QUIZZICAL ONTOLOGY AND EASY ONTOLOGY

What’s wrong with disagreements in ontology? While many would deny that anything is wrong, there are growing suspicions that something is wrong with protracted debates about the existence of numbers, properties, propositions, mereological sums, or even ordinary objects. One route is to think of the problem as merely an epistemic one—that in some cases we simply lack justification for adopting one view over another.[[1]](#footnote-2) A more severe line of skepticism has come from the idea suggested by Hilary Putnam[[2]](#footnote-3) and developed by Eli Hirsch[[3]](#footnote-4), that the disputants in many ontological debates can be seen as using the quantifier with different meanings, in a way that leaves them talking past each other. This is a line of attack serious ontologists have been quick to fight, and indeed defenses of serious ontology have by and large focused on defeating the threat of quantifier variance.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Here I want to examine two different ways of being suspicious about ontological debates: the easy approach to ontology I have defended elsewhere, and Stephen Yablo’s quizzicalist approach. The easy approach to ontology, as I argue elsewhere,[[5]](#footnote-6) gives us a way of being skeptical about ontological debates that does not rely on quantifier variance, and does not treat the problem as a merely epistemic one. On the contrary, I think that not only can we know the answers to ontological questions, but that they are too easily resolved to be the subjects for extended and deep disputes. Following in the tradition of neo-Fregeanism in the philosophy of mathematics[[6]](#footnote-7) and of Stephen Schiffer’s work on propositions[[7]](#footnote-8) (among other things), I hold that a great many ontological questions can be answered by making trivial inferences from uncontroversial premises. For example, we can make a trivial inference from ‘There are two cups on the table’ to ‘The number of cups on the table is two’, and so to ‘There is a number’; or from ‘The shirt is red’ to ‘The shirt has the property of redness’, and so to ‘There is a property’, thereby settling the questions of the existence of numbers and properties.[[8]](#footnote-9) I also have argued that easy arguments can settle debates about the existence of concrete, ordinary objects. For we can begin from a sentence even the eliminativist accepts, say, ‘There are particles arranged tablewise’, and make a trivial inference to ‘There is a tablewise arrangement of particles’, and from there introduce the noun ‘table’ accordingly, to conclude ‘There is a table’. Moreover, even if we do not have an uncontroversial premise to make use of in a trivial argument, I hold that all existence questions can be resolved straightforwardly by empirical and/or conceptual means, with no room remaining for anything that is, in Ted Sider’s phrase, ‘epistemically metaphysical’ in the sense of being answerable neither by direct empirical means nor by conceptual analysis.[[9]](#footnote-10)

I am sure you are thinking of objections to this view; I have tried to answer many of these elsewhere,[[10]](#footnote-11) but the primary aim of this paper is not to defend the view. Instead, I aim to see how it compares to an interesting and subtle alternative: Stephen Yablo’s ‘quizzicalist’ view[[11]](#footnote-12) that many ontological questions are ‘moot’ in the sense that there is simply no fact of the matter whether the relevant entities exist.[[12]](#footnote-13) In many ways, our views are close together. Like me, Yablo does not treat the problem as a merely epistemic one. Nor does he think of it as arising from variation in the meaning of the quantifier—and so both of our views remain standing even if one accepts the frequent defenses of the univocality of the quantifier.

His central case in point is numbers, and the basic idea is intriguing: A sentence like ‘The number of cups on the table is two’, as he reads it, *presupposes* the existence of numbers. But there is a sense in which, in its standard use, it is not used to tell us *about* numbers, but rather about the world: it tells us how many cups we have (useful information if we wish to match them with saucers). In this way, as Yablo has pointed out in other work, our number terms may serve as ‘representational aids’.[[13]](#footnote-14) And the ‘assertive content’ of our number statement—that is, its analytic implications that remain when we subtract away the presupposition of the existence of numbers[[14]](#footnote-15)—may still be true, regardless of whether the assumption that numbers exist is true or false. In this sense, the ontological disagreement about numbers is irrelevant to the information the sentence is getting across—to the ways we use it to communicate about the world. It is in this sense that Yablo suggests that presuppositions of the existence of abstracta in general are ‘a fail-safe mechanism’;[[15]](#footnote-16) the failure of the presupposition doesn’t matter to the truth-value of the assertive content. So, similarly, one might say, ‘The property of redness is instantiated by my shirt’ presupposes the existence of properties, but its assertive content (that my shirt is red) remains true independently of whether the ontological presupposition of the existence of properties holds up.

How does this lead Yablo to conclude that ontological debates about the existence of abstracta are ‘moot’? Initially, he argued that whether a term (or at least an abstract term) refers is a function of its ‘sentence-level semantic effects’, so that if the presupposition that number terms refer is ‘fail-safe’, then the sentence-level semantic effects are the same regardless of whether or not the term ‘the number of cups’ refers, leaving nothing to settle whether number terms refer (2009, 520).[[16]](#footnote-17) On his most recent formulation, the focus on individual terms has dropped out of the picture. Now he holds that a question of the form “Whether P” is moot, just in case P is ordinarily presupposed (not asserted) and P is highly extricable from the sentences S that presuppose it.[[17]](#footnote-18) What does it mean to say that P is ‘highly extricable’? Roughly, that statements presupposing P are “cleanly factorizable into P and ‘something else’”: the assertive content of the sentence S taking away the presupposition P. So, on Yablo’s view a sentence like “The number of cups on the table is two” is cleanly factorizable into a presupposition that numbers exist, and assertive content that there are two cups.[[18]](#footnote-19) But, Yablo holds, if the presupposition that numbers exist is extricable in this way from the assertive content our number sentences, then there is nothing to settle whether numbers exist[[19]](#footnote-20)—the question is moot.

So while Yablo and I agree in rejecting ontological debates as pointless, there are important differences between us regarding in what sense we each come to think that the relevant ontological debates have gone awry. Yablo, as we have seen, thinks that (many) ontological debates go wrong because there is simply nothing to settle the question, say, whether numbers exist or not. By contrast, I (and other friends of easy ontology) think not that these questions are unsettled, but that they are very *easily* settled, by trivial inferences from uncontroversial premises. In fact, I think that ontological debates go wrong not because there is *nothing* to settle them, but rather because they are so obviously and easily settled that there is no point debating them. Given that there are two cups on the table, and that that trivially entails that the number of cups is two, that *settles* it: there are numbers.

Seen in a proper Carnapian context, though, our views are not so far apart as that makes it seem. When the easy ontologist says existence questions about numbers, properties, or ordinary objects are easily answered, it is the *internal question* she speaks of. And these, too, Yablo thinks (for a different reason) could be answered easily. If we managed to ask, ‘Presupposing the existence of numbers, are there numbers?’, we would clearly get a positive answer to a very stupid question. Moreover, if we take it as an external existence question, I agree with Yablo that it cannot be answered.

But the real point of difference between us arises regarding *why* we each think the external question cannot be answered. As we have seen, Yablo thinks that the external question concerns the presupposition that numbers exist, and cannot be answered because that presupposition is highly extricable from the sentences that presuppose it. So, for Yablo the external question of whether numbers exist is a well-formed and legitimate question; it’s just that there is nothing to determine the answer.

The easy ontologist has a different view of what’s wrong with the external question: on her view, the external question is not a well formed question that there is simply nothing to settle the answer to. Instead, if we take there to be a question not answerable trivially, it cannot be a well-formed, fully meaningful question at all. Why not? I hold that there are constitutive rules governing the use of our terms—indeed, that the reason the trivial inferences are so trivial is that they are licensed by the rules of use for the terms in question. On the easy ontologist’s reconstruction of Carnap, it is these rules of use that help constitute a linguistic framework, giving the terms their meaning. As long as the terms in question are used with their standard rules in place, the existence question (the *internal* question—the one asked *using* the very term in question) is easy to answer, in the affirmative[[20]](#footnote-21) —for the rules of use entitle speakers to draw the existential conclusion.[[21]](#footnote-22) The only way to ask a remaining, ‘hard’, external question, that speakers were not so entitled to answer easily, would have to involve asking ‘Are there numbers?’ in a way that severs the term from its constitutive rules of use, those rules that give it meaning—leaving the question meaningless (or assigning new rules that change the question). For if it did use the term with its standard rules, the question would be trivially answerable.

