**The Easy Approach to Ontology**

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In the last few decades there has been a resurgence of interest in the old question “What exists”. This led first to a great proliferation of ontological views and to endless battles over whether numbers, properties, organisms, or artifacts exist. But lately a different line of inquiry has emerged: Are existence debates in ontology genuine debates? Are they resolvable? Or is something wrong with them that makes them not worth pursuing?

Those who ask this metaontological question can be very roughly classed into two camps. On one side are those I will call ‘serious ontologists’. Serious ontologists either explicitly defend or (by engaging earnestly in first-order ontological debates) implicitly presuppose that ontological debates are genuine, and that ontological questions have answers that we can in principle discover, though doing so is a difficult matter requiring distinctively philosophical work.

On the other side are those who, for one reason or another, think that the serious ontologist’s pursuits are misguided. One option is to take an epistemicist view like Karen Bennett’s (2009): that ontological questions are genuine questions, but at least in some cases they are too difficult: their answers are not discoverable—little justification can be found for taking either side. More severe skeptics like Steve Yablo (2009) hold that ontological questions are moot—that there simply is no fact of the matter about which is the right answer, and that ontological claims lack truth-value. But the vast majority of the metaontological discussion thus far has focused on a different sort of skeptical view: the view suggested by Hilary Putnam (1987) and prominently defended by Eli Hirsch (2002a, 2002b), that ontological debates are merely verbal disputes, in which the disputants simply talk past each other by using the quantifier with different meanings, although they are really (in some sense) ‘saying the same thing’, each in his or her own idiolect.

There is, however, another way of being skeptical about recent ontological debates that does not rely on quantifier variance, and yet also does not take ontological questions to be either moot or too difficult to answer. The idea, instead, is that ontological questions (properly understood) are *easy*—too easy, in fact, to be subjects of substantive and distinctively *philosophical* debates. They are easy, roughly, in the sense that they may be resolved straightforwardly—generally by a combination of conceptual and empirical enquiries. Related views have been developed in other quarters—by neo-Fregeans about mathematics (e.g. Hale and Wright 2001, 2009), and by minimalists about propositions, properties and the like (e.g. Schiffer 1994, 1996, 2003). But the view has seldom been systematically developed and defended as a metaontological position,[[1]](#endnote-1) and has received few critical responses at the hands of serious ontologists—who have by and large contented themselves with defending their approach by attacking the idea of quantifier variance (van Inwagen 1998, Sider 2006 & 2009, Hawthorne 2009).

I have argued for such a view in *Ordinary Objects* (2007) and elsewhere (2008, 2009), and will not have the space to do so again here. The purpose of this paper is the purely defensive one of examining the main objections that have been raised against this approach, or that have been raised against related approaches (like the neo-Fregean’s) and might be thought to apply here. After briefly outlining the view and some of its virtues in Section 1, I turn to examine two central lines of objection. The first is that this ‘easy’ approach is itself committed to substantive ontological views, including an implausibly permissive ontology. The second is that it, like the neo-Fregean view, relies on transformation rules that are questionable on both logical and ontological grounds. Ultimately, I will argue, the easy view is not easily assailed by either of these routes, and so remains (thus far) a tenable and attractive approach.

1. **The Easy View**

Though what I say here will no doubt be too brief and sketchy, let me begin with a short overview of the ‘easy’ or ‘semanticist’ approach to existence questions I have developed elsewhere (2007, 2008, 2009). The basic idea is that ontological questions must be asked, and debates undertaken, using language—and that if we properly understand the rules of use for terms used in ontological debates—especially such key terms as ‘exists’, ‘object’, and the various sortal terms at issue in existence questions (‘table’, ‘number’, ‘property’…)—existence questions become easy to answer.[[2]](#endnote-2)

First, consider ‘exists’. I have argued elsewhere (2008) that there is a connection between the rules of use for ‘exists’ and ‘refers’ such that, for most general, well-formed terms \*K\*, \*Ks exist\* is true just in case (holding the meaning of the term “K” fixed—as we mark by putting it in star quotes) \*K\* refers. This metasemantic approach to existence questions is independently appealing, since it enables us to account for the truth of nonexistence claims without needing to say that they involve referring to an object only to deny its existence. It also gives a way of understanding the point of uttering claims of existence and non-existence (to correct others’ apparent use of non-referring terms, or—in the case of positive claims—reject attempted corrections). Using the T-schema to undertake semantic descent, we can also say that (provided the relevant term \*K\* exists), Ks exist iff \*K\* refers.

