Artifacts and Prototype Production

A very different account of prototype production, and the nature of artifacts in general, is presented in Preston (2013).⁹ Preston calls her approach “*sociogenerism*” to contrast it with the “*suigenerism*” adopted by proponents of what she refers to as “*the centralized control model*”. According to sociogenerism, an individual is formed by her society and would not be the individual she is without these societal influences. Suigenerism, by contrast, assumes that fully formed autonomous (“*sui generis*”) individuals exist prior to, and independently of, any social relationships into which they enter. When Preston speaks of the centralized control model,

⁹ Preston’s account is intended to apply not only to artifacts but to the broader category of “items of material culture”. This category, for Preston, includes items that are made by human agents (viz., artifacts) as well as natural things that are not made, but used, by human agents (Preston, 2013: 4–6). Preston uses the term, “designer”, to refer to agents I have been calling “authors”; and her term for “author-intention-based accounts” is “the centralized control model”.

she has in mind an approach which conceives of the process of production along the following lines: (i) an antecedent mental design phase, which specifies a plan, precedes a subsequent construction phase, which specifies how the plan in question is to be executed; (ii) the mental design is devised by an agent who engages in means-end deliberation aimed at the construction of a product; (iii) the design specifies the product's features and gives step-by-step instructions for how the product is to be constructed; (iv) the construction phase consists simply in the execution (ideally by way of a faithful copy) of the instructions provided during the design phase either by the designer or by some other agents (ibid: 30).

In action theory, so Preston argues, the centralized control model leads to a deeply engrained and, in her view, problematic tendency to analyze intentions as *plans*, i.e., mental constructs that are located, first and foremost, in the minds of individual agents and, only derivatively, in the minds of multiple agents. Agents who perform actions are then, in turn, conceptualized as *executing* these plans. In line with this approach, proponents of the centralized control model take artifact functions to be established by the intentions of the artifact's designer. In contrast to the *individualistic* orientation inherent in the centralized control model, Preston advocates a perspective which views human action as typically *collaborative*, and which assigns a less pronounced role to intention in her understanding of both action and the assignment of functions to artifacts. Sociality, in Preston's view, must be distinguished from cooperation and the former precedes the latter, since individuals who enter into collaborative relationships are always already socialized. In contrast to the *control* aspect emphasized by the opposing model, Preston offers an account which identifies *improvisation* as the primary structure underlying human action. Given the open-endedness and incompleteness of plans, *creativity* on the part of agents, in Preston's view, is called for throughout the process during which an action unfolds and is not confined merely to the phase in which an agent devises a plan that is to be executed.

Preston's sociogeneric approach also yields a radically different characterization of prototype production from that encountered earlier in the guise of the particular variants of the centralized control model considered above. In order to explain the assignment of functions to artifacts,

Preston endorses a pluralist conception of function which applies two complementary approaches developed for the case of biological function to the domain of artifacts: Robert Cummins' notion of function referred to in Preston (1998) as "*system function*" (Cummins, 1975); and Ruth Millikan's notion of "*proper function*" (Millikan, 1984, 1993). According to the first approach, functional analysis in biology proceeds by way of specifying the current capacities or dispositions which belong to a system (e.g., a biological organism) in virtue of the current capacities or dispositions exhibited by the components of the system (e.g., the organs of a biological organism). According to Millikan's causal-historical approach, in contrast, a trait counts as a proper function if it contributes to the survival or proliferation of the system or component in question.

In order to see how Preston's pluralist conception of artifact functions applies to the case of prototype production, let's imagine an agent who has just thought of a brand-new method by which to open tin cans designed for long-term food preservation, which were previously tricky to pry apart. The agent now sets out to construct the first-ever prototype of her newly invented device, which she calls a "can-opener". If all goes well, the outcome of the agent's creative act is a product which is in fact able to implement the agent's novel strategy for opening cans. In that case, the assignment of the function in question to the novel device can be explained, so Preston argues, by appeal to Cummins' notion of system function: independently of what the agent may or may not have intended, the system function of the can-opener is based on the current capacities or dispositions the device has in virtue of the current capacities or dispositions of its component parts (i.e., its handle, the sharp rotating cutting wheel, etc.). Since, by hypothesis, the agent manages to fashion a product which successfully implements her newly devised strategy for opening cans, the function ascribed to the device in question is in fact among the item's current capacities or dispositions.

Suppose, however, that something goes wrong in the agent's attempt to produce the first-ever prototype can-opener and the outcome of her attempted creative act is an item which fails to implement the agent's novel strategy for opening cans. (Perhaps, with enough force or ingenuity, the item in question can still be used to pry open cans; however, or so I will assume, the item is no better at performing this task than other

metal devices, e.g., screwdrivers, which are not normally classified as can-openers.) In that case, Cummins' notion of system function, with its appeal to the current capacities or dispositions associated with a system and its component parts, is of no help. But neither is Millikan's causal-historical notion of proper function: for, in a case of prototype production, no prior history of use or reproduction has as-of-yet been established to which the attribution of a proper function to the novel device could be anchored. Outside of cases of prototype production, Millikan's notion of proper function comes in handy in cases of *malfunction*, when a history of actual use and reproduction can be used to supply the normative content implicit in ascribing a proper function to a device (e.g., a broken corkscrew), even one that is in fact unable to carry out the function in question. In a case of prototype production, however, a claim about what items of the kind in question are *supposed* to do (whether or not they are in fact able to do it) cannot make reference to the use to which previous members of the same kind have already been put, since by hypothesis the artifact kind in question has only just been established.

Neither of the two approaches to biological function utilized in Preston's account of artifact function thus can be used to motivate the ascription of a function to the item we imagined in the second scenario, viz., the first-ever can-opener prototype which fails to implement the agent's novel strategy for opening cans successfully. The only other option for how an ascription of a function to a malfunctioning prototype could be motivated, viz., to anchor the ascription in question to the designer's intentions, is of course one that Preston rejects and against which she argues at length. Therefore, when confronted with a prototype that is unable to realize the designer's novel idea, Preston recommends that we resist the temptation to ascribe any kind of function at all to the device in question. The first-ever can-opener prototype which fails to implement the designer's novel strategy for opening cans lacks both a proper function (given the absence of an actual pattern of use and reproduction) and a system function (given that opening cans using the inventor's novel strategy is not among the device's current capacities or dispositions). Since Cummins-style system functions and Millikan-style proper functions exhaust our options, on Preston's account, for how an ascription of a function to an artifact could be motivated, there is no other basis on

which a function could be ascribed to the device in question, and it therefore lacks a function altogether. Preston summarizes her response to the scenario at hand as follows:

Fortunately, there is a simpler and more workable alternative. We can disregard our intuitions and stop insisting that novel prototypes have proper functions. Indeed, this is what we should do, since, as we discovered above, the antecedents of this insistence are suspect. Instead, we can analyze novel prototypes the same way as novel uses of existing items. If the novel prototype or innovatively used item performs successfully, it has a system function. *A novel prototype or innovatively used item that does not perform successfully has no function, either proper or system.* In the course of time, the copies of a novel prototype that is reproduced and proliferates on account of its successful performance acquire a proper function, just as a novel use of an existing item may become a proper function over the course of time. This alternative is non-intentionalist, in the sense that it appeals to systematic material culture contexts, on the one hand, and processes of reproduction, on the other hand, rather than to the unmediated intentions of individuals. It has the signal advantage of preserving the phenomenologically well-attested parallels between design and innovative use. In particular, it does not run afoul of the fact that much of what is classified as design actually consists of innovative uses of various sorts. But most importantly, from our point of view, it preserves the phenomenologically and theoretically well-grounded distinction between proper function and system function which is threatened by intentionalist theories should they fail—as we have argued they do fail—to articulate a real and significant difference between users' intentions and designers' intentions (ibid: 176-177; my emphasis).

Preston's explicit concern is with the question of how a function ascription to a novel prototype could be motivated, rather than with the question of how a novel prototype might be classified as belonging to a certain artifact kind. However, given the response to our imagined scenario favored by Preston, it now also becomes difficult to see on what basis the first-ever prototype which fails to implement the designer's new strategy to open cans could be assigned to the supposedly novel artifact kind, *can-opener*, or, for that matter, to any other artifact kind. Since the device in

question lacks a (proper or system) function and the designer's intentions are not an available option on which such a classificatory judgment could be based, it is unclear to what other considerations one might appeal, within the confines of Preston's user-based framework, in order to justify categorizing the device in question as a can-opener, or as some other type of artifact, more generally. Given Preston's approach, the only other candidate for how the item in question could be classified as a can-opener, albeit one that fails to live up to the designer's expectations, is to refer to patterns of actual use and reproduction. But these are of course, as of yet, non-existent, since, by hypothesis, the designer in question has only just attempted to implement her novel method for opening cans for the very first time. Unless the device's classification as a can-opener can be justified on principled grounds, however, other crucial questions which might reasonably be expected to be settled by appeal to the item's kind-membership, e.g., its persistence conditions or modal profile more generally, are equally left unanswered.¹⁰ Preston's account therefore places us in the uncomfortable position of having to recognize concrete particular objects, viz., members of novel artifact kinds, whose nature, including its kind-membership, appears to be not fully determined.

The Limits of Agentive Authority

We now have on the table two very different approaches to the phenomenon of prototype production and the nature of artifacts more generally: an author-intention-based account, in the extended formulation offered by Evnine; and a user-based account, as developed by Preston. My goal, in the remaining section, is to argue that both of these approaches ultimately suffer from the same underlying shortcoming: namely their tendency to overestimate the epistemic and ontological authority that should be assigned to the attitudes or dispositions of agents, whether their status is that of authors or that of users or reproducers, in determining the

¹⁰ See Koslicki (2023a), (2023b), (2023c), and Koslicki and Massin (2023) for further discussion of the connection between the essence of a thing and its kind-membership, persistence conditions, and modal profile more generally.

kind-relevant features of an artifact or artifact kind. To advance this argument, we will, in what follows, consider a further scenario which is intended to show that, in some cases, neither author-intentions nor user-practices can serve as a reliable guide on which to base our classificatory judgements concerning a particular artifact or artifact kind.

Consider a subclass of artifacts which includes, for example, amulets, voodoo-dolls, evil eyes, and perpetual motion machines. For the sake of simplicity, I will focus on the first case involving amulets; but my reasoning, as it applies to this case, is meant to be more general and to carry over to other similar instances of the same broader phenomenon.¹¹ For the sake of the argument, let's suppose that, on a particular occasion, an agent exercises her intention to create the very first prototype of a type of artifact she calls an "amulet", and which, according to the agent's own understanding, has the function of warding off evil spirits. (More specifically, we might imagine that the agent expects the artifact in question, when worn around a person's neck, to protect its wearer from harm caused by evil spirits.) When the agent finishes, she is under the impression that her work was successful and that she managed to produce an artifact which is able to implement her novel strategy for warding off evil spirits. The product of this agent's intentional act of creation catches on and, after a while, a practice is established in which other agents standardly reproduce and use artifacts of the same type, which are now universally referred to as "amulets", in a way that remains faithful to the intentions of its original author, namely (as these agents would similarly put it) for the purpose of warding off evil spirits. In fact, however, or so we may assume, there are no evil spirits and, therefore, both the intentions of the original author and the subsequent practice of reproducing and using the artifacts in question in accordance with the intentions of the artifact's original author in a sense "misfire": for, given the non-existence of evil spirits, the artifacts in question are unable to succeed in performing the task of protecting their wearer from harm caused by evil spirits by manifesting the

¹¹ Cases of this sort are also discussed, for example, in Baker (2007), particularly in connection with the phenomenon of malfunction (ibid: 55-57); in Evnine (2016) (see especially Section 4.1.2 on "failures", pp. 125-128); and in Preston's work, particularly under the heading of what she calls "phantom function" (Preston (1998), (2009), (2013), (2018)). Preston's notion of phantom function is also taken up, for example, in Holm (2017) and Parsons (2016).

ability that is falsely ascribed to them both by their original author and by the community of agents who continue to reproduce and use the items in question in line with the intentions of the original author.¹²

The scenario just outlined now presents us with the following classificatory challenge: To what artifact kind (if any) do the items described above belong? And who (or what) has the authority to determine their kind-relevant features? If we did not already find ourselves in the grip of an author-intention-based or user-based framework, the natural reaction to this case, I take it, would be to diagnose both the original author and the subsequent community of reproducers and users as suffering from a certain kind of illusion and, therefore, as being mistaken in their practice of classifying the artifacts in question. For suppose that we were to grant the authority to determine the artifact's kind-relevant features either to the intentions of the original author (following an author-intention-based account) or to the subsequent community of reproducers and users (following a user-based account). In that case, we would expect that the classification of the artifacts in question as so-called "amulets" should be based (at least in part) on the device's alleged ability to ward off evil spirits, as a kind-relevant feature. In fact, however, given that (by hypothesis) there are no evil spirits, the items in question lack the ability that is falsely ascribed to them by both their original author and the subsequent community of reproducers and users. Therefore, we would be mistaken in classifying the items in question as belonging to whatever artifact kind they in fact belong to on the basis of the kind-relevant feature that is incorrectly attributed to them by both their original author and the subsequent community of reproducers and users. Rather, given that the devices in reality lack the ability to ward off evil spirits, we might instead be tempted to classify these items in accordance with their actual or potential use, e.g., to serve a purely ornamental role, and therefore as