With some basic differences between our views laid out, we can now address the question: What’s at stake in which form of deflationism we adopt? Are there differences in the breadth of the debates each view deflates? What might the relative costs, and liabilities, be of adopting Yablo’s view or mine? I’ll address these in turn. Those with skeptical sympathies may find both views attractive. Seeing what really divides them may lead to a deeper understanding of the landscape of options for the skeptically inclined, and may give the ontologically inclined a clearer view of the strengths and vulnerabilities of different areas in the opponents’ territory.

1. IT’S NOT EASY BEING QUIZZICAL

On my view, the main challenge for the quizzicalist is how to make sense of the idea that the existence of numbers is a presupposition that might fail (even if its failure doesn’t matter to its assertive content). For Yablo, the claim that numbers exist is a presupposition of our normal statements involving nominative terms for numbers. The assertive content of the claim ‘The number of cups is two’ (subtracting the assumption of the existence of numbers) is just that there are two cups; but on Yablo’s view it would take something more for ‘The number of cups is two’ itself to be fully and literally true: it has an additional presupposition.[[22]](#footnote-23) What is that presupposition? On Yablo’s view, it is that numbers exist. But what content can we give to that claim itself—how must we be thinking of number terms if we think of this as a presupposition that we cannot simply infer is true on the basis of knowing that the number of cups is two, or that five is a prime number? What is the ‘extra’ condition it would take? That there *really* be such objects? But I have argued elsewhere[[23]](#footnote-24) that this use of ‘object’ is misguided: if ‘object’ is meant in a sortal sense (of Spelke-object: medium sized trackable unified lump[[24]](#footnote-25), clearly that there is an object in this sense is no presupposition of there being numbers. If ‘object’ is meant in a covering or dummy sortal sense, then we can’t ask whether there is an ‘object’ as a precondition for answering whether there is an S, where S is a sortal: instead, we must address the sortal-specific question, and if the answer is that yes, there is an S, we may infer that there is an object (or perhaps better, that there is *something*)*.* If not, what more could it be thought to take for the presupposition to succeed? Without any idea of what more it would take, it is hard to make sense of the idea that there is an additional presupposition there.

Yablo rejects this line of approach, saying “there is no rule that says that the world has to contain tables, if it can’t tell you why it is holding out”.[[25]](#footnote-26) Perhaps not. But if I can make a good case that the ‘extra’ requirements most commonly adverted to are misguided (a case I have made at length elsewhere[[26]](#footnote-27)), and if my opponents can come up with no alternative suggestion of what it might take for the presupposition to succeed, I think we are left quite justified in doubting that there *is* something more it would take. Yablo likens the situation to one in which a child who says she doesn’t like the pasta doesn’t have to respond to the demand that she say what’s wrong with it.[[27]](#footnote-28) But of course the parents (who ask *just what makes it different* from the pasta she liked last week) may be left with a quite justified suspicion that there is in fact no different taste the child is detecting that makes her not like the pasta. Even if they can’t stop her complaints, they have good reasons to suspect that she is just being awkward.

But we can do more than rest with a suspicion here; we can also give more positive reason for doubting that our number talk involves a presupposition—or at least that it involves a presupposition in anything like the same sense as the clear cases Yablo uses to motivate the view. Yablo motivates his presuppositional view by first examining assertions using terms like ‘the present King of France’ or ‘Vulcan’, where these presuppose that France is ruled by monarchy, and that there is a planet between Mercury and the sun.[[28]](#footnote-29) But there are crucial disanalogies between these cases and the case of numbers: in the former two cases the presupposition fails if we are making some *empirical* error, but not so for the case of numbers. Indeed (unlike the case of Vulcan or kings) it is hard to see what it would be for the presupposition of the existence of numbers to fail: in Schiffer’s terms, number terms seem to have no ‘algorithm for elimination’.[[29]](#footnote-30)

So if we follow Yablo in thinking that our number talk involves presuppositions at all, its presuppositions must be distinctively *ontological*, making them quite different from the *empirical* presuppositions we started with as examples. Another symptom that these types of presuppositions are radically different is precisely that the distinctively ontological presuppositions of the existence of numbers seems ‘fail-safe’ in a way empirical presuppositions typically are not. Yablo acknowledges a number of ways in which the presupposition that there is a king of France differs from the presupposition that there are numbers, for example that the failure of the former (but not the latter) makes a large difference to which sentences containing it are true or false. [[30]](#footnote-31) He chalks these up to differences between terms for *concreta* and those for *abstracta*. I think, however, that they are better attributed to differences between cases in which the presupposition is *empirical* and cases in which it is (allegedly) *ontological.*

For, as Yablo himself acknowledges, although ‘mereological sum’ should be a term for concreta, presuppositions about mereological sums act like numerical presuppositions—not like presuppositions about the king of France. Yablo applies his approach to debates about mereological sums as follows:

Take ‘The mereological sum of my pants and jacket is at the cleaner’s.’ Stripped of the presupposition that my pants and jacket have a mereological sum, this says that my pants and jacket are at the cleaners. The assertive content is the same whether the mereological sum exists or not, and its truth-value is the same, too. If this pattern continues, then the existential presupposition is fail-safe, and there is no fact of the matter as to whether my pants and jacket have a mereological sum.[[31]](#footnote-32)

The presupposition in question here is again clearly ontological: there may also be an empirical presupposition (that I have pants and jacket) that is not fail-safe, but what’s in question (and is fail-safe) is the distinct, general ontological question of whether or not there are mereological sums. So the broad background idea, here, is that our use of terms like ‘number’, ‘property’, or ‘mereological sum’ in assertions presupposes certain *ontological* facts: it presupposes that there are numbers, properties, or sums. But, Yablo wants to say, since these presuppositions could fail without altering what is claimed or whether it is true, the ontological question is moot. That suggests that the relevant difference is not whether the term is supposed to refer to something concrete or abstract, but rather whether the presupposition is empirical or ontological.

Yablo himself doesn’t think, however, that *all* existential presuppositions are fail-safe, or that all ontological questions are moot. He intends the consequences of his view to be constrained: to entail that debates about the existence of abstracta (like numbers) and of some concreta (like mereological sums) are moot, but to leave intact debates about the existence of ordinary concrete objects (like pants). The easy ontological approach, by contrast, is supposed to ensure that all ontological debates are easily resolved by nothing more than conceptual and/or empirical means—so this marks an important *apparent* divide between us. But do, or should, the views really remain divided in their extent of applicability? I’ll give reasons for doubting this, and for holding instead that if one takes on an approach like Yablo’s, it should be applied across the board for all strictly ontological questions.

It’s easy to see why Yablo might want to resist the idea that his method also renders existence questions about ordinary objects moot—it just doesn’t sound good to say that there is nothing to settle the matter of whether there are pants. (One can imagine an irritable response: ‘I settle it thus!’, hurtling trousers at the speaker.) However, shortly I will suggest that there is a way to see it as sounding a whole lot better.