Most parties to the metaontological debate accept that there is an equivalence between existence claims and quantificational claims, so that \*Ks exist\* may be perspicuously rendered as \*∃x(Kx)\*. This is an assumption I will retain. So if we accept the above reading of existence claims it also follows that quantificational claims of the form \*∃x(Kx)\* are true just in case \*K\* refers, and that (provided the term \*K\* exists), ∃x(Kx) iff \*K\* refers.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The connection between the rules of use for ‘exists’ and ‘refers’ that enables us to shift between talk about reference and talk about existence is confirmed by the fact that it is a platitude about *reference* that (for most general terms \*K\*, assuming the term exists), \*K\* refers if and only if Ks exist. This link between the fundamental rules of use for ‘refers’ and ‘exists’ enables us to move up and down the semantic slide from talking (in the metalanguage) about whether a term refers to speaking (in the object-language) about whether or not the relevant things exist.

On this view, the truth-value of existence claims may be determined via semantic ascent, but this should not be confused with the idea that ontological questions *are* semantic questions: the idea is not that claims about existence and reference are *synonymous,* or that questions about existence are really ‘about’ reference. Instead, since they use rather than mention the terms, existence claims themselves are in that sense about the world. The claim is merely that there is a connection between the rules of use for our terms ‘refer’ and ‘exist’, which enables us to shift between *using* terms in talking about whether or not entities of a given sort exist and *mentioning* those terms in discussing whether they refer. This shift is crucial to enabling us to assess the truth-value of existence claims.

***I.1 Application Conditions***

The metasemantic approach to existence claims can only help us answer existence questions, however, if it is paired with a view about the conditions under which our terms refer. Thus we move next to understanding the rules of use for the sortal terms that appear in general existence claims. I have argued elsewhere (2007) that our sortal terms have at least very basic application conditions (conditions under which the term may be properly applied) and co-application conditions (conditions under which the term S may be properly re-applied to one and the same S).[[4]](#endnote-4)

To avoid preemptive dismissal, I need to say a few things about how I understand application conditions (see my 2008 for fuller discussion):

1. They are semantic rules of use (analogous to grammatical rules of use), which speakers master in becoming competent with applying and refusing the term, but needn’t be able to recite. They also need not take the form of necessary and sufficient conditions, and indeed need not be *stateable* in other terms at all.
2. They are not merely evidential conditions, or conditions under which it would be warranted or generally accepted to apply the relevant term. Instead they are conditions under which it (really) would be proper to apply the term, i.e. conditions under which the term would actually apply.
3. They need not be descriptive, and may involve deference to the world—e.g. plausibly, it is a condition for a term like ‘kangaroo’ to apply in circumstances C that the term have been properly grounded (by being applied to a sample in which there was some kind of creature), and that (in C) there are creatures of the same kind as that referred to in the initial sample.[[5]](#endnote-5)
4. The application conditions for a term \*K\* must not be understood as appealing to the existence of Ks (e.g. as: \*K\* applies if and only if Ks exist.) For that understanding of application conditions could provide no help in evaluating the truth of existence claims via claims about reference, and those about reference in terms of fulfillment of application conditions.

In the most basic cases, rules for applying terms may be taught ostensively, e.g. that \*K\* is to be applied in situations *like this*. In other cases, the application conditions for one term may be parasitic on those for another: if a more basic term \*K\* applies, that may (combined with fulfillment of other conditions C) guarantee the application of a new term \*J\*.[[6]](#endnote-6) Where that is the case, we can also say that the truth of a sentence S (in which \*J\* does not appear as a term) that asserts that Ks exist and conditions C are fulfilled may guarantee the application of \*J\*. For these derivative terms, we can then say that there are ‘transformation rules’ licensing us to infer from the truth of the basic sentence S, that \*J\* applies. These semantic rules may also be expressed in the object language via semantic descent, giving us analytic truths of the form that if S, then Js exist.

As I have argued elsewhere, transformation rules like these are typically used in introducing new terms for social and cultural entities—e.g. that if there is a building and it is consecrated, a church comes into existence; if the relevant paperwork is filed in the right context, a corporation comes into existence, etc. Provided these rules are well-formed (see II.2.a below), they establish the application conditions for the newly introduced social and institutional terms, making it analytic that if the conditions are met, there are churches, corporations, etc. Such transformation rules may also be used to introduce event and state terms: e.g., that if ‘Fido bit Fifi’ is true, then the singular event term ‘Fido’s biting of Fifi’ is guaranteed to refer, and if ‘The stair rail is rusting’ is true, the singular state term ‘The stair rail’s state of rusting’ is guaranteed to refer (cf. Schiffer 1994, 1996).