¹² Note that the function that is falsely ascribed to so-called "amulets" is not that the items in question *make people believe* that they have the power to protect agents who wear them from harm caused by evil spirits. This latter condition is one that, in the scenario described, truly applies to the items in question. However, given our hypothesis, this latter condition is not what drives the original author's creative act or the subsequent practice of use and reproduction.

being more properly assigned to an artifact kind whose kind-relevant features are in line with this assessment, e.g., the kind, *jewelry*.^{13,14}

To compare, consider the case of what is known as “holy water”. According to atheists, so-called “holy water” is just ordinary water, albeit ordinary water with interesting relational properties and a particular causal history which includes for example actions performed by priests in religious contexts. Theists, however, or so we may suppose for the sake of the analogy, might argue that what they call “holy water” should be classified as belonging to a category distinct from that of ordinary water. Theists may agree that what they call “holy water” originates from ordinary water, as a result of the latter’s being blessed by a member of the clergy. But once this ceremony has been performed, the resulting substance is one which, in the mind of the theist, has distinct and special cleansing or purifying powers, not shared by ordinary water, which can then be harnessed in baptisms or other rituals. For the sake of the analogy, however, we may suppose that, as in the amulet-case discussed above, theists are in fact mistaken in attributing special supernatural powers to what they call “holy water”. In that case, the theist’s proposed classification of so-called “holy water” as belonging to a category that is distinct from that of ordinary water should similarly be resisted, since the theist’s

¹³The proposed alternative classification of so-called “amulets” as mere pieces of jewelry with a purely ornamental value is intended merely as an *illustration* of how one might classify the artifacts in question in a way that conflicts with the function these artifacts are taken to have by their original author as well as by their subsequent users and reproducers. As noted earlier, my primary goal, in the present context, is to argue for the negative point that neither author-intentions nor user-practices seem to yield the correct result concerning the classification of so-called “amulets” and we should therefore be open to exploring alternative strategies for determining an artifact’s kind-relevant features. Any such positive proposal concerning the classification of these artifacts, which diverges from those considered here, will of course require its own separate defense (see Koslicki and Massin (2023) for further discussion).

¹⁴Of course, regardless of how these questions concerning the correct classification and function ascription are resolved, agents can (and very well may) continue to refer to the artifacts in question as “amulets”; and, quite possibly, in the minds of these agents, the meaning of the term, “amulet”, is definitionally tied to the satisfaction of a condition (e.g., “being capable of protecting a person from evil spirits, when worn around the person’s neck”) which reflects their attitudes and dispositions towards items to which they apply the term, “amulet”. But these semantic facts do not by themselves answer the ontological question of whether there in fact is a genuine and distinct artifact kind to which the term, “amulet”, applies; or, if so, what function (if any) should be ascribed to the items that belong to it.

classificatory judgment is based on an incorrect ascription of allegedly kind-relevant features to what is in fact just ordinary water.

An alternative classification, such as that of so-called “amulets” as merely ornamental pieces of jewelry, would be difficult to defend from the perspective of an author-intention-based or user-based account, given that it in fact conflicts with the function that is falsely ascribed to these items by the relevant community of agents who engage with these items, viz., their original authors as well as their subsequent users and reproducers. Applying Preston’s user-based account to the outcome of the original author’s attempt to fashion the first so-called “amulet” prototype, we arrive at a result that is reminiscent of the conclusion reached previously in connection with the malfunctioning can-opener prototype. Though the reasons for the failure in question are different in the two scenarios, in both cases the relevant agent does not in fact succeed in implementing their strategy in such a way that the product of their would-be creative activity is able to manifest the ability in question and perform the desired task. In the case of the malfunctioning can-opener prototype, the reasons for the agent’s lack of success are, as we might put it, purely mechanical: the device produced by the agent simply lacks the right material parts, or the material parts in question are not arranged in the right way, to allow the device in question to perform the task of opening cans in the novel manner envisaged by the agent. By contrast, in the amulet-scenario, the original author’s lack of success is due not merely to a mechanical failure: even if the agent had used different material parts, or had arranged the item’s material parts in a different way, the device in question still would not have been able to implement the agent’s novel strategy for protecting its wearer from harm caused by evil spirits. Rather, the difficulty in this case is, as it were, more “existential” in nature: since (by hypothesis) there are no evil spirits, the agent cannot succeed in implementing their strategy regardless of which material parts are selected or how these material parts are arranged. Despite the difference in how the failure in question is to be explained, however, the overall outcome remains the same: Preston’s user-based account provides us with no basis on which a function ascription to the novel prototype in question could be motivated. As Preston puts it in the passage cited above, “[a] novel prototype or innovatively used item that does not perform successfully has no function, either

proper or system” (Preston (2013: 176). The device lacks a Cummins-style system function to protect its wearer from harm caused by evil spirits, since it does not have the current capacity or disposition, derived from the current capacities or dispositions of its parts, to do so. Nor is there an actual causal history of warding off evil spirits which could license the ascription of a Millikan-style proper function to the item in question. In fact, given that we are dealing with an attempted case of prototype production, the option of linking the ascription of a proper function to an existing causal history, even one involving the manifestation of a different capacity, is in any case not available. As in our earlier scenario, in the absence of a function ascription, Preston’s user-based account therefore also leaves us in limbo when it comes to the classification of the novel prototype in question as belonging to a particular artifact kind.

Once an actual history of use and reproduction has been established, however, Preston’s user-based account does make room for the ascription of a proper function, in an extended sense, even in cases in which the item in question is in fact unable to perform successfully the function that is ascribed to it. Such cases fall under the heading of what Preston calls “phantom function”. Phantom functions, according to Preston, are applicable when “a type of artifact is regularly reproduced to serve a specific function, but no exemplar of it has ever been structurally capable of performing that function, or, in the nature of things, ever will be” (Preston, 2009: 217). Often, in such cases, the failure in question will eventually come to light and the items will cease to be used and reproduced for the purpose with which they are mistakenly associated. To illustrate, the tapered tail of old racing cars was initially thought to lead to a more aerodynamic performance; but once it became apparent that the design was based on a false theory of drag, the practice in question was discontinued (Griffiths, 1993: 420–421). As Preston notes, however, in other cases, particularly those which are of direct relevance to the amulet-scenario currently under discussion, such items as good luck charms, artifacts with religious significance, popular remedies and the like may continue to be used and reproduced to perform a phantom function, despite the fact that no exemplar of the kind in question has (or will) ever in fact successfully perform the phantom function in question.

Thus, fengshui mirrors continue to be used and reproduced for the purpose of deflecting “bad qi”, even though arguably no such mirror ever has (or will) manifest the trait in question. Similar observations apply to rabbits’ feet that are worn as good luck charms; bug zappers that are taken to be effective against mosquitoes; or vitamin C that is administered for the purpose of preventing colds (Preston, 2013: 177). In these cases, Preston advocates that an ascription of a proper function, in the following extended sense, is nevertheless justified:

A current token of an item of material culture has the proper function of producing an effect of a given type just in case producing this effect (whether it actually does so or not) contributes to the best explanation of the patterns of use to which past tokens of this type of item have been put, and which in turn have contributed to the reproduction of such items (Preston, 2013: 186-187).

Thus, in cases in which an item in fact does not (and never will) successfully manifest the function that is ascribed to it, the item’s phantom function nevertheless counts as its proper function, in the extended sense just cited, if the ascription of the phantom function best explains the actual patterns of use and reproduction surrounding the type of artifact in question.¹⁵

When applied to the amulet-scenario, Preston’s extended account cannot be used to underwrite an attempt to classify the artifacts in question in an alternative way (e.g., as merely ornamental pieces of jewelry which lack any special supernatural powers), which conflicts with the attitudes and dispositions of the relevant community of agents. For, as long as the attribution of the phantom function (viz., to protect its wearer from harm caused by evil spirits) best explains the actual pattern of use and reproduction surrounding so-called “amulets”, this imagined effect has as

¹⁵The analysis of phantom functions offered in Preston (2013) diverges from her earlier treatment of this phenomenon in Preston (1998), according to which function ascriptions should be based on successful performances of a trait, even if in some cases this leads to the consequence that users and reproducers are mistaken in their attribution of a function to an artifact. Thus, following Preston’s earlier account, while bug zappers lack the proper function of specifically killing mosquitoes that is mistakenly attributed to them, it is possible to ascribe to them the proper function of killing other types of insects, since the latter corresponds to a effect they in fact successfully bring about (Preston, 1998: 246).

much of a claim to being considered to be the item's proper function as it would if so-called "amulets" in reality had the ability to bring about the effect in question. As Preston puts it, "the proper function is the effect the item of material culture would have to have to make sense of the pattern of use to which it is put" (Preston, 2013: 186), regardless of whether the item in question in fact has been or can be used to achieve the effect in question. To diagnose the existing classification of so-called "amulets" as being, in some sense, pathological, due to the fact that it is based on the mistaken attribution of a non-existent trait, could only be motivated, on Preston's account, once a future generation of agents is no longer subject to the prevalent illusion and establishes a new practice in which the items in question are knowingly reproduced and used for a different purpose. Until then, the existing practice of using and reproducing so-called "amulets", guided as it is by mistaken beliefs in their alleged supernatural powers, cannot be regarded as being defective relative to the task the items in question are currently meant to accomplish, viz., to protect their wearer from harm caused by evil spirits. Preston's user-based account, therefore, does not license a correction of the existing function ascription; nor, consequently, does it deliver a basis for an alternative classificatory judgment in the case at hand.

When approached from the point of view of Evnine's author-intention-based framework, an alternative classification, such as that of so-called "amulets" as mere pieces of jewelry with a purely ornamental value, appears similarly out of reach. Since we supposed above that the practice of subsequent users and reproducers of so-called "amulets" remains faithful to the intentions of the original author, the new element of "counter-use" introduced into Evnine's extended account is simply irrelevant to the characterization of the case at hand. Our classificatory judgment in this case must therefore rely either on the second novel component of Evnine's extended account, viz., the idea of "historicity", or on other features that were already present within the non-extended account. No doubt, based on the description of the amulet-scenario provided above, the feature of being *believed* to have special supernatural powers to repel evil spirits should count as an excellent candidate for inclusion in the set of salient historical and contemporary properties associated with so-called "amulets" which can be expected to be widely known among the relevant

community of agents who engage in the practice of using and reproducing the items in question. According to Evnine's extended account, the property in question therefore belongs to the CSP associated with so-called "amulets"; and, as a consequence, it is essential to these artifacts that they are widely believed to have special supernatural powers to protect their wearers from harm caused by evil spirits. Nevertheless, since (by hypothesis) the items in question in fact lack the special supernatural powers that are falsely ascribed to them by the relevant community of agents, the property of actually *having* these supernatural powers cannot be taken to belong to the CSP associated with so-called "amulets"; and, for this reason, this property, which we might have otherwise expected to give rise to a function ascription, cannot be regarded as partially determinative of the kind-relevant features on the basis of which so-called "amulets" can be classified as belonging to a particular artifact kind.

What, then, are the kind-relevant features of so-called "amulets", given Evnine's perspective, on the basis of which they should be classified as belonging to a certain artifact kind? Despite the prominence of author-intentions in his account, Evnine agrees that there is a need for additional "objective", i.e., non-author-centric, success and failure conditions which can be invoked in certain difficult cases, such as the amulet-scenario presently under discussion, to differentiate between instances in which an author succeeds and instances in which an author fails to execute their creative intentions to bring into existence a new artifact or artifact kind (Evnine (2016: 125-128). As Evnine notes, we cannot in general simply take an author's word for whether or not she has succeeded in her attempted act of creation. An "eccentric" agent, for example, who is a bad judge of her own work, may be convinced that, by imposing a certain shape on a lump of butter, she has succeeded in bringing into existence an airplane (ibid: 125). Moreover, given the phenomenon of malfunction, whether a particular attempted act of creation counts as successful or not, in Evnine's view, also cannot in general be tied to the question of whether its product is in fact able to perform the kind-associated function (ibid: 126). Some cases of failure, in which something objectively speaking goes wrong in an agent's attempt to execute their creative intentions, can be handled, so Evnine suggests, by invoking a resemblance relation between a newly created artifact and already existing members of the same artifact kind. In this way, for example, a shoe that cannot be

worn (e.g., because its maker, for whatever reason, decides to insert spikes into it) can nevertheless be classified as a shoe, i.e., as something that has the relevant kind-associated function despite the fact that this particular item cannot in its current state perform the kind-associated function in question, based on the fact that the item in question resembles already existing shoes, many of which can in fact be worn on human feet (ibid: 126). This strategy, however, as Evnine acknowledges, will not work across the board, given that in cases of prototype production there are as of yet no existing members of the artifact kind in question to which the newly created exemplar could bear a resemblance relation. Particularly puzzling in this respect are cases, like the amulet-scenario, in which the item that is produced lacks the function that is falsely ascribed to it and is therefore unable to perform the task for which it was intended.