But how does Yablo resist extending the analysis to pants and other ordinary objects? A skeptic of the debate between eliminativists and realists about ordinary objects[[32]](#footnote-33) might suggest that the debate over the existence of pants is moot, since, stripped of the presupposition that there is a unified material object (the pants), the assertive content of ‘There are pants at the cleaners’ is merely that pantishly arranged microparticles are at the cleaners, which remains true regardless of the truth of the ontological presupposition. But Yablo counters (quite appropriately) that the microparticle statement can’t be the assertive content of the pants statement—for that must be what is *analytically implied* by the original, while nothing whatsoever about microparticles is analytically implied by the statement about pants (the very existence of microparticles required scientific discovery—it’s not something competent speakers could discover by unpacking the analytic implications of what they said about pants).[[33]](#footnote-34)

That seems fine for the example in question. But the general point remains vulnerable. For in the half-century in which metaphysics has been dominated by a neo-Quinean approach to ontological commitment, those defending radical ontological proposals have come up with not just one, but many ‘ontologically alternative’ languages. Those introducing an ontologically alternative language aim to avoid quantifying over the entities our prior sentences quantified over, thereby allegedly avoiding the unwanted ontological commitments.[[34]](#footnote-35) But they could also avoid the needed commitments by just keeping their mouths shut—why introduce a new language? Revisionary ontologists still wish to give us a ‘theory of the world’, and to retain our ability to share information about the world (in what they consider a less ontologically misleading way). Equally importantly, as van Inwagen himself points out, revisionary ontologists must award the apparent truths of ordinary speakers some sort of ‘alethic commendation’[[35]](#footnote-36) to distinguish those who believe in statues from those who (say) believe in unicorns, and to distinguish the metaphysician’s view that there are no pants from the ‘madman’s’ view.[[36]](#footnote-37) Paraphrasing the claims they see as ‘ontologically problematic’ into an ontologically alternative language enables revisionary ontologists to retain the idea that what ordinary people say in the course of normal conversation is true (though perhaps not ‘perspicuous’[[37]](#footnote-38)), or at least ‘nearly as good as true’,[[38]](#footnote-39) and also enables them to distinguish what they are saying from what only a madman would assert.

Van Inwagen famously paraphrases statements apparently about chairs into talk about ‘wood-particles’ bonded and arranged in a certain region of space.[[39]](#footnote-40) So his proposed paraphrases happen to make use of talk of particles (and thereby incur a new commitment not analytically implied by the original sentence). But arguably that is accidental. Van Inwagen himself notes that although, to make a relatively simple example of a paraphrase, he supposes that anything made of wood is ‘composed of simples called ‘wood-particles’’, in fact ‘nothing remotely like this is true’.[[40]](#footnote-41) So even van Inwagen’s talk of particles seems intended merely as a place-holder. Trenton Merricks similarly speaks of atoms being ‘arranged statuewise’, introducing the notion as follows:

Atoms are *arranged statuewise* if and only if they both have the properties and also stand in the relations to microscopica upon which, if statues existed, those atoms’ *composing a statue* would non-trivially supervene.[[41]](#footnote-42)

But he explicitly distances himself from any claim about whether it is actually atoms or some other microscopica that exist—they are ‘placeholders for claims about whatever microscopic entities are actually down there’.[[42]](#footnote-43)

One could imagine a way of distancing from these particularities (and avoiding these new commitments) by avoiding talk of any particular microscopic entities at all, and speaking not of atoms arranged statuewise, but rather using a feature-placing language to say that it’s ‘statuing’ around here. Thus one might say:

It’s statuing around here if and only if circumstances are such that, if statues existed, it would be true that there is a statue here.[[43]](#footnote-44)

On the modified Merricks strategy, it does seem like ‘It’s panting around here’[[44]](#footnote-45) is analytically implied by ‘There are pants here’—for given the way the new turn of phrase is introduced, it is guaranteed to be true in whatever situations speakers would normally treat as situations in which there are pants. So if there *were* pants in the relevant situation, ‘It’s panting around here’ would be true (and indeed this is supposed to remain true even if we suspend the ontological assumption).[[45]](#footnote-46)

The idea then is that, using the feature-placing language, we could say that ‘There are pants at the cleaners’ presupposes the existence of pants; but stripped of the presupposition that there is a unified material object (the pants), the assertive content of ‘There are pants’ is merely that ‘It’s panting around here’, which remains true regardless of the truth of the ontological presupposition that there is a unified, countable material object. We can use that language (expressing that remaining truth) to distinguish the nihilist’s position from the madman’s, and to preserve a sense in which what the ordinary speaker says (when she says there are pants at the cleaner’s) is true, or nearly as good as true. If all that is correct, then debates about the existence of pants should be rendered moot by Yablo’s methods just as much as debates about numbers are.

Yablo, however, resists the idea that his view can be broadened in this way. For he doubts that we can identify an ontologically innocent assertive content for talk of macro-objects.[[46]](#footnote-47) In order for him to accept that the question of the existence of pants is moot, say, we would have to be able to say:

1. that P (Pants exist) is ordinarily presupposed, not asserted;

2. that P (Pants exist) is highly extricable from the sentences S that presuppose it (e.g. The pants are at the cleaners).

That is, a statement S like ‘The pants are at the cleaners’ would have to be cleanly factorizable into ‘Pants exist’ (the ontological presupposition) and something else: the metaphysics-free remainder. The problem Yablo sees is not with (1), but rather in identifying the remainder needed to make good on the idea that ‘The pants are at the cleaners’ is factorizable.[[47]](#footnote-48)

I have been suggesting above that the remainder (R) can be understood using a feature-placing language, enabling us to factor ‘The pants are at the cleaners’ into:

P = Pants exist (ontological presupposition)

R = It’s panting at the cleaners (assertive content)

But Yablo doubts the viability of a feature-placing language as a way of capturing (R), the metaphysics-free assertive content. For suppose, for example, we tried to introduce the terminology of panting counterfactually, as suggested above; or perhaps (given the objection Yablo raises to that formulation) better, as:

It is panting around here if and only if circumstances C obtain such that, if pants existed & C, then there would be pants here in virtue of C.[[48]](#footnote-49)

Now of course, as a defender of easy ontology, I personally think that the clause ‘if pants existed &’ is unnecessary, since (provided we properly identify circumstances C) there would be pants wholly in virtue of C. Nonetheless, both the eliminativist who introduces the feature-placing language and Yablo would deny this, thinking that there is an additional ontological presupposition (P) that must be fulfilled. But if we think of the existence of pants as an extra requirement, then it looks like it is *the existence of pants* that does the significant work in guaranteeing that the pants are at the cleaners; so what work is C doing? Yablo’s underlying worry is that there will be no ‘metaphysics free remainder’ left to capture as the assertive content of ‘There are pants at the cleaners’ if we put aside the presupposition of the existence of pants, since he doubts that we can make sense of the feature-placing language in ways that will enable us to use it in expressing (R).

But let us put (R) to the side for the moment and ask how to understand (P). As in the case of number talk, one must be careful to distinguish empirical from ontological presuppositions. Given those, there is an ambiguity in saying that ‘The pants are at the cleaners’ presupposes ‘Pants exist’, and accordingly an ambiguity in how we understand (P) above. A first way would be to understand it as an empirical presupposition: that we haven’t been making empirical mistakes, or been subject to some sort of illusion when we said there were pants. This would make the presupposition of the existence of pants comparable to the cases he begins with, of ‘The present king of France is bald’, which presupposes that France is a monarchy, or like ‘Vulcan orbits the sun five times in an Earth year’, which presupposes the existence of a planet between Mercury and the Sun. It seems to be where empirical presuppositions like these fail that “the whole assertive enterprise is wrecked”.[[49]](#footnote-50)

But the sense in which the existence of pants is presupposed by trouser talk is not like this: the worry isn’t that we have been under an illusion or made some terrible empirical mistake that wrecks the whole enterprise. Instead, what the eliminativist thinks is presupposed is that *the ontology of enduring, non-living material objects is the correct one* (rather than some empirically equivalent but distinct ontology)*.* And if this *ontological* presupposition turns out to fail, then the eliminativist doesn’t think the whole assertive enterprise is wrecked (van Inwagen, Merricks and the like go to considerable pains to avoid this appearance of wrecking)—for we can turn to an ontologically distinctive language that still enables us to communicate what we need to about the world. (One important lesson here, to which I will return below, is that failures of empirical presuppositions may be ‘wrecking’, but not so those of *ontological* presuppositions—if indeed there are such presuppositions at all).