***I.2 Handling Existence Questions***

That understanding of application conditions and our earlier understanding of the truth-conditions for existence claims together yield the easy approach to existence questions. Any well-formed sortal refers if its application conditions are fulfilled, and so determining the truth-value of an existence (or non-existence) claim involving a well-formed sortal \*K\* may be done in two simple steps: First, undertaking conceptual analysis to figure out the associated application conditions for \*K\* (what it would take, according to the associated semantic rules, for the term to refer)—or (using semantic descent) to figure out the existence conditions for Ks (what it would take for there to be such things); second, undertaking empirical inquiry to see whether those conditions are fulfilled.

This procedure often makes the answers to existence questions easy and obvious: ‘Do chairs exist?’, for example, may be answered first by appeal to the application conditions for the term ‘chair’. One thing that seems clear: the ordinarily associated conditions are fulfilled by situations like *these,* in which, e.g., some wood has been hammered together by someone intending to make a seating device—and succeeding at putting it together in such a way that a person may be comfortably supported in a sitting posture. And we don’t need very involved empirical investigations to find that these conditions are fulfilled (barring radical skeptical hypotheses, we need only look around the room)—so, chairs exist.[[7]](#endnote-7)

I have elsewhere argued that a great many ontological disputes are easily resolvable along these lines, and that this approach gives us grounds for accepting the existence of most common sense entities, including not only ordinary concrete objects like tables and chairs, sticks and stones (2007), but also abstract social and cultural objects such as symphonies, corporations, and even fictional characters (2003).[[8]](#endnote-8)

This easy method not only enables us to handle well-formed existence questions with ease, it also enables us to diagnose some common problems with ontological debates. For on this view existence claims (whether formulated in English or quantificationally) are only truth-evaluable when paired with a term or terms that come with application conditions, so that their truth may be evaluated by way of establishing whether or not those application conditions are fulfilled. So while, properly formulated, existence questions are easy to answer, there are several ways in which existence questions may turn out to be ill-formed and unanswerable, or in which serious ontologists may end up talking past each other and failing to have a genuine debate (cf. my 2009). Existence claims and questions may be ill-formed if they involve a term without associated application conditions. As I have argued elsewhere (2009), attempts to revive ‘serious’ ontological debates (in the face of semanticism) by asking if there really is some *object* in the relevant situation often rely on using the term ‘object’ in a way that lacks application conditions, and so asking an ill-formed, unanswerable question.[[9]](#endnote-9) Moreover, ontological debates may turn out to be pseudo-debates if each of the disputants tacitly has a different range of terms in view, or associates different application conditions with the terms used. Elsewhere (2009) I have extensively discussed the ways in which ontological debates may fail to be genuine on this view.

The virtues of the easy approach are readily evident to those without a stake in serious ontological debates, and who may have suspected that something was wrong with these interminable disputes. It provides ways of suggesting where various ontological disputes have gone wrong; but at the same time, it does not interfere with the idea that standard existence questions posed in ordinary life, in ordinary English, are meaningful and straightforwardly answerable—and indeed it gives us the intuitively ‘right’ answers to these existence questions: e.g., that there are tables and chairs and symphonies, but there are not witches or phlogiston (as the corresponding application conditions for these latter terms are not met) (cf. my 2009).[[10]](#endnote-10)

But while the easy method yields answers to existence questions, it also deflates those questions so that there is nothing particularly deep or philosophical about them: they are to be answered simply by a combination of conceptual and empirical enquiry. While the conceptual work may be difficult and controversial, it is there (and not in making discoveries about what exists) that the real philosophical work lies. The result is a sort of Carnapian deflationism about existence claims: Existence claims must be made using a language, and (if they are to be meaningful and truth-evaluable) must involve using the meaningful terms of that language with their extant application conditions. Provided we approach existence questions using well-formed meaningful terms with application conditions, they are easy (internal) questions. Beyond that, the questions that remain are those of what language we should adopt—what terms, with what application conditions—and that, it seems, must be a pragmatic issue.[[11]](#endnote-11) Some serious ontologists may be understood as tacitly proposing or employing a new language, but doing so does not involve them in a factual disagreement either with the ordinary person (who makes existence claims in plain English) or with other serious ontologists (who either speak standard English or employ their own new language).

**II. Criticisms**

I turn now to discuss some recurrent criticisms that have either been raised directly against the easy view, or are raised against the neo-Fregean position and might be thought to also apply here. Examining those should give us a better idea of where this view stands and what its prospects might be.

***II.1. (Problematic) Metaphysical commitments***

The first standard line of objection is to point out that, although it claims to be deflationary and to dissolve traditional ontological debates, the semanticist approach leaves us committed to substantive ontological positions (Sider 2009, Sidelle 2008). Thus, e.g., Ted Sider writes of my view “But that would not make all the ontological questions go away,” noting that we could still ask, e.g. whether, granting that there are some particles arranged personwise, there are some persons in addition (2009, [37]). Alan Sidelle similarly notes that “Thomasson cannot quite get away without doing, or needing to do, the sort of ‘serious’ metaphysics which she hopes to undermine” (2008, 175).