In connection with the case of so-called “amulets”, Evnine puts forward the following proposal:

It will be apparent that there will be a problem in accounting for prototypes, or first instances, of kinds the associated functions of which were not, and perhaps could not have been, performed by anything. In these cases what allows the coming into existence of a new type, and hence of objects falling under that type, will have to rely on *belief that the object made performs the relevant function, in other words, on some kind of acceptance condition*. Here is it plausible to see a source of objectivity (ruling out the acceptance of an eccentric maker as sufficient for success) deriving from a requirement that *the acceptance be to some degree widely shared in the maker's social environment*. This must surely have been what happened in the case of *amulets*. This seems to me to underwrite a sense in which artifacts like amulets are *social* in a way that chairs are not (though of course there may be a broader sense in which chairs are social too) (ibid: 127; my italics).¹⁶

¹⁶A further possibility, which Evnine considers in the section devoted to “failures” (ibid: Section 4.1.2, pp. 125-128), is that an attempt at engaging in an intentional creative act may fail by resulting in what Hilpinen (1993) calls “scrap” (Evnine, 2016: 127-128). The category of scrap, as Evnine understands it, includes, on the one hand, residue that is generated as a side-effect of what may be a successful act of creation, e.g., wood shavings that come about as a by-product of successfully crafting a piece of furniture. On the other hand, scrap also encompasses what is left over when nothing at all is in fact produced, e.g., wood that is left over when an agent attempts to make a piece of furniture but does not succeed in bringing a new object into existence. As the passage just cited brings out, however, Evnine does not take this option to be relevant to the case of so-called “amulets”, since he allows that in this case a new artifact and a new artifact kind can be brought into existence.

Evnine's recommendation, for the case at hand, thus is the following. In a case of attempted prototype production, in which an agent produces an artifact which is in fact unable to carry out the kind-associated function that is falsely ascribed to it by the agent in question, membership in the relevant category is instead determined on the basis of the following two kind-relevant features: first, an "acceptance condition", according to which the artifact's original author *believes* that the item is able to carry out the relevant function; and, secondly, an additional requirement according to which "the acceptance be to some degree widely shared in the maker's social environment" (ibid.). It is the presence of the second feature, in Evnine's view, that gives rise to a kind of artifact that has a more pronounced *social* nature than what we might otherwise expect to find in cases, e.g., that of an "ordinary" chair, in which the second condition is not satisfied.

As should be obvious, however, neither of the two conditions proposed by Evnine results in a mechanism for determining an artifact's kind-relevant features which would make room for the possibility of reaching a classificatory judgment in a particular case that conflicts with the attitudes and dispositions that are held by the artifact's original author or by other members of this agent's community. As in the case of Preston's user-based framework, Evnine's account, despite its recognition of the need for objective success and failure conditions, does not provide us with the resources needed to capture the sense in which, in the amulet-scenario, the relevant agents are in fact mistaken in classifying artifacts as so-called "amulets" based on the erroneous assumption that these items have special supernatural powers which they in fact lack. Such mis-characterizations, however, are at the very least a live possibility (if not, arguably, a reality), and therefore cannot be ruled out as a matter of principle. As a result, we must impose limits on the epistemic and ontological authority that is assigned to agents, regardless of whether they are authors or users and reproducers, in determining an artifact's kind-relevant features. The imposition of such constraints on agentive authority concerning the classification of artifacts, however, requires us to depart from the two types of frameworks considered here and to look instead for a less agent-centric

alternative to author-intention-based and user-based accounts of prototype production and the nature of artifacts more generally.¹⁷

Conclusion

In sum, I take the considerations discussed in the preceding sections to indicate that both author-intention-based approaches and user-based approaches, despite their success in a wide range of cases, do not, as it stands, yield a fully satisfactory account of artifacts and prototype-production. Contrary to Thomasson's view, agents who are engaged in prototype production ought not to be regarded as stipulatively setting the normative success conditions for their own attempted acts of creation, through the substantive concept guiding their performance. Nor can we always rely on established practices of using and reproducing a type of artifact for a certain purpose to arrive at an accurate function ascription or artifact classification. Both author-intention-based and user-based approaches are marred by an overly agent-centric orientation when it comes to the determination of an artifact's kind-relevant features. Instead, what appears to be needed is a more object-centered perspective, i.e., an approach which puts greater emphasis on artifactual objects and their

¹⁷ Baker, Evnine, and Preston emphasize that, in the case at hand, it appears to be *physically impossible* to carry out the kind-associated function that is falsely ascribed to the artifacts in question. A similar observation might apply more generally not only to other cases involving the alleged presence of supernatural powers (e.g., voodoo-dolls, evil eyes, and the like); but also to cases, such as so-called "perpetual motion machines", which do not require the alleged presence of supernatural powers. The fact that the falsely attributed powers, if manifested, would violate the actual laws of nature, however, strikes me as a detachable feature of these cases. An illustration of what I have in mind might be provided by the so-called "Baghdad Battery", brought to my attention by Ludger Jansen (personal communication). As reported for example in Eggebrecht (2016), the case in question involves ancient clay pots which were found by archeologists in Iraq in 1936 and which seem to be able to function as batteries, despite the fact that they were fashioned and used long before any sophisticated scientific understanding of electricity was developed. If the items in question are in fact correctly classified as batteries, as at least some archeologists seem to hold, then the kind-relevant features in question cannot be read off the attitudes and dispositions of agents who were engaged in the practice of producing, using, or reproducing the items in question. Nevertheless, the manifestation of the capacities in question does not violate any actual laws of nature, as is shown by our acceptance of modern-day batteries as a respectable artifact kind. Due to the highly complex and controversial nature of this case, I defer a more detailed examination of the very interesting issues it raises to a future occasion.

capacities themselves, as opposed to the mental states and actions of agents who make or use these artifacts. As noted above, in order to account for the phenomenon of malfunction, the conception of which capacities are relevant to determining an object's membership in an artifactual kind cannot be confined only to its actual or current capacities; rather, we must broaden our perspective to include also an object's potential capacities, i.e., those it could manifest if it were to be repaired or otherwise modified in a way that is compatible with its kind-membership.

A promising direction for understanding the distinction between an object's actual and potential capacities, in my view, is provided by Barbara Vetter's account of "*iterated*" and "*non-iterated potentialities*": an iterated potentiality, roughly, is a potentiality for further potentialities (Vetter, 2015: 135-139). In contrast, a non-iterated potentiality, on this account, is a potentiality an object already possesses in its current state without first having to acquire another potentiality. To illustrate, a person who has not yet learned how to play the violin lacks the non-iterated potentiality to play the violin, but nevertheless has the iterated potentiality to play the violin: she has the potentiality to acquire the potentiality to play the violin by learning how to play the violin. By appeal to this distinction, a malfunctioning can-opener prototype, for example, can be characterized as a device which has a certain iterated potentiality, without also in its current state possessing the corresponding non-iterated potentiality, e.g., to open cans in the novel manner envisioned by its author. A malfunctioning can-opener prototype thus has the potentiality to acquire the relevant potentiality, viz., by being repaired or otherwise modified in an appropriate manner that is compatible with the constraints dictated by its essence. In this way, the device's iterated potentiality can then serve as a basis for classifying the malfunctioning prototype as a can-opener, despite the fact that it cannot in its present state be used to implement the agent's novel strategy for opening cans. Such a non-agent-centric account of course faces many challenges, not least of which is the question of how to distinguish an artifact's *function*, on the one hand, viz., those (actual or potential) capacities which serve as the basis for classifying a device as belonging to a certain artifactual kind (e.g., a screwdriver's capacity to be used to tighten and loosen screws), from the nearly endless

variety of other *accidental uses* to which an artifact can be put, on the other hand (e.g., a screwdriver's capacity to be used as a weapon) (Wakefield (2005)). A more detailed development of the positive suggestions briefly hinted at here will, however, have to await another occasion.¹⁸

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¹⁸For other work that is relevant to the development of the proposal briefly outlined above, see for example Koslicki (2021), (2023a), (2023b), (2023c), and and Koslicki and Massin (2023); Vetter (2020).

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11

Mountains and Their Boundaries

Daniel Z. Korman

Amie Thomasson has made groundbreaking contributions to the ontology of human kinds, both abstract and concrete: literary works and fictional characters (1999), social objects (2003a, 2009b, 2019a), material artifacts (2003b, 2007), and artworks (2010b). My interest here will be on her discussion (2001) of a type of object that arguably straddles the line between human kind and natural kind, namely geographic objects like mountains. In §1, I lay out a puzzle about mountains that generates some pressure towards accepting that we are somehow responsible for their having the boundaries that they do. As a foil for Thomasson's own account, I present two competing theories of geographic objects—one on which they are thoroughly mind-dependent (§2), and one on which they are thoroughly mind-independent (§3)—neither of which yields a fully satisfying solution to the puzzle. I then turn to Thomasson's intriguing suggestion that, although the geographic objects themselves are mind-independent, the boundaries of those objects are not (§4). Finally, I

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examine whether Thomasson's account is equipped to solve the puzzle (§5), and I explore how the account interacts with Thomasson's plenitudinous ontology (§6).

The Puzzle

Some objects have “joint-carving” boundaries, that is, boundaries that run along a site of intrinsic qualitative differentiation. A pebble, for instance, has a joint-carving boundary: there's stone on one side of the boundary and air on the other. This is not to say that the boundary is precise. It may well be indeterminate, at the microscopic level, where exactly the pebble ends and the air begins. But the site of intrinsic qualitative differentiation is likewise imprecise. So long as the gray area of the pebble's boundary matches the gray area of where stone ends and air begins, the boundary will count as joint-carving in the intended sense.

Other objects have “non-carving” boundaries, that is, boundaries that at least in part do not run along the site of any intrinsic qualitative differentiation—boundaries that, as Barry Smith puts it, “lie skew to the physical joints of reality” (2001: 134). Mountains are often like this. As one walks from the center of town towards the mountain, one at some point reaches a slight, imperceptible incline. But one is not yet on the mountain. The incline gradually becomes steeper and steeper, and at some point, one is on the mountain. Coming down from the mountain, one is definitely off the mountain well before one reaches perfectly level ground, just as one is definitely bald well before one reaches complete hairlessness.

Such mountains—let's suppose Mount Kinabalu (Thomasson's go-to example) is one of them—have non-carving boundaries.¹ It is not just that their boundaries are imprecise, which of course they are. Unlike a pebble, or even a cloud, Kinabalu's imprecise boundaries do not run along even an imprecise site of intrinsic qualitative differentiation.

¹ If not Kinabalu, Canberra's Mount Ainslie (though technically a hill, not a mountain) has the sort of dimensions I have in mind here.

Given the seeming arbitrariness of Kinabalu's boundaries, one naturally wonders whether there are objects answering to other ways of drawing the boundaries—and if not, why not. Let R_K be the (imprecise) region that Kinabalu occupies. Now consider a somewhat larger region, R_K^+ , extending well beyond the point at which the incline becomes noticeably steep, and encompassing portions of the surrounding terrain that we definitely wouldn't regard as part of Kinabalu, for instance the areas of negligible incline that one encounters *en route* to Kinabalu. Let's call the object occupying R_K^+ , if there is one, 'Kinabalu⁺'.

A puzzle arises for those who, like me, are inclined to agree that there is such an object as Kinabalu, but deny that there is also such an object as Kinabalu⁺. The puzzle can be framed as an inconsistent tetrad:

THE PUZZLE

- (i) There is no ontologically significant difference between Kinabalu and Kinabalu⁺
- (ii) If so, then: if Kinabalu exists, then so does Kinabalu⁺
- (iii) Kinabalu⁺ does not exist
- (iv) Kinabalu does exist

Regarding (i): An *ontologically significant difference* between two putative objects is a difference that could explain why the one but not the other exists. Put another way, an ontologically significant difference is the sort of difference that can make a difference with respect to which things exist. And it's plausible, at least on the face of it, that there is no such difference between Kinabalu and Kinabalu⁺.²

This is not to say that there is *no* interesting difference between them. One difference between Kinabalu and Kinabalu⁺ is that Kinabalu's outer boundaries correspond to a point at which there begins to be a notable incline—that is, an incline sufficiently steep to be noticed by and have a discernible effect on beings like us. And whereas that's a difference that is of some importance to us, it seems far too anthropocentric to be the sort

² Carmichael's (2020: §2) strategy for resisting arbitrary undetached parts may be adapted as a strategy for resisting (i). The strategy ultimately turns on the idea that distinct objects cannot be exactly co-located. Since I—like Thomasson (2006: §4, 2007: ch.4)—have no objection to co-located objects, I won't pursue this strategy here.

of difference that could make an ontological difference. True, one starts to break a sweat and can really feel it getting steeper as one crosses the threshold of R_K , whereas one hardly notices anything changing as one crosses the threshold of R_K^+ . But that surely can't be *why* there's an object in R_K but not in R_K^+ . The fact that the outer edge of R_K (unlike R_K^+) runs along the site where a notable incline begins plausibly explains why we *think* of R_K (but not R_K^+) as the boundary of an object, but it cannot plausibly explain why R_K (but not R_K^+) *is* the boundary of an object.