This makes a difference for how we are to understand (P), and I think also makes it clearer what (P) could leave ‘left over’ to figure in (R), enabling us to get an idea of what the ‘metaphysics free remainder’ is that we can keep as the assertive content of our pants sentences. What we are putting aside (P) is the (supposed) *ontological* presupposition that an ontology of enduring material objects is the ‘correct ontology’ (rather than that some empirically equivalent but alternative ontology is ‘correct’). We might do better to leave aside the Merricks-style counterfactual approach to articulating the feature-placing language, and begin instead from the different approach Hawthorne and Cortens suggest in introducing their feature-placing language:

Imagine a tribe whose inhabitants spoke in the following way. Placed in circumstances in which we English speakers would normally say ‘There is a pebble’, the members of this community would say ‘It is pebbling.’ Placed in front of a cat, they would say ‘it’s catting’, and so on.[[50]](#footnote-51)

While there are modifications needed to get this language to have full expressive power (introducing spatial and temporal adverbs, etc.), it remains (they argue) ‘ontologically innocent’, enabling members of the nihilist tribe to get around (and to capture what ordinary speakers were onto) without committing themselves to the existence of countable objects, whether macroscopic or microscopic.[[51]](#footnote-52) It also has the advantage over the counterfactual accounts that one need not appeal to situations in which *pants would exist—*instead, we move up to the linguistic levelto identify those cases in which normal speakers (who aren’t subject to empirical errors) would *say* that they do.

The eliminativist’s talk of relevant ‘circumstances’ is supposed to be shorthand, driven in part by a desire for neutrality on particular issues about what’s fundamental, or about what cultural and intentional and other conditions are relevant to the application of the normal term. So at a first pass, the eliminativist wants to say something like this: I don’t think an ontology that includes artifacts is correct (perhaps because I reject all composite material objects), but I still want to be able to communicate with you. So, let us bracket our differences of opinion about whether an ontology of enduring material objects is the correct one (or if adopting another language would better ‘carve the world at its joints’; if it would be better to speak of particle arrangements, time slices, or what have you). Then we can introduce talk of ‘panting’ roughly as follows: whatever circumstances you, the friend of pants, think it takes for there to be pants, wherever those circumstances occur, say ‘It’s panting around here’. The relevant circumstances then might involve there being particles, or plenum stuff, or whatever there turns out fundamentally to be, arranged in a certain way; and the relevant circumstances also may build in cultural, social, and intentional circumstances, for example that those particles/stuff have been arranged by someone with the right *intentions*,in the right *cultural context*,etc. The appeal to circumstances should then be read transparently in introducing feature-placing talk: “in *those* circumstances (the ones in which you normally say there are pants), just say ‘It’s panting’”. Of course, the friend of pants had better not say that the relevant circumstances are *that there be pants—*but to offer only this homophonic reading would just be uncooperative at this juncture—there is clearly a lot more that could be said. Nor must the friend of pants include requirements like “and there’d have to be some object/individual/entity…”, since the use of the feature-placing language is supposed to bracket that kind of ontological commitment. But there is still quite a lot to say that enables the rival ontologists to communicate about the world.

Of course introducing a feature-placing language isn’t easy, and part of the differences Yablo identifies between mathematical and mereological sum talk on the one hand, versus ordinary object talk on the other, plausibly arise from the fact that in the first two cases but not the third we can retreat to an ordinary language expression of the assertive content that leaves the questioned commitments aside. Of course we can’t do this where the ontology of ordinary objects itself is in question. For given the way our actual language functions, we have difficulty expressing the assertive content that remains in terms that don’t make use of ordinary terms and thereby apparently presuppose an ontology of ordinary objects. Nonetheless, it seems extremely plausible that—if one follows Yablo in thinking of our assertions as involving ontological presuppositions—there is such an empirical, assertive content of our ordinary object assertions that can be understood and retained while bracketing the question of which is the correct ontology. Yablo says, “even if a statement’s metaphysical aspects could be identified, who is to say that anything useful is left when they are stripped away?”.[[52]](#footnote-53) But I think there is strong *prima facie* reason to think that something *is* left: even purified into a feature-placing language, the claim about it ‘panting’ seems to tell us something about the world, expressing assertive content that can be useful to us in making our plans (whether navigational or sartorial). And those who disagree about ontology seem to still be able to put aside those disagreements to communicate about the world around them.

I’ve argued that Yablo’s use of the presupposition-failure model requires that we distinguish empirical from ontological presuppositions. So if you accept the idea that our use of certain terms involves specifically ontological presuppositions (as I do not) then I think you should go all the way, and treat ordinary object talk along the same model as talk of mereological sums, numbers, or properties: as having ontological presuppositions that are ‘fail-safe’ in the sense that even if they were to fail, they would leave an assertive content intact. That would leave us with a generalized quizzicalist approach, according to which *all* strictly ontological questions are moot (not just questions about the existence of abstracta or sums).

This might at first seem like bad news for Yablo’s view. For it sure doesn’t seem like the question of whether pants exist is ‘objectively unsettled’.[[53]](#footnote-54) Indeed that seems, at first glance, a little crazy. But I actually don’t think it is. I think it is a conclusion Yablo should embrace. The crazy interpretation is one on which we would end up thinking it is unsettled whether we can clothe ourselves (an unsettling thought). But of course that is not at all the right conclusion to draw, for the assertive content of ‘There are pants’ remains true, regardless of this ontological presupposition, and arguably that includes the analytic implication that I am able to clothe myself (well, provided they are my size of course). What is ‘objectively unsettled’ if we generalize Yablo’s approach in this way is *which is the correct ontology of the material world—*whether it is correct to speak in terms of enduring material objects, in terms of features of the blobject, sequences of temporal parts, etc. And one who accepts Yablo’s methodology, I think, should hold that *that* *is* ‘objectively unsettled’; that there is nothing in the world to settle it.

Yablo raised difficulties in identifying an (R)—an assertive content for the claim, freed of the metaphysical presupposition. But, as I suggested at the beginning of this section, to my mind the much greater problem is identifying a meaningful content for the ontological presupposition (P), such that we can see what is being presupposed and how it might fail (even if its failure makes no difference). I have, for the sake of argument, characterized it above as the assumption that the ontology of medium-sized enduring material objects (rather than some empirically equivalent competing ontology) is correct. But what further content can we give this? As mentioned above and elsewhere, I have serious doubts that it can be meaningfully characterized in terms of saying that there are such and such *objects.* One could instead think of this as presupposing that the language or conceptual scheme of enduring material objects is *the right language/conceptual scheme* either in the Tractarian sense that its logical structure matches that of the world (its nouns corresponding to the objects, etc.) or in the Siderian sense that it is the one which ‘carves reality at its (ontological) joints’, the one in which to ‘write the book of the world’.[[54]](#footnote-55) I wouldn’t personally want to have to follow through on clarifying either of those suggestions, but others may.

In any case, this gives us a new way of characterizing in broad strokes a further respect in which the quizzical and easy approaches come apart. Yablo uses his work on presupposition to reconstruct Carnap’s view charitably. On his reconstruction, Carnap’s internal questions, say, about the existence of numbers, are best understood as questions asked *presupposing* that numbers exist; external questions are questions asked ‘about the framework as a whole’ in the sense of asking *whether that presupposition is correct*.[[55]](#footnote-56) If we take Yablo’s arguments to show that such external questions are moot—in the sense that there is nothing to settle them—and generalize Yablo’s view as I have suggested, then we end up with a rather Carnapian position: there is nothing to settle the matter of which of our strictly *ontological* presuppositions is correct. (Carnap, of course, did not limit his view to ontological views about abstracta, but also applied it to material objects and the rest.) Taken in this way, Yablo’s work might be thought to show why we should not expect anything in the world to determine which of various ontologically alternative languages or conceptual schemes is the *right one.* That in itself is a rather neat result.