This is a useful observation, but it only shows the need to clarify the sense in which this easy approach is and is not deflationary. It is not deflationary in Yablo’s (2009) sense, of suggesting that ontological questions are moot and have no answers. Provided the questions are well-formed (and leaving problems of vagueness and indeterminacy aside), there are typically right answers to existence questions. (The answer to Sider’s is ‘yes’.) The view is, however, deflationary in holding that these answers are easy to come by via conceptual and empirical enquiry, and that the philosopher’s share of work is on the side of conceptual analysis.

This observation, however, may be turned into an objection by arguing that the metaphysical views to which one becomes committed (if one adopts the ‘easy’ method) are problematic. The central source of the alleged problem is that the easy method leaves us with a plentitudinous ontology.[[12]](#endnote-12) For if we apply this method, then as long as we have a well-formed term the application conditions for which are fulfilled, the term refers and there are such entities. As a result, it turns out that most common sense terms speakers thought referred do so, e.g. ‘person’, ‘chair’, ‘mortgage’, and ‘symphony’ all refer, and these things exist. Moreover, any well-formed term we care to introduce will also have a referent, provided it has application conditions that are fulfilled, and so we can also conclude that mereological sums exist, van Inwagen’s gollyswoggles exist, Hirsch’s incars exist, and so on (cf. my 2007, 183-85).

This might be thought to be problematic on various grounds: that accepting such entities flouts the demand for parsimony in ontology, leads us into other problems such as violations of prohibitions against co-location, doubling-up of properties, etc, or even (by accepting the existence of gollyswoggles, sums and the like) itself violates common sense. I have dealt with all of these objections in *Ordinary Objects* (2007), so I won’t rehash them here.[[13]](#endnote-13)

***II.2. (Problematic) Transformation Rules***

Instead, here I will focus on two big issues that I haven’t fully dealt with in the book. Both of these involve criticisms that have been raised primarily against the neo-Fregean approach to mathematical objects (and certain other abstracta). The semanticist view should not simply be identified with neo-Fregeanism as there are important differences between them.[[14]](#endnote-14) Nonetheless, the views share certain crucial commonalities that might make the semanticist appear vulnerable to the same problems thought to plague neo-Fregeanism.

The neo-Fregean holds that there are abstraction principles which are conceptual truths, with the form of stating an equivalence relation (e.g. on concreta) on the right side, and an identity statement involving a new kind of term (e.g. for abstracta) on the left, e.g. Hume’s Principle states:

HP: The number of As = the number of Bs iff the As and the Bs are equinumerous

The truth of the right-hand side of the conditional is supposed to be ‘conceptually sufficient’ for that of the left (Hale/Wright 2009, 12), and the truth of the identity statement guarantees that the singular terms in it (e.g. ‘the number of As’) refer, thus guaranteeing the existence of numbers.

The semanticist does not limit the relevant conceptual truths to abstraction principles, and does not define reference in terms of truth. But despite these differences, the neo-Fregean and the semanticist both accept that what we might call a ‘basic’ claim involving no terms for Js, combined with an analytic or conceptual truth, may entail the existence of a new kind of thing J. Call the rules that enable us to move from the basic truth to the claim about the existence of Js ‘transformation rules’—rules that may be said to be ‘existence entailing’ in the sense that they enable us to infer the existence of entities of a new kind J from claims that made no mention of Js at all.[[15]](#endnote-15)

These transformation rules have been much discussed in the literature on neo-Fregeanism. First, skepticism has been raised about whether we should accept these transformation rules and the metaphysical commitments they apparently hand us. We can divide the objections to these principles roughly into two categories: logical objections and ontological objections. I will discuss these in turn in sections (II.2.a) and (II.2.b) below.

***II.2.a Logical Objections to Transformation Rules***

The logical objection to existence-entailing transformation rules arises as the ‘bad company’ objection to neo-Fregeanism. The abstraction principles that the neo-Fregean relies on are supposed to be conceptual truths. But other abstraction principles with the same form lead to various problems, including self-contradiction, conflicts with known empirical facts, or conflicts with the consequences of other principles with equally good standing. Parallel worries may easily be raised about the semanticist’s transformation rules, which enable us to introduce terms \*J\* that are guaranteed to refer provided only that some more basic claim S (which involves no mention of Js) is true. For allowing these definitional existence entailments may, in certain cases, get us into palpable trouble. Thus, famously, holding that for every propositional function (P(x)), there exists a set whose members are exactly those things that have P, leads to Fregean set-theoretic paradoxes. Other problems with existence-entailing principles arise from conflicts with what seem to be obvious empirical truths. Thus, in Stephen Schiffer’s example, a ‘wishdate’ is stipulatively defined as “a person whose existence supervenes on someone’s wishing for a date, every such wish bringing into existence a person to date” (2003, 53). But accepting this principle apparently conflicts with the obvious empirical truth that simply wishing does not create a person to date. As a result (the objection goes) it can’t be that we should accept across the board all such abstraction principles as conceptual truths (Eklund 2006).