Claim (ii) is a plausible anti-arbitrariness constraint: it cannot simply be a brute fact that the matter in R_K constitutes an object but the matter in R_K^+ doesn't.³ As for (iii) and (iv), while sensible and intuitive, they are not uncontroversial. Plenty of metaphysicians are eliminativists, and will deny that there are mountains, and plenty of others embrace permissive ontologies that include Kinabalu⁺, along with bazillions of other objects we fail to notice. But the puzzle is pressing for conservatives like myself, according to whom, when it comes to highly visible material objects, things are more or less the way they seem to be, perceptually and intuitively.⁴

The puzzle straightforwardly generalizes to a broad range of geographic entities, including hills, dunes, seas, and oceans. By contrast, the puzzle doesn't arise (with any force) for objects with joint-carving boundaries. For instance, take a pebble, and consider a region somewhat larger than the pebble, encompassing both the pebble and some of the surrounding air. The fact that the boundaries of the pebble are joint-carving, whereas the boundaries of this larger region aren't, seems poised to explain why the contents of the one but not the other constitute an object; it's plausibly an ontologically significant difference.⁵

³ Proponents of the "brutality of compositional facts" (e.g., Markosian 1998: 215) will likely reject (ii). Certain sorts of deflationists (e.g., Putnam 1987, Hirsch 2002b, and Fine 2007: 163-165) are also well-positioned to reject (ii), since on their view, when one accepts that Kinabalu but not Kinabalu⁺ exists, one does not thereby *privilege* Kinabalu over Kinabalu⁺. But this is not the sort of deflationism that Thomasson herself defends; more on Thomassonian deflationism in §6.

⁴ See Thomasson (2006, 2007, 2010a) for discussion of permissivist and eliminativist ontologies. See Korman (2015) for a defense of conservatism.

⁵ Though see Varzi (2011: 140) and Fairchild and Hawthorne (2018: 69-71) for skepticism about treating such boundaries as ontologically privileged.

Before turning to Thomasson's account of geographic objects, and how it might help with the puzzle, let's consider two competing accounts.

Robust Creationism

The fact that Kinabalu's boundaries, but not those of Kinabalu⁺, mark the start of a notable(-to-humans) incline seems not to be an ontologically significant difference. But there is another, closely related difference that might do the trick, namely that—perhaps as a result of noticing the incline at R_K but not at R_K^+ —we “draw lines” around R_K (but not around R_K^+) and take there to be an object circumscribed by those lines.

The idea that line-drawing has the power to bring things into existence draws support from reflection on geopolitical entities.⁶ Wyoming and Colorado, for instance, plausibly came into existence as a result of line-drawing. Moreover, there is a straightforward explanation for why there are states occupying those rectangular regions and yet no state in some arbitrary rectangular region that cross-cuts Wyoming and Colorado. The ontologically significant difference is that actual people actually drew the former lines whereas no one drew the latter lines.

“Line-drawing”, as I intend it here, covers not just the literal drawing of lines on maps, but also conceptual activity like focusing on some region and regarding it as the boundary of an object. To be sure, not all acts of line-drawing suffice to bring objects into existence. Your fleeting conceptualization (just now) of a rectangular region cross-cutting Wyoming and Colorado doesn't bring a new object into existence that has that region as its boundaries. Perhaps that's due to a lack of collective buy-in, or a lack of sustained attention to this newly (conceptually) drawn line, or your lack of relevant authority, or the lack of a robust set of norms or practices accompanying the line-drawing. What exactly it is that's missing is beyond the scope of this paper (though see Passinsky 2020: §2 for an insightful discussion). The takeaway here is just that line-drawing is *at least sometimes* ontologically significant.

⁶See Smith (2001), Thomasson (2001: 150-151), Korman (2020: §5.1), and Passinsky (2020) for a defense of robust creationism about geopolitical entities, and see Heller (1990: 36-37) for resistance.

One might try to apply the same sort of account to non-geopolitical geographic objects like mountains. At some point in the distant past, people encountered the granite in and surrounding R_K and drew lines around R_K . As a result of the line-drawing, the idea goes, a new object came into existence—Mount Kinabalu—constituted by the granite in R_K . Let's call this sort of account *robust creationism*, understood as the thesis that mountains and other such geographic objects are created by acts of line-drawing. The view is “creationist” insofar as it takes geographic items to be created by people. It is “robust” in comparison to Thomasson's more modest view—which we'll discuss in §4—on which line-drawing creates the boundaries of the mountain, but not the mountain itself.

Robust creationism fully vindicates the idea that it was up to us where Kinabalu's boundaries are: had we drawn the lines differently, Kinabalu would have occupied a different region and would have been constituted by a different portion of granite. Accordingly, robust creationism has the resources to deny (i) of the puzzle. The ontologically significant difference between Kinabalu and Kinabalu⁺, the idea goes, is that people drew lines around the region occupied by Kinabalu, whereas no one drew lines around the region putatively occupied by Kinabalu⁺.

Smith (2001), as I read him, is a robust creationist.⁷ He couches his account in the language of *fiat boundaries* and *fiat objects*, which I understand as follows. A *fiat boundary* is a boundary that is mind-dependent and (partially or entirely) non-carving. A *fiat object* is an object whose boundaries are fiat boundaries. While it's not true *by definition* that fiat objects are mind-dependent (only that their boundaries are), it's natural to think that they would have to be. And Smith does indeed take geographic objects like the North Sea to be fiat objects that we brought into existence with our conceptual activity:

It seems to have been a complex medley of considerations relating to shipping, trade, harbors, climate, markets, and so on, which led our ancestors to **create** the fiat object “North Sea” Fiat objects in general **owe their existence** not merely **to human fiat** but also to associated real properties of the relevant factual material (2001: 142).

⁷ As is Varzi (2011: §3).

Thomasson (2001: 150) interprets Smith differently, as endorsing her more modest form of creationism on which it is only the boundaries of geographic objects, not the geographic objects themselves, that are mind-dependent. Smith does say (and Thomasson quotes him as saying):

[T]he interiors of fiat objects are ... autonomous portions of autonomous reality. **Only** the respective external boundaries are created by us (2001: 143).

However, what I read him as saying here is not “only the boundaries *and not the fiat object itself*”—which would contradict what he said in the earlier passage—but rather “only the boundaries *and not the material stuff that constitutes the fiat object*.” I likewise take his references to “relevant factual material” and “the interiors of fiat objects” to be referring, not to the fiat objects themselves, but to the stuff (e.g. water or granite) that constitutes the objects.

The obvious problem with robust creationism is that Kinabalu and other mountains long pre-dated our line-drawing. Kinabalu is millions of years old, and therefore existed long before there were any humans around to draw lines around the contents of R_K . If that’s right, then the line-drawing cannot be what brought Kinabalu into existence.

Robust creationists may bite the bullet, conceding that, although the mind-independent stuff (the granite) that presently constitutes Kinabalu has been around for millions of years, Kinabalu itself (the mountain) does not pre-date the arrival of humans in Borneo. They may however insist that, when we find it plausible that mountains long pre-dated our line-drawing, we are confusing the mountain with the stuff that constitutes the mountain. And it’s true that we sometimes run these things together. For instance, we say things like ‘dinosaurs once roamed Wyoming’, meaning of course that dinosaurs once roamed *the land* now occupied by Wyoming, and knowing full well that the state of Wyoming didn’t exist in the time of the dinosaurs. The robust creationist may suggest that we are likewise speaking loosely when we say things like ‘mountains have existed for millions of years’, meaning only that the stuff that now constitutes them has existed (and has been mountain-shaped) for millions of years. And when we report finding ‘mountains have existed

for millions of years' to be obviously true, the idea goes, what is actually striking us as obvious is the creationist-friendly truth that such a claim would ordinarily be loosely used to express—namely, a claim about the stuff that constitutes mountains.

In reply: There is good evidence that we speak loosely in saying 'dinosaurs once roamed Wyoming'. The good evidence is that when pressed ("there weren't any states back then!"), we immediately retract ("okay, but there used to be dinosaurs on *that land*"). We easily recognize, upon minimal reflection, that we were, perhaps without realizing it, speaking loosely. In stark contrast, 'mountains have existed for millions of years', even on reflection, seems no less strictly and literally true than 'mountains are steep', and there is no felt need to retract or rephrase what one said.⁸ Given the lack of any temptation to retract, there is no reason to think that we are merely speaking loosely when we say such things. And given that we *do* see the need to retract or rephrase talk of dinosaurs in Wyoming, there is no reason to think that we are prone to confusing a thing and its matter—or, at any rate, prone to a confusion that isn't cured by minimal reflection.

Selectionism

Let's turn now to a competing account of geographic objects, one on which mountains and other such geographic objects are mind-independent objects with mind-independent boundaries. Call this sort of account *selectionism*. By selectionist lights, when we draw lines, we are not thereby bringing mountains into existence; we are merely selecting pre-existing objects for attention and reference.

Selectionism easily accommodates the longevity of mountains: since Kinabalu doesn't (on this view) depend for its existence on our conceptual activity, there is no barrier to its pre-dating our arrival by millions of years. Selectionists will likely regard any temptation to say that it is up to

⁸ Cf. Hirsch (2002a: 109–111). Of course, those who already accept robust creationism will feel a need to retract after saying such things, but *their* felt need to retract is no evidence that the rest of us are speaking loosely when we say such things. Cf. Merricks (2001: ch. 7.4) on philosophers speaking loosely.

us where Kinabalu's boundaries are as resting on a sort of use/mention confusion. All that is up to us is whether to use the name 'Kinabalu' to pick out an object with those boundaries. Our line-drawing doesn't determine which objects there are but only which objects we refer to.

As for the puzzle, rejecting (i) seems like a non-starter for the selectionist. After all, the only plausible candidate we've found for an ontologically significant difference between Kinabalu and Kinabalu⁺ requires taking mountains to have mind-dependent boundaries, generated by acts of line-drawing. Selectionism, rather, is most naturally paired with a rejection of (iii), affirming the existence of Kinabalu⁺. More generally, it is naturally paired with one or another form of *permissivism*, on which there are wide swathes of material objects right before our eyes but that routinely escape our notice. Mereological universalism, for instance, delivers objects exactly filling R_K , R_K^+ , and any other matter-filled region we may wish to draw lines around. (Though, as we shall see, selectionists likely need a form of permissivism far more potent than universalism.) In permissive ontologies, there are objects answering to any of the myriad ways we could have conceptualized geographic boundaries, and had we drawn different lines we would simply have selected different objects for attention and reference.⁹

Frege, as I read him, endorses a permissive form of selectionism:

The objectivity of the North Sea is not affected by the fact that it is a matter of our arbitrary choice which part of all the water on the earth's surface we mark off and elect to call the 'North Sea'... If we say 'The North Sea is 10,000 square miles in extent' ... we assert something quite objective, which is independent of our ideas and everything of the sort. If we should happen to wish, on another occasion, to draw the boundaries of the North Sea differently... that would not make false the same content that was previously true: what we should perhaps rather say is, that a false content had now taken the place of a true, without in any way depriving its predecessor of truth. (1884/1980: 34)¹⁰

⁹ Cf. Heller (1990: 36) on selectionism as applied to geopolitical entities. Selectionism is a natural extension of Lewis's (1986: 212) remarks about the Australian outback.

¹⁰ Smith (2001: 134) quotes from this passage as well, but may be reading Frege as a robust creationist.

Here is what I understand Frege to be saying. Our line-drawing demarcates the mind-independent boundaries of a mind-independent body of water, which let's say (following Frege) is 10,000 square miles. We selected that body of water for attention, and named it 'The North Sea'. Lying within its perimeter is a somewhat smaller body of water, which currently has no name but exists nonetheless. If at some future time we select the smaller body of water for attention and decide to apply 'The North Sea' to it, 'The North Sea' will at that point refer to something else. The North Sea will still be 10,000 square miles, but 'The North Sea is 10,000 square miles' will say something false about something other than the North Sea.

Selectionism, if it is to serve as a principled solution to the puzzle, evidently must be paired with a permissivist ontology on which there are countless mountain-like things—Kinabalu⁺ among them—massively overlapping Kinabalu, but either extending past the outer boundaries of Kinabalu, or stopping short of its outer boundaries. Can permissive selectionists somehow show that this explosion of mountain-like things is not quite as bad as it seems?

One strategy would be to remind us that permissivism is downright intuitive when it comes to portions of matter.¹¹ No one denies that there's some granite in (and exactly filling) the region R_K . In other words, there is something in that region that we all already recognize: some granite. Yet, 'Kinabalu⁺' was stipulated to name the object (if any) exactly filling R_K . Thus, the idea goes, to recognize Kinabalu⁺ is just to recognize something that's already present in a commonsense ontology.