But it still leaves us just shy of Carnap: for Carnap would not have held that we can even make sense of the question of which linguistic or conceptual scheme is *the right one.* For Carnap, the choice of a linguistic framework is a *pragmatic* matter—not a matter of choosing the one that is ‘correct’. The fan of easy ontology cleaves more closely to this aspect of Carnap, insisting that our linguistic or conceptual schemes may be introduced or retained in order to serve a variety of functions, without ontological presuppositions, and combining this with a functional pluralist view of language.[[56]](#footnote-57)

Take number talk, for instance. Suppose we think of number terms, perhaps first used as determiners, indicating quantity, as being introduced as nouns in order to achieve some purpose rather different from the purposes served by king talk or planet talk. We might introduce number terms the via the rule that entitles speakers to infer from ‘There are two cups on the table’ to ‘The number of cups on the table is two’—a shift that may, as Thomas Hofweber has pointed out,[[57]](#footnote-58) serve the useful function of shifting the focus of attention from what’s where, to *quantity.* But as Yablo’s own earlier work has made clear, introducing number terms as nouns (and introducing mathematical terminology more generally) may serve even more crucial functions. For nominative number talk, for example, may enable us to express facts and explanatory laws in finite form, which would otherwise require infinitely long sentences (involving disjunctions, non-identity statements, etc.).[[58]](#footnote-59)

If we think of number terms as introduced by way of rules like these, which *entitle* us to speak of numbers, then the existence of a separate range of objects is not *presupposed* by the use of the terms (as Carnap would have put it, we don’t require or hold ourselves hostage to any ontological justification for introducing the new linguistic framework). Instead, the rules of the framework *license* us to conclude that there are numbers, *in the only sense these terms have.* Nor is there (as in the case of ‘the Present King of France’ or ‘Vulcan’) some empirical presupposition that might turn out to fail: we may retain our conclusion that there is a number regardless of whether or not we have counted the cups correctly. The thought that there is some presupposition of our use of number terms that might ‘turn out to’ fail seems to come from a mistaken sort of functional monism about language, treating number terms as if they were terms like ‘the present King of France’ or ‘Vulcan’ that serve a tracking or positing function and that run empirical risk of failure.[[59]](#footnote-60)

But if we follow Yablo’s own earlier insights that number terms are introduced with a totally different function, we might conclude they were never *supposed to* serve any kind of tracking or positing function that might ‘turn out’ to fail because of some empirical mistake, or that the avoidance of such mistakes must be ‘presupposed’ for the full literal truth of our statements involving numbers. Instead, it might just be that our number statements are fully and literally true when introduced via the rules that entitle us to move from ‘There are two cups on the table’ to ‘The number of cups on the table is two’ (and then other rules that give us other entitlements). The latter might, just as it seems to ordinary speakers, be every bit as fully and literally true as the former, without involving us in any additional *presupposition*—(in Hale and Wright’s terms, there won’t be any ‘hostage to redeem’[[60]](#footnote-61)), though it *will* entitle us to use nouns to speak of things (numbers) we hadn’t spoken of before.[[61]](#footnote-62)

I have been giving reasons for thinking that our talk of numbers is importantly disanalogous to talk about planets or people (which may have empirical existence presuppositions). Moreover, I’ve been suggesting that it’s a faulty functional monism about language that misleads us into assimilating these cases. Some areas of discourse (terms introduced with a tracking or positing/explanatory function) may indeed have empirical presuppositions, the failure of which might in some cases wreck the assertive enterprise (if we were suffering from various kinds of mistake or illusion). But in no case do I think there are *ontological* presuppositions that could turn out to fail—just as Carnap held that we require no ‘ontological justification’ for introducing new linguistic forms (we don’t have to first establish that there *really are* enduring material objects or numbers to be entitled to introduce the relevant singular terms).[[62]](#footnote-63) So, for example, our table talk (unlike our number talk) may presuppose that certain empirical mistakes were not being made (that we weren’t subject to a mass delusion, etc.). On the other hand, unlike both the eliminativist and Yablo, I deny that it also presupposes that an ontology of enduring objects is really ‘the correct ontology’. In fact, I think there is reason to doubt that our talk of numbers, tables, or other sorts of thing has *ontological* presuppositions at all, or that we can really make sense of what these ontological presuppositions would be.

2. IT’S NOT EASY BEING EASY

One thing that distinguishes my approach from Yablo’s is that I rely on the idea that our terms have certain constitutive rules of use: rules that are binding on speakers who use the term, and to which they are answerable. I rely on it in my claim that the trivial inferences really are trivial (for I take the connecting conceptual truth, which licenses the easy inference, to be an object-language expression of a rule of use for the term that is introduced). I rely on it in holding that there is nothing more it takes for the nominative number claim to be true than for the uncontroversial claim using the determiner to be true—so there are no additional presuppositions, nor hostages to fortune taken, in moving to the nominative turn of phrase.

But this leads to liabilities for easy ontology, for the idea that our terms have constitutive rules of use is undeniably unfashionable, and has faced a variety of formidable criticisms. Most famous among these are Quine’s criticisms of the analytic/synthetic distinction;[[63]](#footnote-64) more recent are Tim Williamson’s criticisms of the idea of that there are epistemically analytic sentences.[[64]](#footnote-65) I have addressed each of these lines of criticism elsewhere,[[65]](#footnote-66) so I will leave them to one side here.

Instead, here I will discuss a different and interesting line of worry Yablo has raised about the idea that our terms have constitutive rules of use. Yablo considers the interpretation of Carnap that takes external questions as defective in the sense that “How can an external deployment of ‘There are Xs’ mean anything, when by definition it floats free of the rules from which meaning comes?”.[[66]](#footnote-67) But he rejects this, since he rejects the view of meaning on which it is based, namely that:

Words depend for their meaning on analytically valid rules of assertion and inference. The rules completely determine proper usage modulo a given set of observation reports. Resistance is futile; all it achieves is to change the subject. There is no communicating with those who defy the rules because they do not speak our language.[[67]](#footnote-68)

Yablo rejects this view on grounds of ‘empirical implausibility’: thinking that our terms have (in my terms) constitutive rules of use erects “barriers to communication that are empirically speaking just not there”.[[68]](#footnote-69) So, for example, Tyler Burge argues that one may be a competent user of the term ‘sofa’ and yet come to doubt the standard truism that sofas are seating devices, embracing instead the theory that they are objects of religious veneration.[[69]](#footnote-70) Yablo argues that we could still communicate with such a person, and that we can similarly communicate with those who wonder whether there are any numbers. In sum, as Yablo puts it, “Communication is possible across all kinds of doctrinal divides—even when the doctrines are the kind considered ‘meaning-constituting’ by those who go in for that sort of thing”.[[70]](#footnote-71)

But does the idea that our terms have constitutive rules of use erect ‘barriers to communication’ across speakers who use the term in ways that make them answerable to different rules? First, I should make clear in what sense I think our terms have constitutive rules of use. The idea is that there are constitutive semantic rules for employing our terms, where these are public and normative—like the rules of games. In presenting oneself as using a given Standard English term, one makes oneself *answerable to* certain rules for its use. This, however, does not mean that speakers thereby invariably *follow* these rules. They may make mistakes, or intentionally flout the rules (just as players of games may). Nor does it mean that they could explicitly *articulate* the rules (nor indeed that there is any non-homophonic linguistic form in which they could be articulated). Nonetheless, they are answerable to them and open to rebuke (or penalties) if they violate the rules.