In response to the bad company objection neo-Fregeans have argued for a range of conditions—including consistency, conservativeness, generality, and harmony (among interrelated definitions)—that implicit definitions must meet to be well-formed.[[16]](#endnote-16) The semanticist must require that the sortal terms meet similar constraints if the guarantee of reference (given fulfillment of application conditions) is to hold.[[17]](#endnote-17) (This requirement was alluded to above in saying the terms must be ‘well-formed’). Such constraints have been much discussed elsewhere, so rather than discussing the details of how such constraints should be formulated here, it may be more useful to step back to examine at a broader level what the impact of bad company objections is supposed to be, and what our attitude towards them should be—something the generality of the semanticist approach can shed new light on.

Bad-company objections raise important challenges for the semanticist to refine her view by saying what constraints well-formed sortals must meet, but they do little to undermine the approach as a whole. The semanticist allows that we may introduce new terms that have sufficient conditions for application that are guaranteed to be met if other statements in the (unextended) language are true. And while the ‘bad company’ objection reminds us that there may be constraints on what transformation rules are (individually or jointly) permissible, they do not undermine the idea that there may be—and indeed in most cases there are—terms that are perfectly well-introduced via transformation rules. Indeed, as Hale and Wright have argued (2009, 11-12), we should assume that our implicit definitions are fine, and meet the requisite conditions, unless shown otherwise—the person who uses the relevant terms and claims that the corresponding entities exist is not obliged to justify their use by determining the details of the requisite conditions and demonstrating that they are met by the term used.

This point is reinforced when we note, with the semanticist, just how ubiquitous such existence-entailing transformation rules are. We find them not only in introducing reference to the refined abstracta of mathematics, but also in introducing reference to such pedestrian entities as mortgages, corporations, churches, contracts, and the like. Although there may be cases in which problems can be shown to arise with the relevant transformation rules, this does not seem to give us the least reason to doubt that many of these rules are perfectly well-functioning, and that there are mortgages, corporations, and the like.

A helpful comparison comes from considering games. The constitutive rules of a game include transformation rules that, combined with empirical facts, tell us under what conditions there are, e.g., touchdowns, fouls, and the like. The rules of some games are demonstrably inconsistent—e.g., as Ted Cohen (1991) has pointed out, the rules of baseball are subtly inconsistent. But the fact that some games have rules that are inconsistent casts no doubt on the idea that many games may have consistent rules—rules that (combined with empirical facts) entail that there were, e.g. three touchdowns scored by the Redskins in the fourth quarter, or seven fouls committed by Manchester United. Nor then should the problems that can arise for superficially similar transformation rules be taken to undermine the general idea that there may be well-formed transformation rules that entail the existence of entities of new sorts given the truth of sentences that appealed to no such things, and that existence questions may often be answered simply by appealing to the basic truths and making use of a well-formed transformation rule.

The comparison with games is doubly useful, since it’s not even clear that the subtle inconsistencies of the rules of baseball show that there are none of the entities the existence of which would be entailed by the rules of *that* game—no pitchers, base hits, home runs, etc.—though (given the inconsistency) there can be nothing that exactly matches all the constraints of the rules. Instead, such difficulties might raise interpretive questions—we might require the principle of charity to reinterpret baseball discourse in a way that minimally revises it to avoid the contradictions while retaining the vast majority of its rules intact, including transformation rules that tell us under what conditions there are hits, runs, errors, and the like.

This brings us to a second general point about bad-company style objections to the semanticist’s defense of the existence of ordinary objects. The standard objections to accepting existence-entailing transformation rules involve attempts to stipulatively define terms (‘hoverball’, ‘wishdate’, ‘xheart’) that turn out to be problematic in some way. But what we were interested in initially was the answer to the question ‘what exists?’ The basic strategy of the easy approach is to say that, to figure out whether Ks exist, first, figure out the application conditions for \*K\*, then see if they’re fulfilled. Bad company objections remind us that we need to add in a step: we shouldn’t say if just any old application conditions for a term \*K\* are fulfilled, there are Ks: we need to add in constraints on how \*K\* is defined (requiring, e.g. consistency, conservativeness, harmony…).