There are, however, important respects—specifically, modal respects—in which the granite in R_K is unlike a mountain. That granite could survive being flattened to the ground, or even being blown to bits. A mountain, by contrast, couldn't survive either of these things. A selectionist who cannot deliver a modally mountain-like Kinabalu⁺ would then face a new version of the arbitrariness puzzle.¹² For, just as it appears intolerably arbitrary to privilege R_K by taking it to be the sole occupied

¹¹ Cf. Markosian (2015: 678) on "PUF for Stuff".

¹² Additionally, one might worry that the granite doesn't even satisfy the description used to fix the reference of 'Kinabalu', since the granite is *some stuff*, whereas it was stipulated that 'Kinabalu' names an *object*. See Kleinschmidt (2007) and Markosian (2015) on the distinction between stuff and objects.

region in its vicinity, it likewise appears intolerably arbitrary to privilege R_K by taking it to be the sole region in its vicinity occupied by something modally mountainlike. To address the concern about arbitrariness, the selectionist must embrace a more plenitudinous permissivism, on which R_K^+ is likewise occupied by something modally mountainlike. The observation that common sense recognizes arbitrary portions of matter is not enough to take the sting out of the full permissive ontology needed by the selectionist.¹³

Opinions will differ on just how problematic it is for selectionists (if at all) that they are committed to a modally mountain-like occupant of R_K^+ . However, it's clear enough that this sort of selectionism is unavailable to those who favor a conservative (non-permissive) ontology. So let's turn to Thomasson's account of geographic objects, to see whether it can serve as a viable option for conservatives.

The Modest Creationist Compromise

What conservatives evidently need—if they are to solve the puzzle—is a view on which geographic objects are sufficiently mind-independent to pre-date the arrival of humans, and yet sufficiently mind-dependent that our line-drawing can play a role in explaining why there's a mountain exactly filling R_K but no mountain exactly filling R_K^+ . Robust creationism cannot deliver the former, and selectionism cannot deliver the latter.

In her 2001 article, “Geographic Objects and the Science of Geography,” Thomasson advances an account of geographic objects that's poised to deliver all the goods. Recall (from §2) Smith's distinction between fiat *boundaries*, that is, mind-dependent non-carving boundaries, and fiat *objects*, that is, objects with partly or entirely fiat boundaries. As Thomasson rightly points out, “the fact that an object is a fiat object does not entail that the object itself is mind-dependent, but only that some of its boundaries are” (2001: 150). Strictly speaking, there is no

¹³ See Thomasson (2007: 183–185) for a different attempt to take the sting out of permissivism, and see Korman (2015: 47–48) for critical discussion.

contradiction in affirming that a mind-independent object has mind-dependent boundaries.

This opens the door to a modest alternative to robust creationism—call it *modest creationism*—according to which the boundaries of mountains and other such geographic objects are created by acts of line-drawing, but the objects themselves are mind-independent. In Thomasson's own words:

Such fiat objects as Mount Kinabalu provide excellent examples of fiat objects whose mere existence (as physical objects) is mind-independent, though the existence of certain of their boundaries depends on human cognition. (2001: 150)

[T]here is some sense in which such apparently fiat objects as bays and mountains (but not nations and property) could exist in the absence of all linguistic and cultural habits. (2001: 151)

[T]he boundaries of Mount Kinabalu are not established through any formal declaration, but rather through the informal collective practices of people of Borneo regarding what pieces of land and rock do and do not 'count as' part of Mount Kinabalu. (2001: 151)

Modest creationism promises to give us everything that we want. Since Kinabalu is mind-independent on this view, we can accommodate the historical fact that Kinabalu long pre-dated the arrival of humans in Borneo. At the same time, modest creationism tells us that it's up to us where Kinabalu begins and ends, which yields a conservative-friendly solution to the puzzle: the fact that we drew lines around R_K and not R_K^+ serves as an ontologically significant difference between Kinabalu on the one hand, and Kinabalu* on the other. In other words, the modest creationist can help herself to the robust creationist's solution to the puzzle without inheriting robust creationism's revisionism about the age of Kinabalu.

To my mind, the main allure of modest creationism, and its primary advantage over selectionism, is precisely that it provides a conservative-friendly solution to the puzzle. But Thomasson herself is no conservative. Indeed, she endorses a highly permissive ontology, one on which R_K and R_K^+ each contain bazillions of objects with (virtually) every imaginable

modal profile. So it is somewhat curious that she doesn't go in for a selectionist account, even though the availability of such an account is clearly on her radar (see 2001: 158 n.6). More on this in §6.

Boundaries in the Distant Past

There is a crucial question that modest creationism leaves unanswered, and that I fear has no satisfactory answer: what was Kinabalu like prior to the line-drawing that determined its current boundaries?

Let t be some time in the distant past—100,000 years ago, let's say—prior to the arrival of humans in Borneo, but not before R_K was filled with matter arranged mountainwise. Here is a revised version of the puzzle:

THE REVISED PUZZLE

(i*) There is no ontologically significant difference *at* t between Kinabalu and Kinabalu⁺

(ii*) If so, then: if Kinabalu exists *at* t , then so does Kinabalu⁺

(iii*) Kinabalu⁺ does not exist *at* t

(iv*) Kinabalu does exist *at* t

The rationale behind (ii*) and (iii*) is exactly the same as the rationale for (ii) and (iii)—so rejecting either of those would remove the need for modest creationism to solve even the original puzzle. As for (iv*), modest creationism doesn't strictly *commit* one to accepting it. It is (strictly) open to modest creationists to say that, although Kinabalu is mind-independent, it so happens that it came into existence only once (but not *because*) lines were drawn around R_K . But to deny (iv*) would be to sacrifice the main advantage of modest creationism over robust creationism—namely, that it avoids revisionism about the age of Kinabalu. Furthermore, if Kinabalu is mind-independent, then there must be some world w in which Kinabalu exists but in which there are no minds whatsoever. So we could always (re-)reinstate the puzzle in terms of w rather than t .

Now for (i*). The key to the creationist strategy for resisting (i) of the original puzzle was to insist that the fact that people drew lines around R_K whereas no one drew lines around R_K^+ is an ontologically significant difference between Kinabalu and Kinabalu⁺. However, since lines had not yet been drawn at t , the appeal to line-drawing may seem like a

nonstarter for resisting (i*). But perhaps there is some way to adapt the line-drawing response to solve even this puzzle.

The modest creationist might insist that mountains needn't have their boundaries determined case-by-case, but rather by what Thomasson calls "direct creation by type" (2001: 152). Here, the idea would be that mountains have their boundaries determined by a more generic type of line-drawing, for instance by early humans conceptualizing mountains—as a kind—as having boundaries beginning at the point of notable incline. In that case, early human encounters with mountains in Africa could have generated boundaries for mountains around the globe that hadn't yet been encountered—Kinabalu among them. This response, however, is unavailable if we place *t* further in the past, say a million years ago, before *any* line-drawing was happening, but not before there was matter arranged mountainwise in R_K .

Alternatively, modest creationists might insist that Kinabalu had the boundaries that it did at *t* as a result of line-drawing that occurred *after* *t*. This sort of maneuver is not entirely without precedent. Lynne Rudder Baker (2007: 130-132), for instance, defends a view of vague composition on which whether *x* and *y* are a borderline case of composition—as when a hammer head is in the middle of being affixed to a hammer handle—depends in part on whether they later definitely do compose something. If the assembly is later completed, then they are a borderline case of composing something in the intuitive grey area; but if the assembly is never completed, the idea goes, then they definitely compose nothing in the intuitive grey area. Similarly, the modest creationist might hold that Kinabalu occupied R_K at *t*, but would not have occupied that region at *t* had it not been for cognitive acts that occurred long after *t*.

The problem with this strategy—even setting aside the curious sort of backwards causation it involves—is that it can't accommodate the aforementioned world *w*, in which there are mountains but no minds. In such a world, Kinabalu exists and yet there are no minds, and thus no acts of line-drawing—before, during, or after *t*—to serve as the ontologically significant difference between Kinabalu and Kinabalu*.

Reflection on *w* reveals an even more fundamental problem with modest creationism: supporters evidently must concede that Mount Kinabalu can exist (and perhaps once did exist) without any boundaries at all, even

imprecise boundaries. But it is hard to make any sense of this suggestion. If at some time Kinabalu has no boundaries, then there is nowhere that it begins and ends at that time. In that case, there is nothing that lies outside of its boundaries at that time, including the coastline of Borneo, the South China Sea, or even the sun. Moreover, if it had no boundaries at that time, then nothing was within its boundaries at that time either, including its peak—from which it would seem to follow that it had no parts at that time, since plausibly x is a part of y only if x lies within the boundaries of y .

Perhaps I have been unfair to Thomasson. I have thus far been operating under the assumption that, in calling the boundaries of Kinabalu “mind-dependent”, Thomasson means that it’s impossible for Kinabalu to have boundaries in the absence of minds. But perhaps there is a weaker, more charitable understanding of the view, on which Kinabalu and other geographic objects are merely being said to have “mind-malleable” boundaries, that is, boundaries whose location can be changed by mere mental acts. That would then be compatible with Kinabalu having boundaries in w and at t —boundaries that weren’t created by line-drawing, but which can be affected by line-drawing.

So understood, modest creationism would avoid commitment to the possibility of boundaryless objects. But it remains unclear how this modification helps with the revised puzzle. There are no joint-carving boundaries anywhere in the vicinity of Kinabalu’s boundaries. So, supposing that Kinabalu’s boundaries at t were at least *roughly* where they are now, neither joint-carving boundaries nor line-drawing can serve as the needed ontologically significant difference at t between Kinabalu and Kinabalu⁺. So conservatives are still left without any way of resisting (i^*).

Perhaps conservatives could challenge the supposition that Kinabalu’s boundaries at t were roughly where they are now. At t , the idea goes, Kinabalu had boundaries extending all the way to the nearest site of intrinsic qualitative differentiation, be it the nearest coastline, the lowest point of the nearest valley, or the nearest point at which flat terrain begins. By drawing lines, the idea goes, we stripped Kinabalu of its joint-carving boundaries and imbued it with its present non-carving boundaries. This would then underwrite a two-pronged strategy for resisting the puzzles: resist (i^*) by pointing to the fact that Kinabalu but not Kinabalu⁺ had

joint-carving boundaries at t , and resist (i) by pointing to the fact that we draw lines around R_K but not R_K^+ .

In reply: One would have to study the actual terrain (and its geological history) to establish what, according to this response, Kinabalu's dimensions were at t . But it is an open (epistemic) possibility that the nearest site of intrinsic qualitative differentiation, in all directions, is hundreds of miles beyond Kinabalu's present boundaries. Perhaps the nearest site is the coastline of Borneo, in which case this view would imply that Kinabalu once spanned the entire island, and then—once lines were drawn—it shrunk down to a tiny fraction of its original size, occupying only a small portion of the island. Perhaps some conservatives will be able to stomach this possibility. But that this is even an open possibility strikes me as a *reductio* of the envisaged strategy.

Modest Creationism for Permissivists

In thinking about Kinabalu at t , I have been focusing somewhat narrowly on modest creationism's shortcomings *as* a conservative-friendly solution to the puzzles. But Thomasson is no conservative: she embraces a plenitudinous ontology, which straightforwardly delivers the result that (iii) is false. So, let me close the paper with an examination of Thomasson's plenitudinous ontology (§6.1), followed by a discussion of whether plenitudinists ought to accept modest creationism (§6.2).

Thomasson's Plenitude

Very roughly put, a plenitudinous ontology is one that includes objects answering to any conceivable way of dividing up matter into objects and attributing modal profiles to those objects. As an illustration, a plenitudinous ontology will include something right where my car is—an "incar"—that's constituted by the matter of my car, but that unlike my car is necessarily inside the garage. It will also include objects (co-located with my car) that are necessarily dented, objects that can survive the replacement of their front tires but not their back tires, and objects that

are only contingently made of metal and could have been made entirely of ice.

Formulating plenitudinism as a general thesis that delivers the bloated ontology envisaged by its various proponents is no small feat. Typical formulations will have something like the following form:

For any matter-filled region R, and for any modal profile M, there is an object in R constituted by the matter in R and that has M as its modal profile.¹⁴

Thomasson herself will regard such theses as ill-formed or meaningless, on account of their employment of bare quantifiers and associated neutral uses of ‘object’.¹⁵ Still, Thomasson does accept what she herself describes as a “plenitudinous ontology” (2015: 214), containing all the kinds recognized by defenders of such theses.¹⁶

Since it may be surprising to some readers that the author of *Ordinary Objects* is neck-deep in extraordinary objects, let me say a few words about how Thomasson winds up with a plenitudinous ontology. On Thomasson’s deflationary metaontology, to tell whether a kind K has any instances, one need only check whether the applications conditions we associate with the associated kind term are satisfied. If they are, then (as long as the application conditions meet certain minimal constraints¹⁷), there are guaranteed to be things of kind K, with exactly the modal profile that we associate with Ks.