Consider an analogy. The idea that our terms have constitutive rules, I have suggested, makes terms like games. Now consider the game of football. American football and Canadian football developed from the same original sport (a form of rugby) and share most of the same constitutive rules. A Canadian and American can play together—most of the time—without conflict or noticeable trouble (even if neither realizes the differences in the rules each is holding himself answerable to). Are they playing ‘the same game’? They might be in a sense—both parties may be playing the grad students’ Saturday Afternoon Football Game at the Hamburg Summer School. (The game is then on neutral territory, so that rules are not made determinate by home field.) Nonetheless, some pseudo-disputes can arise between them, say regarding whether Sam’s team has just earned a point when they have kicked the ball across the end zone. But those don’t interfere with the idea that, in most contexts, there aren’t insuperable barriers to their playing together, even if they each take themselves to be answerable to different rules. (Matters are even easier if they are answerable to the same rules, but one or both parties is mistaken about the rules or flouts them—they still may, for the most part, play together, though they may require periods of suspended play and negotiation where conflicts arise, to work out what the rules are or should be.)

Moreover, even if one thinks of games as having certain constitutive rules, we can speak of (and individuate) ‘games’ in various ways: not just as governed by a strict set of constitutive rules, but also as historical practices (tracking historical continuity even across certain changes in rules), or in vague terms (tracking only the most significant central constitutive rules), or… In this sense we can allow that Americans and Canadians can not only play together but also are in some sense ‘playing the same game’, though certain pseudo-disputes will arise that are only resolvable by decision (are we going to count kicks through the end zone as point-scoring?).

So similarly, we can think of terms as having constitutive rules to which we must be answerable in order to be using that (very) term at all. But the constitutive rules associated with a given set of syllables may change gradually over time or vary somewhat from place to place (and yet we may still speak of it in a historical or looser sense as ‘the same’ term). Speakers who use those variants (governed by slightly different constitutive rules) may still communicate in most contexts—though certain pseudo-disputes will arise that can only be resolved by decision. And we may still in some (historical and/or looser sense) speak of them as using the same term.

The idea that our terms have constitutive rules of use then does not seem to erect insuperable barriers to communication that we have empirical reason to think are not there—for we can indeed generally communicate (or play) together despite variations in the rules the parties are, or think they are, answerable to. It does mean that sometimes we’ll get involved in pseudo-disputes, and need to suspend our talk (or play) for negotiation (about what rules do or should govern our behavior) but there doesn’t seem to be anything empirically inaccurate about that.

More recently Yablo has raised other objections to the idea that our terms have the sorts of constitutive rules the easy ontological arguments require; easy ontology depends on speakers being “*actually* […] subject to meaning rules given which ‘Do tables exist?’ has, given unproblematic empirical premises, an analytically guaranteed positive answer”.[[71]](#footnote-72) But Yablo raises doubts, first, that there are such rules at all. In discussing Carnap’s appeal to similar rules, he writes:

It may be wondered, once again, how rules we never agreed to, and may not even understand, can bear on the interpretation of [ontological] questions we do endorse and do understand?[[72]](#footnote-73)

The same might be said, though, for the grammatical rules of our language: we never agreed to them, and some speakers may not even understand them if they are laid out before them (for some people, learning grammatical rules explicitly is hard; and many competent speakers including young children may not be able to explicitly grasp them at all, though they may nonetheless master them). Yet we all think that appeal to grammatical rules does bear on the interpretation of questions we do understand, such as ‘Did Julie hand Sammy to Frank?’

Even if there are such rules, Yablo doubts that the rules we *actually use* can take the form needed for easy ontological arguments. For the easy ontological arguments to work, as I have emphasized elsewhere,[[73]](#footnote-74) the application conditions for a term must not be understood as appealing to the existence of the very (sort of) thing in question: they must not be thought of as taking the form “’K’ applies if Ks exist”, or else we could not hope to answer existence questions easily by addressing reference questions. One way to show that application conditions for ‘K’ need not appeal to the existence of Ks is to show a way they may be stated without appeal to the existence of Ks. I aim to show how this could be done by making use of ontologically alternative languages to state the conditions: so one could state sufficient conditions for applying a noun like ‘table’ by saying, for example: if there are particles arranged tablewise (or: if it’s tabling around here), then there is a table.

But Yablo doubts that the rules that actually govern our ordinary terms have this ‘downward looking’ form, saying “a situation with tablishly arranged particles is a situation with tables, according to the easy ontologist […] Given that table and particles are both present, why should it be the particles the speaker is relying on, rather than the table?”.[[74]](#footnote-75) In general, he asks, why should we think that application conditions—the rules we actually follow—have this ‘downward looking’ form rather than being simply homophonic? If the project is supposed to be a hermeneutic one, of interpreting the actual rules governing our terms, it seems like the homophonic rule ‘Assert the existence of tables,.. should it be that: there are tables hereabouts’ is a likelier candidate than: ‘Assert the existence of tables… should it be that: particles are arranged thusly’.[[75]](#footnote-76)

But the idea that we have to answer the question: “Which is the actually correct statement of the rules: the one in terms of tables, or the one in terms of particles (or another in terms of its tabling around here, or…)?” misses the crucial point behind the easy approach to ontology. The rules for introducing our basic sortals are language-entry rules—world-language rules; rules for some of our basic terms have to take this form if language is to be learnable at all. Given that, there is no need that these rules be stateable in this (or another) language at all, and there certainly need be no ontologically privileged, uniquely best way of stating these world-language application conditions (that would express them in the form of language-language rules).

The core point that is needed for easy ontological arguments to work is that the new nouns must be introducible without ontological presuppositions that would require us to determine whether Ks exist before we are ‘licensed’ to introduce the term ‘K’ and conclude that ‘K’ refers. One way to show that is to show that those actual world-language rules *could* be expressed (if we were to stated them) in various ontologically alternative languages: a feature-placing language, a particle-arrangement language, etc. So the point is not that these are alternative *rules* we *could have* adopted (nor that it is the uniquely proper way of stating our actual rules)—the neo-Carnapian rejects the idea that there is a uniquely correct way of stating world-language rules. Instead, the point is to show that the actual world-language rules we have needn’t be seen as having particular *ontological presuppositions*. Instead, they are simply rules for introducing a kind of talk that then *entitles* and *enables* us to speak of a certain range of objects, without having *presupposed* a given ontology. There is then also no need to say that the speaker is responding to the particles ‘rather than’ the table, but rather to deny that there is any *ontologically privileged way of stating* what the speaker is responding to, when she learns to introduce the term (or concept) ‘table’: that means we don’t have to start from ontologically presupposing the existence of a table, or of particles, or some other ontological alternative. Rather, what the easy ontologist denies is that there is any ontologically unique, privileged way of *saying* from what basis I am entitled to conclude that there is a table.[[76]](#footnote-77)