But the ontological questions we’re really interested in involve extant terms of a living language—we have to *figure out* what the application conditions for our natural language terms are. And this requires (sometimes very tricky) interpretation—it’s not just a matter of stipulating some new definition, or even reading out the explicit definitions in the baseball rule book. The constraints governing interpretation might ensure that—for the living terms of a proper language—any plausible interpretation of the application conditions for our terms will ensure that these on the whole meet the relevant constraints; that we interpret our terms as having consistent rules of use, as being mutually harmonious, and so on. And so, in answering normal existence questions, we might not need to separately consider an added step, provided we do our interpretation well.

Thus we should be suspicious of the idea that bad company objections give us reason to doubt the legitimacy of the semanticist’s arguments for the existence of ordinary objects—we’re very unlikely to turn up inconsistencies, failures of harmony, etc. in the rules of use for ordinary terms, if we do our interpretive work well. For interpretive constraints such as charity might by and large prevent us from ascribing to the terms of a language such inconsistent rules as would characteristically undermine the claim of its terms to be well-formed.

***II.2.b. Ontological Objections to Transformation Rules***

The ontological objection to existence-entailing transformation rules is that these are fundamentally *linguistic* principles (serving as implicit definitions of our terms); entities are objects in the world. So (the objection goes) how can linguistic principles guarantee the existence of real entities? Thus, for example, Stephen Yablo writes of attempts to prove the existence of abstracta from a priori or empirically obvious premises, that such “arguments are put forward with a palpable sense of daring, as though a rabbit were about to be pulled out of a hat” (Yablo 2000, 197)[[18]](#endnote-18), adding, “Our feeling of hocus-pocus about the ‘easy’ proof of numbers (etc.) is really very strong and has got to be respected” (Yablo 2000, 199). If these linguistic principles aren’t magically *creating* the entities whose existence they supposedly entail, the objection goes, what ensures that the world ‘lives up to’ the promises of the linguistic principles; what ensures that there are all the objects there would have to be if the linguistic principles were legitimate? (cf. Hale/Wright 2001, 12ff).

Those who would raise this as an objection, however, have failed to see the thoroughgoing nature of the semanticist’s approach. The skeptical question is: are there enough objects to live up to the promises of the linguistic principles? (cf. Field (1984); Sider (2007, 3)). So, e.g., if we have a principle that says that if there are particles arranged tablewise, there is a table—what ensures that there is this (additional) object there? If we have a principle that says that if the relevant paperwork is filed, a corporation is created, what ensures that there is such an object as a corporation in the world that ‘pops’ into existence upon the filing of the relevant paperwork?

The semanticist’s first response, of course, is to ask: what would it take for there to be enough objects—for there to be an object where there are particles arranged tablewise or a bunch of paperwork is filed? This question, too, has to be asked *using* language, and as always, the semanticist’s strategy in answering it will be to try to determine the application conditions for the substantive term involved—in this case, ‘object’—and then see if they are fulfilled. Now this is a tricky matter, as the English word ‘object’ (and similar terms like ‘thing’, ‘entity’, ‘individual’, and the like) apparently has several uses (cf. my 2009). Suppose ‘object’ has independent application conditions of its own (that is, application conditions that may be evaluated without appeal to whether or not there is a table or a corporation (or referent of any other sortal term) there). Either they are met in the relevant situation (with the particles arranged tablewise, with the paperwork signed) or they are not. If they are, the challenge is met, for there is after all an object there. Suppose they are not met—perhaps the application conditions for ‘object’ require a quantity of physical stuff unified in certain ways that particles arranged tablewise are not (and that is not required for the application conditions for ‘corporation’ to be fulfilled). In that case, we might have reason to deny that there are *objects* in the relevant situations, but we still wouldn’t have reason to deny that there are *tables* and *corporations*—so this line would at most suggest that tables and corporations do not count as ‘objects’ in this sense of ‘object’. (This is a line of reply few serious metaphysicians will make use of, as most insist that they are not simply denying, e.g., that tables are objects (cf. van Inwagen 1990)).

Another reason this approach is unpopular is that it sounds odd to say that there is a table there but there is no object. This oddness comes from the fact that ‘object’ is often, perhaps most often, used in English as what is called a ‘dummy sortal’ (Lowe 1989, 11-12, 24-5)—that is, a term that stands in for any genuine sortal term. I have elsewhere called this the ‘covering’ use of ‘object’, according to which ‘object’ has derivative application conditions: it is guaranteed to apply if any genuine sortal term applies. In that case, we can again answer the question of whether there is a relevant object in the situations, and do so in the positive: if there is a table or a corporation, there is guaranteed to be an object—since (on this view) the (derivative) application conditions for ‘object’ are guaranteed to be fulfilled provided those for any first-order sortal term are.