To illustrate: ‘tree’ is associated with something like the following application conditions: trees exist if there are atoms arranged treewise.¹⁸ Since there *are* atoms arranged treewise, the application conditions are satisfied, guaranteeing that there are trees—that is, objects with the sort

¹⁴ See Fairchild (2019) and Spencer (2020) on the difficulties facing existing formulations of plenitudinism. This flat-footed formulation is modeled on—and is even more naive than—what Fairchild calls ‘Naive Plenitude’ (2019: 150).

¹⁵ See her (2007: §6.3, 2009a, 2015: 108–111, 219, and 292–293). See Korman (2015: §4.4.2, 2019: §§3–5) for criticism and her (2019b: §2) for a response.

¹⁶ See her (2007: §9.6 and §10.3) and her (2015: §6.1).

¹⁷ See her (2015: ch. 8) on the constraints needed to ensure that objects aren’t overgenerated in a way that leads to contradiction.

¹⁸ Cf. her (2015: 107).

of modal profile we associate with the kind *tree*. Emphatically, it's not that we bring trees into existence by using terms with such application conditions. Rather, they were already there, waiting to be picked out.

As Thomasson herself observes, this sort of deflationary approach will also deliver objects answering to countless application conditions that we haven't yet introduced:

[I]f you accept (as I have) that you are committed to Ks as long as you accept the truth of claims that (given the application conditions for 'K' and permitted redundant transformations) analytically entail the existence of Ks, then you must also accept **more than** stones, artifacts, and other 'common sense' objects. For other sorts of terms may be introduced with minimal existence conditions that are guaranteed to be met provided that other claims we accept are true. (2007: 172)

As an illustration of what more one must also accept, Thomasson invokes van Inwagen's gollyswoggles:

[S]uppose ... we introduce the term 'gollyswoggle' to refer to [something constituted by] a lump of clay with a particular very complicated shape, where it is taken to have that shape essentially. Given a lump of clay of that shape, the term 'gollyswoggle' is guaranteed to apply (and since it has its shape essentially, the gollyswoggle can be identical neither with the lump nor with any statue the lump may constitute). (2007: 172)

She goes on affirm her commitment to arbitrary mereological sums (2007: 173) and, in later work, incars as well (2015: 214).

So, while Thomasson is unlikely to accept any existing formulations of plenitudinist theses (owing to her aforementioned aversion to bare quantifiers and neutral uses of 'object'), she does nevertheless believe in all of the mereologically and modally extraordinary objects that those theses are designed to deliver. So I will take the liberty of referring to Thomasson as a "plenitudinist".

Locating Mountains in the Plenitude

Plenitudinists like Thomasson will affirm that there is an object composed of the matter in R_K , as well as one composed of the matter in R_K^+ . Indeed, by plenitudinist lights, there are countless objects in R_K , with varying modal and temporal profiles. There's one (indeed many) that ceases to exist whenever a cloud passes directly over R_K and that comes back into existence once the cloud is gone, and one that exists *only* at those times that there is a cloud directly above R_K . There's one that cannot survive Bruno Mars setting foot in R_K , and one that not only tolerates Bruno Mars but whose boundaries would expand by a hundred feet in all directions should he ever set foot in R_K .

Crucially, plenitudinous ontologies will also include an object in R_K with mind-malleable boundaries (i.e., boundaries whose location can be changed by mere mental acts). Indeed, it will deliver countless such objects, some of which came into existence millions of years ago, when the matter in and around R_K first came to be mountain-shaped, and which are modally mountainlike insofar as they would cease to exist should the granite in R_K be flattened or blown to bits.¹⁹

We have thus found within the plenitude precisely the sort of object the modest creationist is after: a ten-million-year old modally mountain-like occupant of R_K , which did have boundaries before we came along but whose boundaries are now up to us. The modest creationist who takes 'Kinabalu' to refer to such an object could say that Kinabalu did have boundaries at t , roughly (but maybe not exactly) where we presently take them to be. But, the idea goes, cognitive acts of line-drawing have the power to change those boundaries. By re-drawing the lines, we can extend or diminish its boundaries, and we can make them more or less precise.

Modest creationism could then be developed as a sort of hybrid of selectionism and creationism. *Initial* acts of line-drawing merely select specific objects with mind-malleable boundaries from among the plenitude to serve as referents for names like 'Kinabalu' and general terms like

¹⁹ One may be tempted to asked whether there are *any* limits to the malleability of the boundaries. Can a mere mental act cause its boundaries to encompass the whole planet? To which the plenitudinist will reply: for any conceivable limits on malleability, there are some objects (and candidate referents) in the region that are so limited and others that aren't.

‘mountain’. Then, having selected the relevant objects for attention, *subsequent* shifts in where the lines are drawn change the boundaries of those objects.

Contrast this with the sort of Fregean, “shifting-reference” selectionism sketched in §3. According to the shifting-reference selectionist, ‘Kinabalu’ refers to a modally mountain-like object with entirely mind-independent (non-mind-malleable) boundaries, and when we deliberately or unwittingly re-draw a geographic object’s boundaries, we select a *different* object for attention and a new referent for ‘Kinabalu’. But on the alternative, “fixed-reference” selectionism now under discussion, the self-same object that was originally selected for attention and reference comes to have new boundaries. It is, on this view, quite literally up to us where a geographic object’s boundaries are.

Against the backdrop of a plenitudinous ontology, the disagreement between shifting-reference selectionism and fixed-reference selectionism looks to be merely verbal. Both sides can agree that, both now and at t , there are mountain-like objects in R_K with mind-malleable boundaries, as well as mountain-like objects whose boundaries aren’t mind-malleable. Both sides can agree that there are objects in R_K whose boundaries will be changed when lines are re-drawn, and others whose boundaries will remain unchanged. The disagreement concerns only which sort of object is picked out by a name like ‘Kinabalu’.

In the end, I don’t see any reason for a plenitudinist to prefer the fixed-reference selectionism that Thomasson’s modest creationism seems to require, to the more straightforward shifting-reference selectionism. Perhaps intuitions to the effect that mountains literally shrink and grow as we (deliberately or unwittingly) re-draw their boundaries could serve as a reason to prefer fixed-reference selectionism. However, I for one have no such intuition. To my mind, the only attraction of a view on which ‘Kinabalu’ picks out something with mind-malleable boundaries is that it has the resources to solve the puzzle without having to reject (iii). But, since plenitudinists already deny (iii), I see no reason for them to prefer the modest-creationist-friendly, fixed-reference selectionism.

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12

Creationism, Easy Ontology, and Indeterminacy

Dana Goswick

Introduction

Amie Thomasson is well known both for defending Creationism about fictional characters (1999, 2003, 2009, 2010, 2015a, and 2016) and for endorsing easy ontology (2015b). My aim in this chapter is to argue that there's a tension between these two views. Creationism commits one to the existence of fictional characters (as abstract objects). Easy ontology commits one to the existence of abundant properties. I will argue that anyone who endorses both the existence of fictional characters and property abundance is committed to an indeterminacy which violates classical logic. Since Creationists, including Thomasson, take Creationism to respect classical logic this is a surprising discovery (Thomasson, 1999; van Inwagen, 1977). If correct, my argument shows Thomasson must either (i) give up the property abundance which follows naturally from easy ontology, (ii) give up Creationism, or (iii) restrict classical logic.

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In section I, I'll say a bit more about the main tenets of Creationism. In section II, I'll argue that easy ontology commits one to property abundance, that property abundance commits one to *within the story* properties, and that *within the story* properties are immune to the Creationists' typical way of avoiding classical logic violating indeterminacy. In section III, I'll consider how Creationists might respond to this new threat from indeterminacy. I'll conclude by arguing that, not only is embracing indeterminacy most faithful to the tenets of Creationism, but so doing also leads to a more parsimonious and better motivated Creationism. Thomasson should opt to restrict classical logic rather than opting to give up easy ontology or Creationism.

Creationism about Fictional Characters

Creationists argue that fictional characters—such as Sherlock Holmes, Jane Eyre, and Tom Sawyer—are abstract objects which owe their existence to acts of creation by humans (Kroon & Voltolini 11).¹

Creationism about Fictional Characters: Fictional characters are abstract objects which are created by human beings (e.g., by authors, by literary critics).

Fictional characters instantiate a variety of properties including e.g., *being the lead character in Tom's favorite book* and *being the most famous fictional detective*. Creationists argue that, in addition to the properties an object instantiates, there are properties an object has ascribed to it (but does not instantiate). For instance, since Holmes is an abstract object rather than a concrete being he doesn't instantiate *being a man, living at 221b Baker St.*, or *being a detective*. But he does have all these properties ascribed to him in the Sherlock Holmes' stories. In general, the Creationist accounts for the properties Holmes are described as having in the story via property ascription. For example, the Creationist accounts for the fact

¹ See Schiffer (1996), Searle (1979), Thomasson (1999, 2010, and 2016), and van Inwagen (1977, 1983, and 2003).

that in the stories Watson is Holmes' friend and Moriarty is not by utilizing an ascription operator: $A(Wh)$ is true, whilst $A(Mh)$ is false. That is, *being a friend of Watson's* is ascribed to Holmes and *being a friend of Moriarty's* is not ascribed to Holmes.

According to Creationism there are two sources of property ascription: the author and the general rules of fiction (Thomasson, 1999; van Inwagen, 1977). The author ascribes particular properties to his characters, e.g., *being a man, living at 221b Baker St., being a detective*. The general rules of fiction allow us to infer that, in addition to the properties explicitly ascribed to a character, the character also counts as having ascribed to him whatever properties follow from those which are explicitly ascribed. In certain types of fiction (e.g., magical realism, fantasy) the general rules of fiction will license very few non-explicit ascriptions, as the work of fiction is specifically written to violate expected connections generally nothing will follow from a character's having property F except what the author explicitly says follows. In realistic works of fiction, such as the Sherlock Holmes stories, the general rules of fiction will generate a wide range of not explicitly ascribed properties. For example, when Doyle ascribes *being a man* to Holmes, the general rules of fiction license us to ascribe *being human* to Holmes (since being a man is one way of being a human), when Doyle ascribes *being a detective* to Holmes, the general rules of fiction license us to ascribe *having a job* to Holmes (since *being a detective* is a determinate of the determinable *having a job*), and when Doyle ascribes *living in London* to Holmes, the general rules of fiction license us to ascribe *living in England* to Holmes (since London is in England).

In addition to playing a key role in our understanding of works of fiction, property ascription also plays a central role in Creationists' avoidance of classical logic violating indeterminacy. Prima facie, one might worry that all the inconsistencies (e.g., Watson shot only once but in two different places) and gaps (e.g., where exactly was Watson standing when he was shot) in works of fiction would lead to violations of the laws of non-contradiction and excluded middle. Creationists are generally keen to show that being committed to the existence of fictional characters doesn't require one to abandon classical logic (Thomasson, 1999; van Inwagen, 1977). They argue that, for any property and any fictional

character, the fictional character either instantiates the property or fails to instantiate the property (Thomasson, 1999, 107-108, van Inwagen, 1977, 307). In other words, they argue that fictional characters respect the tenets of classical logic, including the law of the excluded middle and the law of non-contradiction. The situation with properties which are merely ascribed is, however, quite different. Unlike property instantiation (which has to do with how things are in the real world, outside the fiction), property ascription is inside the fiction and is solely at the discretion of the author. Authors may flaunt the rules of classical logic, as certain magical realists do intentionally. Even authors attempting to keep their stories as realistic as possible may inadvertently describe scenarios which are impossible given classical logic. Were Watson a concrete being, he never would have been shot exactly once and have bullet wounds in both the shoulder and the leg. Were Watson a concrete being, there would have been some exact spot he was standing when he was shot. But unlike the real world, Doyle can make mistakes: He can describe Watson as having been shot exactly once and having bullet wounds in both the shoulder and the leg. And he can fail to describe exactly where Watson was standing when he was shot.

Creationists are quick to point out inconsistent and incomplete ascriptions are no threat to classical logic. After all in the real world *The Age* can describe Cate Blanchett as having worn a red dress and *The Sydney Morning Herald* can describe her as having worn a blue dress. We don't take this to show the real world violates classical logic. We know Cate Blanchett instantiates at most one of *having worn a red dress* and *having worn a blue dress*. What is ascribed to her is no threat to classical logic. It merely shows (at least) one of the ascribers got the facts wrong. Likewise, argue Creationists, conflicting or incomplete ascriptions in works of fiction are no threat to classical logic. Watson, being a fictional character, does not instantiate *being shot*. He can have *being shot* ascribed to him. He can even have *being shot* ascribed to him in ways that are inconsistent or incomplete. So long as the inconsistencies and incompleteness are embedded under an operator such foibles of fiction are easily accounted for—they no more threaten classical logic than do *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald's* conflicting descriptions of Ms. Blanchett's dress.