Yablo also raises doubts about whether rules of the form: “Assert the existence of tables when particles are arranged thusly” should really be thought of as constitutive rules, rather than as rules that tell us that such arrangements are *good evidence* (pending further metaphysical investigation) that there are tables.[[77]](#footnote-78) Yablo gives several reasons for thinking that these rules must be merely evidential: first, ‘What distinguishes a table from an altar or check-out counter is partly normative—how they are supposed to be used’.[[78]](#footnote-79) I couldn’t agree more; in fact, this is something I’ve argued for elsewhere.[[79]](#footnote-80) He suggests, however, that this is reason for thinking something is left out—that even if particles are arranged tablewise that is only good, but not decisive, evidence that there is a table. But one mustn’t overlook the fact that, even as the terminology was originally introduced, talk of particles ‘arranged tablewise’ was supposed to build in *all* of the relevant conditions—not just physical arrangements of tiny physical things (or whatever), but whatever social, normative, and intentional conditions the friends of tables think must be met. Secondly, he suggests, just as ostensive teaching of the word ‘dog’ might fail to take into account that the paradigm cases might happen to fail to be dogs (e.g. if they are robot dogs or dog facades), so might we need to allow for potential error: that paradigm cases of tables might ‘depending on the deep metaphysics of the matter’ turn out not to be.[[80]](#footnote-81) But there is again a difference between guarding against empirical errors and guarding against ontological errors. To think that these conditions are just evidential thus requires thinking that there is a new, distinctive kind of error one must guard against: not a run of the mill empirical error, but a *ontological* error, which might undermine not just the occasional use of the term but *all uses.* And that idea, that there is some potential ontological error (beyond any empirical errors that could arise through cases of misperception, etc.) is exactly what I have been arguing against at considerable length elsewhere.[[81]](#footnote-82)

3. WHAT’S AT STAKE FOR THE SKEPTIC?

The time has come to take stock. Where should you turn, if you are skeptically inclined? Suppose more particularly that you are in the market for a view more deeply skeptical than epistemicism, but are loath to take on board the idea of quantifier variance. How should you go about choosing between an easy ontological view and a quizzical view? What is at stake?

As we have seen in section 1, there *may* be differences in the extent of the deflation you can get: if Yablo is right to reject my friendly amendment that would extend his view to debates about ordinary objects as well, then those who sense that something is equally wrong with debates about whether tables really exist *and* with debates about whether numbers or properties exist would find a broader form of deflationism in easy ontology. On the other hand, if I’m right and his view can be neatly extended, this won’t be a choice point between the two views. This choice in turn rests on whether one can make sense of ontologically alternative languages in which one could express the assertive content, and make sense of what is ‘left-over’ if we subtract away specifically *ontological* presuppositions.

The bigger difference in orientation between us remains, regardless of how one decides the extent question. That is a difference in how each of us conceives of the relative priorities of ontology and language-introduction. The easy ontological view follows through on the Carnapian idea that introducing new linguistic forms (or keeping the old) doesn’t rely on any ontological presuppositions (although, as I have emphasized above, sometimes it may have *empirical* presuppositions). One may employ linguistic forms for a variety of purposes (not all of which involve tracking or positing) and thereby *become entitled to* refer to entities of new kinds, without requiring anything like ‘ontological justification’ for introducing (or retaining) these terms. So the easy ontologist will focus on the pragmatic justifications for (or perhaps evolutionary explanations of) using various forms of discourse; the way the terms are introduced (often combined with features of the world) will then typically license us to make claims about the existence of objects of various sorts.

What the easy ontologist is committed to that the quizzicalist is not is the idea that our terms have constitutive rules, which may have such a form that they entitle us to introduce new terms (that may turn out to refer) without presupposing that they refer, enabling us to address existence questions by way of questions about reference. The chief challenges defenders of easy ontology face, then, (as Yablo makes clear) arise at the level of defending the unfashionable idea that our terms have constitutive rules that may take this form.

The quizzicalist, on the other hand, thinks of introducing terminology as *having* ontological presuppositions: in that sense, it remains a traditional metaphysical ‘ontology first’ approach, with the riders added on that it doesn’t really matter whether those presuppositions succeed, and that the question of whether they do is objectively unanswerable. Why doesn’t it matter? Well, because the assertive content may remain the same regardless, enabling us to *do* the same things with those terms that we always needed to. This leaves the quizzicalist with certain liabilities: for, as I have tried to make clear, it is no easy matter to even articulate what these extra ‘ontological’ requirements are, or to make sense of the idea that there are such *ontological* presuppositions (beyond more pedestrian empirical presuppositions for success). Thinking that there are such extra requirements might just arise from false analogies that arise from an implicit functional monism, or from wrongly assimilating ontological errors with empirical errors. The ontological questions that the quizzicalist allows, then end up being danglers: the answers don’t matter, we don’t know how to articulate them or give them content, there is nothing to determine the correct answer to them, and we can do all the same things the language was designed to do regardless of the correct answer to the question.

At that stage, one might begin to wonder: why think there are such remaining, legitimate, meaningful questions at all? Or is the thought that there are based on some misunderstanding, some false analogy between empirical and ontological discourse? At any rate, if you share this sort of suspicion, the easy approach may be worth pursuing, even if it isn’t always all that easy.[[82]](#footnote-83)