How else might ‘object’ be used in asking whether there really are enough *objects* in the world to make good on the promises of the existence-entailing principles? If ‘object’ is not being used with any application conditions at all (neither independent of those for other sortals, nor derivative in a ‘covering’ use), then on the semanticist’s view, the question is simply ill-formed and unanswerable.

So in short if we address question ‘Are there enough objects there?’ by way of asking about the application conditions for ‘object’, the objection quickly dissolves. Raising it as an objection requires assuming that the question ‘are there enough objects there?’ may be answered in a way that does *not* go via determining the application conditions for the terms in *that* question, and whether or not they are fulfilled. But that of course is just what the semanticist denies. Accordingly, while the above line of thought might articulate the serious ontologists’ way of feeling ill-at-ease with the semanticist approach, it does not provide an objection to it, but merely begs the question against it.

In fact, on the semanticist view, we can say why we have no reason to worry that there might not be enough ‘objects’ to live up to the principles: the transformation rules are *analytic* principles that ensure that sometimes it takes no more for a novel term to apply than for certain other conditions to hold (or than it takes for the truth-conditions of the ‘basic’ sentence to be fulfilled).[[19]](#endnote-19) On the semanticist view, since it takes no more for ‘table’ to apply than for there to be particles arranged tablewise, it requires no metaphysical magic, no ‘popping into existence’ for there to be a table provided there are particles arranged tablewise (and provided there is a table, there is—on the covering sense of the term—an object).[[20]](#endnote-20) In metaphysics as elsewhere, the only way to pull a rabbit out of a hat is if it’s already there.

**III. Conclusion**

For those who do not have a stake in the ongoing ontological debates, I think the easy approach is quite naturally appealing. It is simple—requiring us to posit only one fixed rule of use for the quantifier (unlike Hirschian deflationary views). It also yields the intuitively right answers to a variety of existence questions—both positive (e.g. there are tables, chairs, corporations, marriages) and negative (there are no witches, there is no phlogiston).

The easy view also enables us to diagnose where others have gone wrong in thinking that there was something deeper, more difficult to do in the name of ontology: They might do so, e.g., either in failing to note that, to be fully meaningful and truth-evaluable, existence claims must concern some sort or sorts of entity we are talking about, or by failing to grasp the rules of use for that slippery term ‘object’. But it diagnoses problems with ontological debates about existence without undermining the idea that existence questions may be perfectly sensibly asked, and straightforwardly answered, in ordinary English. While this diagnostic ability won’t be considered an advantage by the serious ontologists who earnestly participate in the debates, it might well be so seen by more neutral observers who have long suspected that something was wrong with these disputes.

While the ‘easy’ view provides a natural understanding of how to address existence questions in ordinary English, it is often criticized on grounds of committing us to an unacceptable plentitudinous ontology or appealing to transformation rules that are problematic on logical or ontological grounds. I have argued, however, that more fully understood, the semanticist approach is not easily assailed from these angles. As long as it remains unassailed, its initial attractions remain untarnished, and we can retain the hope that well-formed ontological questions really are easy to answer.

1. Indeed, although there has been some discussion lately about what metaontology a neo-Fregean should be committed to—see e.g. Eklund (2006), Sider (2007), and Hawley (2007)—neo-Fregeans have often resisted the idea that they need any systematic metaontological approach. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For simplicity I will just discuss sortal terms here, though on my view parallel points apply if we consider existence questions posed using singular terms, as I hold that these, too, must come associated with some basic conceptual content specifying a sort (or disjunction of sorts) of entity to be referred to. See my (2007, 42ff). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For further discussion and defense of this view, see my “Existence Questions” (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I discuss objections to this view that arise from causal theories of reference in my (2007, 38-53), and argue that accepting a purely causal theory of reference will not help the serious ontologist in my (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. I respond to intuitions that kangaroos could be robots in my (2007, 48-53). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Provided \*J\* is well-formed—see section II.2.a below. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. One standard reply of the serious ontologist is to deny that the application conditions for ‘chair’ are met in the circumstances described above—for (they say) that requires that there be some *object* composed by the pieces of wood, but there is none. The defender of the easy view, however, only has to ask: what are the application conditions for ‘object’ used here? Either ‘object’ as used by the serious ontologist has application conditions or it doesn’t. If it is used as a sortal term with first-order application conditions of its own (say, requiring a plenum of unified matter), then it is implausible that fulfilling these is essential to fulfilling the ordinarily associated application conditions for ‘chair’. The idea that ‘chair’ applies only if ‘object’ applies derives from a covering use of ‘object’, on which ‘object’ applies provided any first-order sortal applies; but then we can’t deny that there is a chair on grounds of denying that there is some *object.* Finally, if ‘object’ lacks application conditions, then ‘is there an object here?’ is simply an ill-formed, unanswerable question. (See my 2009 for fuller details of this line of argument). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. But things can admittedly get a bit more complicated. It is no accident that in my exposition of the view thus far (and most such expositions elsewhere) I have taken as my examples existence claims involving standard English terms such as ‘table’, ‘chair’, ‘painting’, and ‘symphony’. For the approach relies on beginning from conceptual analysis to determine the term’s application conditions, and where we have a term with an established English use, there is much more to go on in undertaking a conceptual analysis, and we are much surer on our feet in knowing where a term is to be applied or refused.