We can more fully see how the Creationist utilizes the distinction between property instantiation and property ascription to avoid indeterminacy by considering the question of Holmes' blood type. Every concrete human has a particular blood type: A, B, AB, or O. According to Creationism, since Doyle is writing a realistic fiction and Holmes is portrayed as human in the stories, the rules of fiction license us to conclude that Holmes is relevantly like humans outside the fiction with regard to blood type. Just as the general rules of fiction license us to move from (the explicitly ascribed) "Holmes lives in London" to (the implicitly generated via the rules of fiction) "Holmes lives in England" to "Holmes lives in the Western Hemisphere" to "Holmes lives on Earth", they allow us to move from (the explicitly ascribed) "Holmes is a man" to (the implicitly generated via the rules of fiction) "Holmes is a human" to "Holmes has blood" to "Holmes has some specific type of blood". But Doyle never ascribes any particular blood type to Holmes. Some worry that situations like this will lead to classical logic violating indeterminacy.

The Creationist responds by noting that Holmes is an abstract object and thus does not instantiate *having blood* nor does he instantiate any determinates of *having blood*, e.g., he doesn't instantiate *having blood type A*, he doesn't instantiate *having blood type B*, etc. There is no threat of indeterminacy. For each property involving blood, the answer is simply "no, Holmes does not instantiate that property." Holmes does, however, have *having blood* ascribed to him by the general rules of fiction. The general rules of fiction aren't specific enough to ascribe a particular blood type to Holmes; this is Doyle's job. Doyle didn't comment on Holmes blood type. So, for example, for blood type B, we have $\neg A(Bh)$ and $\neg A(\neg Bh)$; it's not the case that Doyle ascribed having blood type B to Holmes and it's not the case that Doyle ascribed not having having blood type B to Holmes. Mutatis mutandis for the other blood types. This, of course, doesn't violate the laws of classical logic, as the contradiction $(Bh \text{ and } \neg Bh)$ is merely apparent since Bh and $\neg Bh$ are both embedded under an operator and embedded indeterminacy is no threat. Once you embed under an ascription operator anything goes—as authors are free to make up inconsistent and incomplete stories.

So far, so good. But the story doesn't end there. In the next section I'll argue that the embedding-under-an-operator strategy doesn't work for all properties. There are properties which Holmes instantiates rather than merely having ascribed to him. Contra the Creationists some of these instantiated properties lead to classical logic violating indeterminacy.

A New Threat from Indeterminacy

Some accounts of properties (e.g., Armstrong's) are sparse; other accounts of properties (e.g., Plato's) are abundant (Armstrong, 1978; Jubien, 1997). Many philosophers take Lewis' (1999) to have shown us how to have the best of both worlds by distinguishing the natural from the non-natural properties. The natural properties correspond roughly to Armstrong's sparse properties and account for genuine similarity. The non-natural properties are all the other properties, and do work such as serving as referents for linguistic predicates and as a basis for truthmaker theory. As a result of Lewis' arguments, as well as the rise of the importance of the notion of fundamentality in philosophy (which does much of the work sparse properties were originally intended to do), few philosophers today feel the need to endorse a sparse theory of properties. Philosophers who endorse properties at all are generally happy to recognize an abundance of properties. Few who endorse properties would deny that there are properties such as *being red*, *being a tree*, or *being a TV star* even though these properties are not perfectly natural and would not be included in a sparse theory of properties. Thomasson, who endorses an easy ontology approach to ontology in general—including to properties, is perfectly happy to accept an abundance of properties (2015b). She thinks we can go from predicates to properties with ease. So, for example, given the truth of "John is tired", we can conclude there's a property *being tired* and from the truth of "Melbourne is a city", we can conclude there's a property *being a city* (2015b).

If one accepts an abundance of properties the question of exactly how abundant arises. For someone who, like Thomasson, endorses easy

ontology the answer will be “very abundant, indeed”. In *Ontology Made Easy* Thomasson argues that existence questions are easy. With regard to properties she expands upon and generalizes Schiffer’s pleonastic approach: “[We] can begin with undisputed truths, and then engage in pleonastic ‘something from nothing’ inferences [to arrive at the existence of properties]” (2015b, 134). Thomasson is quick to note that, unlike Schiffer, she doesn’t think the properties “we become committed to via trivial inferences are ... ‘ontologically shallow’, or that their existence is somehow to be understood in a deflationary manner” (2015b, 146). Rather she’s a realist about the existence of the entities revealed to us by considering the consequences of our everyday speech: “[We] should simply say that such entities exist—full stop—and adopt a simple realist view of them” (2015b, 146).

The same easy ontology reasoning which allows us to jump from “John is tired” to there’s a property *being tired* will allow us to jump from “John is tired or drugged” to there’s a property *being tired or drugged*. Likewise, if we can conclude from “Michael J. Fox is a TV star” that there’s a property *being a TV star*, we ought to be able to conclude from “Michael J. Fox was a TV star in the 1980s” that there’s a property *being a TV star in the 1980s*. And, if we can conclude from “Michael J. Fox is a TV star” that there’s a property *being a TV star*, we ought to be able to conclude from “Claudia Karvan is a TV star in Australia but not in America” that there’s a property *being a TV star in Australia but not in America*. In general, if, like Thomasson, we’re easy ontologists, it follows that we’ll be very abundant about what properties there are.

If we’re very abundant about what properties there are, then there are many, many properties involving e.g., having blood. Here are some of them: *having blood*, *having red or green blood*, *having blood on a Tuesday*, *being thought by Tom to have blood*, *being described as having blood type B*, *having blood within the story*, *having blood type B within the story*. Some of these properties are properties that only concrete beings can have: *having blood*, *having red or green blood*, *having blood on a Tuesday*. Other of these properties can be instantiated by both fictional characters and concrete beings: *being thought by Tom to have blood*, *being described as having blood*

type B. Finally, some of these properties can only be had by fictional characters: *having blood within the story*, *having blood type B within the story*.²

The old critic of Creationism wondered how Creationists could avoid indeterminacy regarding e.g., Holmes' blood type. As I've already discussed, Creationists have a ready answer to this criticism. Holmes does not instantiate any blood type, so for any blood type x , Creationists avoid indeterminacy by noting that it's not the case that Holmes instantiates *having blood type x* . Nor is any blood type ascribed to Holmes. This lack of ascription allows Creationists to account for the felt indeterminacy of stories without being committed to an indeterminacy which violates classical logic (Thomasson, 1999; van Inwagen, 1977). There are lots of things Doyle didn't comment on, e.g., Holmes' blood type, where Watson was standing when he was shot, how many hairs Holmes has on his head. All this lack of commenting is embedded under an ascription operator—e.g., it's not the case that Doyle ascribed blood type x to Holmes: $\neg A(Hx)$, and it's not the case that Doyle ascribed lacking blood type x to Holmes: $\neg A(\neg Hx)$. So, Doyle's lack of commenting doesn't spill over into the real world in a way that violates classical logic; it's all contained under an ascription operator. The Creationist has the best of both worlds. She's able to endorse the existence of fictional characters and have them serve as referents for various property ascriptions. She's able to encode the lack of specificity that is a hallmark of works of fiction by embedding apparent truth-value gaps under an ascription operator, thereby ensuring no classical logic violating indeterminacy occurs.

The new critic of Creationism thinks the old critic didn't push the Creationist hard enough. All the properties the old critic brought up were

²Or by real people masquerading as fictional characters. Suppose my daughter writes a fictional story about me. The story is fiction, but the main character in it is me. Then we might want to say, e.g., Dana instantiates *having blood type B* and Dana instantiates *having blood type A within the story*. In fact, I have blood type B. But, of course, one can write anything one wants about me in a fictional story, including e.g., that my blood type is different than it really is. Some philosophers will argue that the real person, Dana, is the subject of the fiction. In this case, real people can have *within the story* properties. Other philosophers will argue that there are two objects—Dana the concrete person and Dana the abstract fictional character. In this case, it's only the fictional character who has the *within the story* properties. If one takes the former route (i.e., claims concrete beings can have *within the story* properties), then the problem I'll raise below for those that endorse both Creationism and property abundance would arise even for those who reject Creationism. Thanks to Kristie Miller and Dan Giberman for pressing me on this point.

properties such as *having blood*, *being a detective*, *living at 221b Baker St.* which can only be had by concrete beings. Of course these properties don't give rise to indeterminacy. For each of these properties, it's simply the case that Holmes lacks them. After all, by their very nature, they're properties which cannot be instantiated by (abstract) fictional characters. So it's no surprise that there's no indeterminacy with regard to such properties. The old critic should have pushed harder. He should have asked about properties like *being thought by Tom to have blood*, *being described as having blood type B*, *having blood within the story*. Such properties provide a real question for Creationists, as—unlike properties which can only be had by concrete beings—such properties are at least candidates for being instantiated by fictional characters.

I'll focus on a particular sort of property which I'll call "within the story properties". *Within the story* properties build into the property itself that the property concerns only what happens within the story. We're already familiar with properties which build into themselves certain scope limitations. Adverbialists, for instance, distinguish between temporal properties (e.g., *being red at t*) which build time into the property and simple properties (e.g. *being red*) which don't. I'm relying on a similar sort of scope distinction—only the one I'm interested in concerns only what happens within the story rather than only what happens at a certain time. Although Holmes lacks the property *being Watson's friend* (because he's an abstract object and abstract objects can't be friends); he instantiates the property *being Watson's friend within the story* (because fictional characters can be friends within the story and, in fact, Holmes is Watson's friend within the story).

There's an interesting parallel between properties embedded under an ascription operator and *within the story* properties. The information a property embedded under an ascription operator conveys can equally well be conveyed by an (operator-free) *within the story* property. Here, for example, is how Creationists use the ascription operator to capture the facts of the Holmes stories:

A(Dh): *being a detective* is ascribed to Holmes (by Doyle)

A(Lh): *having blood* is ascribed to Holmes (by the general rules of fiction)

A(¬Mh): not *being a friend of Moriarty's* is ascribed to Holmes (by Doyle)

$A(\sim Fh)$: not *being female* is ascribed to Holmes (by the general rules of fiction)

$\sim A(Bh)$: it's not the case that *having blood type B* is ascribed to Holmes

$\sim A(\sim Bh)$: it's not the case that *not having blood type B* is ascribed to Holmes

And so on and so forth. Properties which are ascribed to Holmes by Doyle or by the general rules of fiction tell us what is the case in the story, e.g., $A(Dh)$ and $A(Lh)$. Properties which Doyle or the general rules of fiction say Holmes lacks tells us what is not the case in the story, e.g., $A(\sim Mh)$, $A(\sim Fh)$. Then there will be a whole range of properties such that Doyle and the general rules of fiction are silent on whether Holmes has or lacks the property, e.g., $\sim A(Bh)$, $\sim A(\sim Bh)$. The ascription operator allows the Creationists to capture what happens within the story, what fails to happen within the story, and what is simply not commented on within the story.

One who, like Thomasson, endorses property abundance can't help but be committed to the existence of *within the story* properties such as

being a detective within the story

having blood within the story

being a friend of Moriarty's within the story

being female within the story

having blood type B within the story

Doyle and/or the general rules of fiction tell us that Holmes instantiates *being a detective within the story* and *having blood within the story*. Doyle and/or the general rules of fiction tell us that Holmes fails to instantiate *being a friend of Moriarty's within the story* and *being female within the story*. Doyle and the general rules of fiction are silent with regard to whether Holmes instantiates *having blood type B within the story*. In general, when the Creationist ascribes a property to a fictional character, the fictional character will instantiate the corresponding *within the story* property; when the Creationist ascribes not having a property to a fictional character, the fictional character will fail to instantiate the corresponding *within the story* property; and when the Creationist doesn't ascribe either having the property or lacking the property to a fictional

character, it will be indeterminate whether the fictional character instantiates the corresponding *within the story* property.

Creationists never discuss *within the story* properties. Why would they? Their goal is to account for truth in fiction, and ascription does that—there is no need for *within the story* properties. What generates a commitment to *within the story* properties isn't Creationism; it's property abundance. A Creationist who was sparse about properties would deny the existence of *within the story* properties. Thomasson, however, is not a sparse property theorist. She is committed both to Creationism about fictional characters and to property abundance. These dual commitments give rise to a classical logic violating indeterminacy. To see this, let's take a closer look at *within the story* properties. The first thing to note is that *within the story* properties aren't themselves within the story—they're in the real world, as are their instantiations.³ Given Creationism, Sherlock Holmes is an abstract object in the real world. And it's in this real world (not in the fiction) where he instantiates properties such as e.g., *being Tom's favorite literary character*, *being created by Doyle*, and *being a detective within the story*. The new critic of Creationism argues as follows: There are just some objects (e.g., Dana, the Statue of Liberty, Uluru, Sherlock Holmes, Jane Eyre) and some properties (e.g., *being human*, *being a statue*, *being a monolith*, *being a fictional character*, *having blood*, *being described as having blood*, *having blood within the story*). Given classical logic, for every object and every property, the object either instantiates the property or fails to instantiate the property (Geach, 1956; Restall, 2001; Tye, 1989). Dana, for example, instantiates *being human* and *being described as having blood*, and fails to instantiate *being a statue* and *being a monolith*. Holmes instantiates *being a fictional character* and *having blood within the story*. And fails to instantiate *being a monolith* and *having blood*.