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1. See Karen Bennett, “Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology”, in D. Chalmers, D. Manley, and R. Wasserman, eds., *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), pp. 38–76, and Uriah Kriegel, “The Epistemological Challenge of Revisionary Metaphysics,” *Philosopher’s Imprint*, xiii, 12 (2013): 1–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. In *The Many Faces of Realism* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1987) and *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See his “Quantifier Variance and Realism,” *Philosophical Issues*, xii (2002): 51–73, and “Against Revisionary Ontology,” *Philosophical Topics*, xxx (2002): 103–27. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. For responses to the threat of quantifier variance, see Peter van Inwagen, “Metaontology,” *Erkenntnis*, xlviii (1998): 233–50, and “Being, Existence, and Ontological Commitment,” in *Metametaphysics*, pp. 472–506, and Theodore Sider, “Ontological Realism,” in *Metametaphysics*, pp. 384–423, and *Writing the Book of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). I discuss the relationship between quantifier variance and easy ontology extensively in my *Ontology Made Easy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. In “The Easy Approach to Ontology,” *Axiomathes*,xix (2009): 1–15, and in *Ontology Made Easy*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. See Bob Hale and Crispin Wright, *The Reason’s Proper Study: Essays towards a Neo-Fregean Philosophy of Mathematics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) and “The Metaontology of Abstraction,” in *Metametaphysics*, pp. 178–212. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. See his *The Things we Mean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Unlike Schiffer, however, I think what we get out of these easy arguments is a straightforward simple realism about the entities in question, not a view on which they are ‘lightweight’ or ‘deflated’ in ontological status (see my *Ontology Made Easy*, Chapter 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. *Writing the Book of the World*, p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. In *Ontology Made Easy*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. See his “Must Existence Questions Have Answers?,” in *Metametaphysics*, pp. 507–25. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Yablo, ibid, at pp. 521. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See his “The Myth of the Seven,” in Mark E. Kalderon, ed. *Fictionalism in Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 88–115, at pp. 94–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Yablo, “Must Existence Questions Have Answers?” at p. 522. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. *Ibid.*, at p. 519. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. *Ibid,* at p. 520. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. “Carnap’s Paradox and Easy Ontology”, at p.??? [p. 27. of copyedited version] [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. For fuller discussion see “Carnap’s Paradox and Easy Ontology”, at p. ??? [pp. 25-27 of copyedited version (section 10)] [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. “Must Existence Questions Have Answers?,” at p. 520. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. See my *Ontology Made Easy*, Chapter 1, for a more detailed development of this reading of Carnap. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Following Huw Price’s interpretation of Carnap’s distinction between internal and external questions in terms of the use/mention distinction; see his “Metaphysics after Carnap: The Ghost Who Walks?” in *Metametaphysics*, pp. 320–346, at p. 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. I develop in greater detail a parallel line of argument against Yablo’s earlier fictionalist view in my “Fictionalism versus Deflationism,” *Mind*, cxxii (2013): 1023–51. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. In “Answerable and Unanswerable Questions” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. See Spelke, Elizabeth. (1990). “Principles of Object Perception”. Cognitive Science 14: 29-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. “Carnap’s Paradox and Easy Ontology,” p. ???. [p. 41 of copy-edited manuscript] [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. In *Ordinary Objects* and in *Ontology Made Easy*. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. See again “Carnap’s Paradox and Easy Ontology”, at page ??? [p. 41 in copyedited version] [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. See ‘Must Existence Questions have Answers”, at page 511-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Stephen Schiffer, “Language-Created Language-Independent Entities”, *Philosophical Topics*, xxiv (1996): 149–67, at p. 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. In “Must Existence Questions Have Answers?,” at pp. 518–20. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. *Ibid.*, at p. 522. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Prominent arguments for eliminativism are in Peter van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990) and Trenton Merricks, *Objects and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001). Defenses of ordinary objects may be found in my *Ordinary Objects* and Lynne Rudder Baker, *[The Metaphysics of Everyday Life: An Essay in Practical Realism](http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521880497)* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. “Must Existence Questions have Answers?”, at pp. 522-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. I reject this, however, arguing that the paraphrases in the new language trivially entail the ordinary language claims the eliminativist aimed to avoid, and so do not avoid any commitments; see *Ordinary Objects*, pp. 151–75. But I will leave that to one side for the moment, since the interest here is in how such languages might be used to generalize Yablo’s approach (not whether they really help avoid ontological commitments). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Peter van Inwagen, *Material Beings (*Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), at p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. *Ibid.*, at p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. John Hawthorne and Andrew Cortens, “Towards Ontological Nihilism,” *Philosophical Studies*, lxxix (1995): 143–165, at p. 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Trenton Merricks, *Objects and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), at pp. 171–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. *Material Beings,* at p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. van Inwagen, *op. cit.*, at pp. 104–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Merricks, *op. cit.*, at p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. *Ibid.*, at p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Cian Dorr (“What We Disagree about When We Disagree about Ontology,” in *Fictionalism in Metaphysics*, pp. 234–286) introduces a general strategy for enabling competing ontologists to communicate: a fictionalist strategy. Merricks (*op. cit.*, p. 6) similarly suggests that an alternative would be a ‘fictionalist’ account on which there are ‘atoms arranged statuewise’ just in case, according to the folk-ontological fiction’, they have properties and stand in microscopic relations upon which their composing a statue supervenes. But one could equally remain neutral on the microscopic issues by simply understanding ‘it’s statuing here’ as true just in case the world is so arranged that those employing the folk-ontological fiction would count ‘there is a statue’ as true. On the alternative fictionalist language, too, ‘it’s statuing around here’ is clearly analytically implied by ‘there’s a statue’. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. Not in the sense of breathing deeply, obviously. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Seen in this light, Yablo’s method of identifying the assertive content of a statement can enable us to characterize much more precisely what purveyors of ontologically alternative languages hoped (or should have hoped) to provide: a way of capturing what is left-over (and still accurate) in what is said by ordinary speakers, if we subtract what the revisionary ontologist would consider a problematic ontological presupposition. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. “Carnap’s Paradox and Easy Ontology,” p. ???. [p. 27-8 of copy-edited manuscript] [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. *Ibid.*, at p. ???. [p. 28-31 (the phrase has been cut from Steve’s paper, so better to turn it into an indirect citation to this section)] [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Parallel to Yablo’s,. *ibid.*, at p. ???. [p. 29 of copy-edited manuscript;], replacing table talk with pants talk. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. Yablo, “Must Existence Questions Have Answers?,” at p. 515. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. John Hawthorne and Andrew Cortens, *op. cit.*, at p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. *Ibid.*, at p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. “Carnap’s Paradox and Easy Ontology,” p. ???. [p. 31 of copyedited version] [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. “Must Existence Questions Have Answers?,” at p. 520. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. See Theodore Sider, *Writing the Book of the World*. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. Yablo, “Carnap’s Paradox,” unpublished, at p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. Where the functional pluralism takes off from the work of Huw Price, *Naturalism without Mirrors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Michael Williams, “Pragmatism, Minimalism, Expressivism,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, xviii (2010): 317–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. See his “Innocent Statements and their Metaphysically Loaded Counterparts,” *Philosophers’ Imprint*, vii, 1 (2007): 1–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. See Yablo, “The Myth of the Seven,” at pp. 94–5. In that article, Yablo gives an interesting ‘just so’ story about how our use of mathematical language might (have) come about, and what function would be served by introducing mathematical terminology. He takes the speakers to be (originally) intentionally introducing the language fictionally (they ‘do not believe in the new entities, but they pretend to for the access this gives them to a fact that would otherwise be inexpressible’ (p. 104)). But there is no need to take this to be pretending anything; one may take them simply to be introducing new terminology that functioned quite differently from their old terms for gemstones and other concreta, in order to serve new purposes, and that entitled them to refer to numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. This similarly points towards a disanalogy with the case of theoretic terms Yablo raises in “Carnap’s Paradox and Easy Ontology,” p. ???. [Reference to p, 40 of copyedited ms.]—for even if we think of terms introduced by a ‘theory’ to play an explanatory role as terms that might turn out to fail to refer, the same needn’t go through for terms introduced by other means to serve other functions. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. Bob Hale and Crispin Wright, “The Metaontology of Abstraction”, at p. 193 [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
61. Identifying an alternative function for a piece of discourse does not mean denying that it refers, but rather denying the appropriateness of thinking there are certain *presuppositions required for it* to refer. We can accept this kind of functional pluralism about discourse and be simple realists about numbers or other things we come to refer to in our discourse. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
62. Rudolph Carnap, “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, iv (1950): 20–40, revised and reprinted in his *Meaning and Necessity,* 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), at p. 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
63. W. V. O. Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” *The Philosophical Review*, lx (1951): 20–43, reprinted in his *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
64. See Timothy Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
65. In *Ordinary Objects* for Quine; in *Ontology made Easy* for Williamson. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
66. Yablo, “Carnap’s Paradox,” at p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
67. *Ibid.*, at p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
68. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
69. Tyler Burge develops this example and insists that someone like this need not lack linguistic understanding; he just has a different theory of what sofas are. See his “Intellectual Norms and Foundations of Mind”, *Journal of Philosophy* 83. No. 12 (December 1986): 697-720, at pp. 707-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
70. “Carnap’s Paradox”, at p. 4*.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
71. “Carnap’s Paradox and Easy Ontology,” p. ???. [p. 13 of copy-edited manuscript] [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
72. *Ibid.*,p. ???. [p.11 of copy-edited manuscript] [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
73. In *Ontology made Easy*, chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
74. “Carnap’s Paradox and Easy Ontology,” p. ???. [pp. 18–19 of copy-edited manuscript] [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
75. See *ibid.*,p. ???. [p. 18 of copy-edited manuscript] [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
76. I actually suspect that our medium-sized ordinary object *concepts* may be built-in for us, so that we need only acquire the terminology to express these concepts. But the point then is that there need be no ontologically privileged way of saying what the conditions are under which the concept is (to be) applied. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
77. See “Carnap’s Paradox and Easy Ontology,” p. ???. [p. 33 of copy-edited manuscript] [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
78. *Ibid.*,p. ???. [p. 35 of copy-edited manuscript] [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
79. See my “Public Artifacts, Intentions, and Norms”, in M. Franssen, P. Kroes, T. Reydon, and P. E. Vermaas, eds., *Artefact Kinds: Ontology and the Human-Made World* (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2014), pp. 45–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
80. See “Carnap’s Paradox and Easy Ontology”, p. ??? [p. 34 of copyedited ms] [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
81. In “Fictionalism versus Deflationism” and in *Ontology made Easy*. Yablo also raises doubts that my appeal to the qua problem does the justificatory work I need for introducing the relevant conditions. I have elsewhere responded to objections that all that is needed is reference-fixing conditions that will not give us anything like analytic claims; see my “Fiction, Existence and Indeterminacy”, in J. Woods, ed., *Fictions and Models: New Essays* (Munich: Philosophia Verlag, 2010), pp. 109–48. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
82. Thanks to Stephen Yablo for very helpful discussions and comments on an earlier version of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)