   Things can get trickier when we shift to distinctively philosophical terms of art, including such terms as ‘mereological sum’, ‘temporal part’, ‘trope’, ‘universal’, and the like. For these often have no established use in ordinary English, and if philosophers use these terms as different terms of art, with different associated application conditions, then debates, e.g. over whether or not there are universals, may turn out to be pseudo-debates in which the participants simply talk past each other. Nonetheless, to the extent that shared application conditions may be found, the debates may again be easily settled—e.g. if it is simply a rule of use that (for singular terms ‘a’ and ‘b’) ‘mereological sum of a and b’ applies provided ‘a’ applies and ‘b’ applies, then (assuming some other terms refer), it is a trivial matter to show that there are mereological sums. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Similarly, quantificational claims may fail to be truth-evaluable if they don’t involve specifying a domain—where that involves specifying (or presupposing) a sort or sorts of entity over which we are quantifying. See my (2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Yablo (2009) lays out as a condition for those who take a ‘quizzical’ attitude to ontological questions that they don’t make those existence questions that intuitively have clear answers unanswerable. This might be more generally thought of as a condition any deflationary view should fulfill; the semanticist view meets it with ease. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. At least, unless the case can be made (as Sider (2009) hopes) that there is one absolutely best language, rather than different languages that may be better or worse suited to different pragmatic purposes. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Eklund (2006b, 325-6) similarly argues that generalizing the neo-Fregean approach commits one to what he calls a ‘maximalist’ ontology. (Note though that his argument only applies directly to the neo-Fregean view, and his way of defining the ‘maximalist’ position is not one I endorse, though his ‘maximalism’ is obviously closely related to the plentitudinous ontology that comes with semanticism). Wright (2009) disputes the charge that the neo-Fregean is committed to maximalism in Eklund’s sense. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Eklund raises another objection to plentitudinous ontologies: that they are apt to be contradictory, as the transformation principles may entail the existence of incompatible objects (2006a). This is a development of the ‘bad company’ objection (see below), and is best addressed by imposing a harmony constraint on transformation rules. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. E.g., the neo-Fregean view takes off from the syntactic priority thesis, understanding reference in terms of truth: for any singular term to refer is for it to appear in a suitable true statement (canonically, an identity statement). It is then the fact that numerical terms function as singular terms in appropriate true sentences that ensures that they refer. The semanticist approach, by contrast, analyses reference in terms of application conditions, and understands existence claims as true provided the application conditions for the appropriate terms are fulfilled. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. In the neo-Fregean’s case the rules will involve combining the abstraction principle with the principle that the appearance of a singular term \*J\* in a true identity statement entails the existence of Js. These jointly enable us to move, e.g. from the claim about an equivalence relation to the claim about the existence of a number. The semanticist allows the rules to take a variety of forms, including, e.g. that if the following paperwork is filed, a corporation exists. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For discussion and development of these constraints, see Hale/Wright (2001, 132-7). Also see Schiffer (2003, 53-61) for a relevant way of stating the conservativeness constraint. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. This is not to say one should deny reference where one or more constraints is not fulfilled—difficult issues may arise about what we should say in various cases, as in the baseball case (below). It is only to say that the semanticist should only be committed to the guarantee of reference in cases that satisfy the constraints. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. A point echoed by Eklund (2006, 97). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. This, of course, will raise objections from those suspicious of analyticity; I will not have space to respond to those broad objections here, though elsewhere I have done so (2007, chapter 2), and have also elsewhere (2009b) developed an account of why analytic claims don’t need truthmakers—an account that may be pressed into service here in again showing why worries about the world failing to measure up are out of place. Karen Bennett (2009) notes that all participants in the serious metaphysical debates deny that such principles are analytic, taking this as evidence against their being analytic. But while it may be true that the serious participants deny that these principles are analytic, that does not undermine the present critique of the disputes: instead, the semanticist’s point may be precisely that that is where disputants on both sides of metaphysical debates jointly go wrong (much as the compatibilist maintains that libertarians and hard determinists jointly go wrong in taking our concept of freedom to be too demanding). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Cf. Hale/Wright (2009) who emphasize that the disputed abstraction principles are conceptual truths, and so do not leave any hostages to metaphysical fortune.

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