³ Some critics of realism about fictional characters (e.g., Everett, 2005) have tried to argue that indeterminacy in a story (e.g., regarding whether $a=b$ or $a=c$, or whether a even exists at all) spills over to real world indeterminacy. This line of argument has effectively been refuted by Schnieder and von Solodkoff (2009) and is not the line of argument the new critic of Creationism is proposing. The new critic's worry isn't about indeterminacy 'spilling over' from the story into the real world. The indeterminacy comes from the existence of fictional characters and the existence of *within the story* properties—both of which exist in the real world, as does the indeterminacy which results from them.

Classical logic violating indeterminacy arises when (i) the object being considered is a fictional character, and (ii) the property being considered is a *within the story* property which is such that neither its instantiation nor its lack of instantiation follows from the story. Given Creationism, whether a property is or is not instantiated depends on what the author writes and what the general rules of fiction entail. Indeterminacy will arise when the author and the general rules of fiction don't comment on whether the fictional character has or lacks the property. This is just another way of saying that it's the dual commitments to Creationism and property abundance that give rise to classical logic violating indeterminacy. If one were not a Creationist, one could deny that there are any fictional characters. Then nothing would satisfy clause (i). If one were not an abundantist about properties, then one could deny that there are any *within the story* properties. Then nothing would satisfy clause (ii).

Let's look more closely at a particular object (Holmes) and a particular property (*having blood type B within the story*) and see how indeterminacy arises. A basic tenet of classical logic—the law of the excluded middle—entails that, for every object and every property, the object either instantiates the property or does not instantiate the property (Geach, 1956; Restall, 2001; Tye, 1989). First, let's consider whether Holmes instantiates *having blood type B within the story*. There are no grounds for the Creationist to say he does. Creationists are committed to the claim that what happens within the story is determined by the author and the general rules of fiction. Authors give us specific facts about fictional characters, e.g., their profession, friendships, where they live, etc. The general rules of fiction fill-in the entailments that follow, e.g., for a realistic fiction: that if Holmes lives in London, then he lives in England, that if Holmes is human, then he has blood, etc. Doyle never comments on Holmes' blood type. There's no way to derive Holmes' blood type from the general rules of fiction. Holmes is a character in a realistic fiction; the general rules of fiction give us that Holmes within the story is relevantly like humans outside the story and, thus, that he has some blood type or other within the story. But the general rules of fiction provide no way to narrow down to a specific blood type. Only Doyle can do this. And he did not. So, Creationism doesn't license us to say that Holmes instantiates *having blood type B within the story*.

But nor can the Creationist say that Holmes does not instantiate *having blood type B within the story*, as saying this goes against what the Creationist says about (i) the general rules of fiction, and (ii) the corresponding property ascription. Consider (i) first. Suppose the Creationist says: It's not the case that Holmes instantiates *having blood type B within the story*. Similar reasoning will lead her to deny that, for each blood type x , Holmes has that blood type within the story. Now, the Creationist is in the awkward position of saying that, although Holmes has blood within the story, he has no blood type within the story. But Creationists are committed to general rules of fiction which, for a realistic fiction like the Holmes stories, say that human characters within the story are relevantly like real life humans, e.g., don't have two heads, have arms, have blood that is relevantly like our blood (all of which is of a certain type). Respecting their own general rules of fiction requires the Creationists not to deny that Holmes has blood of a certain type within the story.

Consider next (ii). Creationists are generally quite keen to capture the 'feel' of a story. Part of the experience of reading a story is that not everything is decided. Creationists don't want to put words in authors' mouths. They want to leave unsettled what the author left unsettled. Thomasson, for example, notes:

Sherlock Holmes is not incomplete by being neither of blood type B nor not of blood type B. ... These claims should be read as 'according to the story, Sherlock Holmes has blood type B' and 'according to the story, it is not the case that Sherlock Holmes has blood type B'. **Both of these are false, because the story does not mention anything about Sherlock Holmes's blood type.** But because these sentences do not describe real properties of Sherlock Holmes, but only how he is said to be according to the story, we need not infer on that basis that Sherlock Holmes is incomplete with respect to the property *having blood type B*" (Thomasson, 1999, 107-108).^{4,5}

⁴In order to keep my examples consistent, I've replaced Thomasson's "Hamlet" with "Sherlock Holmes".

⁵van Inwagen makes a similar claim: What is not true is that, for any property, that property is either ascribed to Sherlock Holmes or not ascribed to him. $A(\text{Sherlock Holmes has blood type B}) \vee A(\neg \text{Sherlock Holmes has blood type B})$. This disjunction is false simply because Doyle was non-committal about Holmes' blood type. It is these facts, I think, that the Meinongian perceives through a glass darkly when he says that a creature of fiction is an incomplete object (van Inwagen, 1977, 308).

Creationists are explicitly committed to $\neg A(\text{Bh})$: it's not the case that *having blood type B* is ascribed to Holmes and to $\neg A(\neg \text{Bh})$: it's not the case that *not having blood type B* is ascribed to Holmes. Given the close connection between $A(\neg \text{Bh})$ and *not having blood type B within the story*, it strains the limits of charity to think that, although Creationists deny $A(\neg \text{Bh})$, they'd endorse *not having blood type B within the story*. This is an ad hoc move which isn't motivated from within Creationism. The only reason to make such a move would be to avoid classical logic violating indeterminacy.

Both Creationists and their critics agree that many things typically remain unsettled within works of fiction. Non-Creationists often take this unsettledness to require that, in order to avoid violating classical logic, we must deny the existence of fictional characters. Creationists, on the other hand, have typically argued that even though fictional characters exist and much remains unsettled within works of fiction, this unsettledness doesn't lead to classical logic violating indeterminacy because it is all embedded under an ascription operator. My aim in this section has been to argue that, if you're a Creationist who endorses property abundance (as Thomasson is), then it simply isn't true that no classical logic violating indeterminacy arises. Property abundance commits one to *within the story* properties and *within the story* properties lead to an indeterminacy which is not embedded under an ascription operator and which, thus, violates classical logic.⁶ I turn, in the next section, to examining how the Creationist might respond to this new threat of indeterminacy.

Responding to the New Threat

Creationists profess to be keen to avoid indeterminacy. Both Thomasson and van Inwagen are quick to point out that it's not indeterminate whether Holmes instantiates *having blood type B* (Thomasson, 1999; van

⁶What about supervenience? Couldn't we say, for example, that although it's not the case that Bh (Holmes instantiates *having blood type B within the story*) and it's not the case that $\neg \text{Bh}$ (Holmes fails to instantiate *having blood type B within the story*), it's still the case that $(\text{Bh} \vee \neg \text{Bh})$. There are good reasons why we cannot say this. Spelling them out is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. See Goswick (2021) and Tye (1989) for arguments as to why supervenience won't work here.

Inwagen, 1977). He's an abstract object, so he does not instantiate this property. Such a move will not work with regard to *having blood type B within the story* which is a property some fictional characters (e.g., Sailor Moon) have and, unlike *having blood type B*, isn't obviously not had by Holmes. Creationists never discuss *within the story* properties. However, given their general commitment to classical logic, it's reasonable to assume that Creationists would be just as keen to avoid indeterminacy with regard to *within the story* properties as they are with regard to other properties.⁷ What is much less clear is why—other than being swayed by the general worship of classical logic which was particularly prominent when Creationism was developed in the 1970s-1990s—the Creationist should be so committed.

The Creationist is happy with:

$\neg A(\text{Bh})$: it's not the case that *having blood type B* is ascribed to Holmes

$\neg A(\neg \text{Bh})$: it's not the case that *not having blood type B* is ascribed to Holmes

In fact, the Creationist openly embraces $\neg A(\text{Bh})$ and $\neg A(\neg \text{Bh})$ because they take this to represent an unsettledness in the Holmes stories which they're keen to capture. But what's the real difference between accepting $\neg A(\text{Bh})$ and $\neg A(\neg \text{Bh})$ versus accepting

It's indeterminate whether Holmes instantiates *having blood type B within the story*. It's not the case that he does, and it's not the case that he does not.

They seem to be two different ways of saying basically the same thing—once via an operator and once via property indeterminacy. Of course, the operator method of accounting for the relevant information respects classical logic, and the indeterminacy method violates it. But so what. Philosophy has long moved past the linguistic turn and the fetishism of symbols. If stories were possible worlds, would the world described by “ $\neg A(\text{Bh})$ and $\neg A(\neg \text{Bh})$ ” be importantly different in content from the world described by “it's indeterminate whether Holmes instantiates *having blood type B within the story*”? Perhaps the upshot of classical logic

⁷“Creatures of fiction ... obey the laws of [classical] logic, just as everything else does” (van Inwagen, 1977, 307).

should be not that all properties and all objects respect the law of the excluded middle, but rather that all objects and all natural properties do, or all concrete objects and all properties do, or ... Limiting the scope of classical logic does not prevent us from embracing it for the bits of reality it is able to represent.⁸

The Creationist who is absolutely wedded to classical logic had better argue that *within the story* properties do not exist. This is her only option for both remaining true to the tenets of Creationism and respecting classical logic. Given their overall views, this might be the right move for some Creationists (e.g., van Inwagen).⁹ It is not the right move for Thomasson. Other bits of her overall philosophical view (i.e., easy ontology) to which she is just as committed as she is to Creationism require her to be an abundantist about properties. And thus start her on the path to classical logic violating indeterminacy. It is not unreasonable to argue that, for the Creationist, this is actually a good thing. The most straightforward response when authors fail to comment on a *within the story* property is simply to take it to be indeterminate whether the fictional object has the property. So doing is faithful to the tenets of Creationism and arguably brings out the indeterminacy in the story more fully than does taking the ascription operator route. Holmes is a fictional character. He owes his existence and properties to Doyle. Doyle didn't fully specify Holmes. Thus, for some properties, it's indeterminate whether Holmes has or lacks those properties. But this indeterminacy is no threat to our

⁸ See Goswick (2021) for arguments that violations of classical logic by odd objects (or odd properties) is no big deal.

⁹ In order to avoid ad hocness, one would need a principled reason for rejecting *within the story* properties, i.e., one's account of fiction would need to be embedded in a more general account of properties. Historically, Creationists have not tied their views on fiction to a sparse account of properties and it would be odd if one's account of fiction dictated one's ontology of properties. Karen Bennett (Eastern APA 2020, Q&A) suggests that we ought to be happy to deny *within the story* properties, as letting them in would let in a whole plethora of 'according to' properties, e.g., *being beautiful according to Kate*, *being legitimate according to Trump*, *being unfair according to Tom*. Do we really want to say that, in addition to the simple properties *being beautiful*, *being legitimate*, and *being unfair*, there are the restricted properties *being beautiful according to ...* (one property for each person there is), *being legitimate according to ...* (one property for each person there is), and *being unfair according to ...* (one property for each person there is)? Allowing such properties will give us billions and billions more properties than there would be if there were only simple properties. There is no reason for an easy ontologist, such as Thomasson, to reject such an abundance of properties. But other Creationists may want to.

daily lives and our (mostly) determinate world. Holmes, after all, is merely a fictional character.

One can even argue that embracing, rather than trying to avoid, indeterminacy strengthens Creationism. Ideological parsimony is generally considered a virtue—why do with two apparatuses what you can do with one? Creationists are already committed to fictional characters instantiating properties. They think, e.g., that Holmes instantiates *being created by Doyle* and *being studied in Kate's literature class*. A Creationism which can account for truth in fiction only using property instantiation is more ideologically parsimonious than is a Creationism that requires both property instantiation and property ascription. If you're already committed to *within the story* properties (due e.g., to being an abundantist about properties), you don't need property ascription. The work Creationists typically do with $A(Bh)$, $A(\sim Bh)$, $\sim A(Bh)$, and $\sim A(\sim Bh)$, you can do with property instantiation. $A(Bh)$ is captured by Holmes' instantiating *having blood within the story*. $A(\sim Bh)$ is captured by Holmes' instantiating *not having blood within the story*. $\sim A(Bh)$ and $\sim A(\sim Bh)$ are captured by it's being indeterminate whether Holmes instantiates *having blood within the story*.

In addition to being more ideologically parsimonious, this also makes better sense of the Creationists' insistence that fictional characters exist. This insistence can seem somewhat frivolous in light of how little work fictional characters do for the Creationist. One could as easily account for truth in fiction by arguing that the author ascribes twice over: first he ascribes existence to (but does not assert the existence of) a fictional character, then he ascribes properties to this character (but does not claim the character instantiates the properties). Understanding fiction in terms of property instantiation rather than property ascription reinforces the importance of the existence of the fictional character. It's the bearer of properties, and it's its bearing these properties that accounts for what is true in the fiction, what is not true, and what is indeterminate. Understanding fiction in terms of property instantiation allows the Creationist to give a more streamlined account of fiction which doesn't rely on any peculiar linguistic operators and reinforces the importance of the existence of fictional characters to which the Creationist is committed.

Only a (misplaced) love of classical logic has kept the Creationist from following where her view most naturally leads. Ideally one will walk away from this chapter believing that embracing classical-logic-violating indeterminacy strengthens, rather than weakens, Creationism. At the very least, I hope to have shown that if one is both a Creationist and an abundantist about properties, classical logic violating indeterminacy is an unavoidable consequence of one's views.

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