

Metaphysics Today Replies to Authors

This volume began at a conference on my work held in Granada, Spain in December 2019. I am extremely grateful to all the philosophers who participated there, and/or contributed here, for taking the time to engage so deeply with my work and for providing so much to think about. I am also grateful to Maria Garcia-Encinas and Fernando Martínez Manrique for organizing the conference, to Otavio Bueno for suggesting the idea of a volume based on the work presented there, and to Mirco Sambrotta for all his work in editing this volume.

The papers collected here address work spanning my career to date—from my early work on fiction 25 years ago, to my recent work on modality and metametaphysics. I will address and reply to their contributions below, roughly in time-order of the work discussed. While some of the papers here raise challenges for my views, others apply or extend the views in useful and important ways. In either case, engaging with these critical discussions of work has been both thought-provoking and valuable to me. I hope readers, too, will find that reading these articles and replies enhances their understanding of the positions I defend, their challenges, their resources for defense, and their broader implications for other areas of philosophy—and sometimes, for other areas of life.

Acero on fiction

Juan Acero takes us back to some of my earliest work—*Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) in which I develop an ‘artifactual theory’ of fiction. When I first wrote *Fiction and Metaphysics*, there were two major approaches to fiction. One (anti-realist) approach holds that the names of fictional characters never refer; instead, all apparent references to fictional characters are to be paraphrased away (as on traditional Russellian, Fregean, or Rylean approaches) or taken as within the context of a pretense or game of ‘make-believe’ (Walton 1990). The second (neo- Meinongian) approach holds that the names of fictional characters *do* refer—to non-existent or Platonistic abstract objects, which are not created, and are individuated by the properties they are attributed in the stories (Parsons 1980, Zalta 1983). In contrast to both of these approaches, I argued that there *are* fictional characters, but that these are a kind of abstract cultural artifact, created in a certain time and context, and capable of change and destruction. In these ways, I argued, they are not unlike works of literature, works of music, laws of state, and other abstract cultural artifacts.

Acero argues that this approach runs into what he calls the ‘Equivocality Problem’. The problem is this: Names for fictional characters get used in many different contexts.¹ In some (which I call ‘external’ contexts), we speak from the perspective of a critic or literary historian, where we might speak of Harry Lime, say, as a character created by Graham Greene in *The Third Man*. In other contexts (which I call ‘internal contexts’) readers discuss the *content* of a work of fiction, e.g. saying “Harry Lime traffics in diluted penicillin”. Acero claims that to

¹ In later work (2009, 11) I distinguish four different forms of fictional discourse: fictionalizing discourse (discourse within works of fiction), nonexistence claims, internal discourse (by readers about the content of works of fiction), and external discourse by readers and critics (about characters as characters, their sources, origins, place in literary history...).

handle both kinds of discourse, I must treat “Harry Lime” as two names in disguise—on my view, he alleges, “‘Harry Lime’ is a two-symbol, equivocal expression” (Acero 32).

And this, he argues, leads to other problems. For what look like sound inferences turn out not to be sound, given the equivocation. For example, consider the following inference:

1. Harry Lime is the character created by Graham Greene in *The Third Man*
2. Harry Lime traffics in diluted penicillin
3. The character created by Graham Greene in *The Third Man* traffics in diluted penicillin

For in (1) (Acero says, correctly) I treat ‘Harry Lime’ as referring to an abstract artifact; but in (2) (he suggests that my view says) ‘Harry Lime’ fails to refer (Acero 13).

Anyone who works on fictional discourse must do *some* paraphrasing in order to avoid outright contradictions, say, between saying that Frankenstein’s monster was a creation of Mary Shelley, and that Frankenstein’s monster was created by Dr. Frankenstein (see my 2003a). No one can just take all statements about fictional characters at face value.

But Acero oversimplifies my way of handling internal claims such as (2). As he notes, I do treat such internal discourse about the content of works of fiction as implicitly in the context of an ‘according to the story’ or pretense operator (this enables us to avoid contradictions like the one just mentioned).² But questions remain about how to read the scope of the ‘according to the story’ operator. That is, we could read the name ‘Harry Lime’ as *outside* the scope of the story operator:

2.1 Harry Lime is such that (according to the story, he traffics in diluted penicillin).

Or we could read name as inside the scope of the story operator:

2.2 According to the story (There is some *x* such that *x* is called ‘Harry Lime’ and *x* traffics in diluted penicillin)

If we take the first option, we can read the name ‘Harry Lime’ in 2.1 as referring to an abstract artifact—just as in (1), and yet we avoid contradictions between what is *said in the fiction* and what is *really the case*, since what is said in the fiction is only true *according to the story*. We also keep a parallelism in reading fictional discourse about real people, versus about fictional characters. If we take the second option, we need not take the name ‘Harry Lime’ in that context to be referring.

Acero claims to be discussing only the version of my view from *Fiction and Metaphysics* (1999), but there I embrace the first option, and take ‘Harry Lime’ to refer to the abstract artifact, and to report on what is true about it, according to the story.³ This avoids the ‘equivocality problem’, since the name in each case refers to an abstract artifact.

But taking this approach does leave me with a different problem, raised by Stephen Yablo (1999): that it entails that authors are ascribing category-inappropriate properties (like smoking a pipe, or in this case, trafficking in diluted penicillin) to abstract objects.

² A pretense operator would also do the job—I am not particularly committed on which way to go.

³ I was somewhat less explicit about the scope issue back in my (1999) than I would be now. But I do speak of predications in fictional contexts as *parallel* regardless of whether they are about real individuals or fictional characters (1999, 107). Internal statements “are not literally true, although they describe states of affairs that, according to the relevant stories, do obtain regarding the fictional character Hamlet and the real people Nietzsche and Freud” (1999, 107). I also accept there that authors performatively create fictional characters through their writing (1999, 12-14) and then refer back to them, ascribing them further properties. I also say there that authors of sequels refer back to extant characters and ascribe them new properties (1999, 67). I was more explicit about the choice point in reading the scope my (2003a, section 2.1). Please see that text for fuller discussion.

For these reasons, I later (by the time of writing my 2003a) came to adopt the second option.⁴ That is, I came to hold (roughly following Schiffer 1996) that in *writing* fiction (engaging in *fictionalizing* discourse), authors aren't referring back to fictional characters, but rather *enabling* reference to them, by engaging in a kind of extended *de dicto* pretense that 'there once was a man, such that he...', which functions roughly as a performative that enables future readers to refer back to the *fictional character* as an abstract artifact created therein. (Those who engage in internal discourse about the contents of works of fiction may then be seen as reporting on the contents of this *de dicto* pretense.) This solution has the benefit of not treating authors as ascribing categorically inappropriate properties to abstract artifacts. As I acknowledge (2003a), it also has some costs of its own—for example, that it threatens to undermine the parallelism between fictionalizing discourse about real people versus fictional characters,⁵ and complicates the story of how an author may write a sequel 'about' the same character.

Nonetheless, that doesn't mean that we treat the name 'Harry Lime' as *equivocal*, as merely 'two names disguised as one', as Acero alleges. For (*pace* Acero) the two uses of the name (in the author's fictionalizing discourse, and in external discourse) are *not* unrelated, mere accidental uses of the same letters, as in 'bat' (animal) and 'bat' (baseball), or like '4' being used to refer to both a number and a mountain. Instead, the fictionalizing uses *create* the character (abstract artifact) and *entitle* us to later refer back to the abstract artifact (in external contexts). To show the connection, we use the same name that was used in the original *de dicto* pretense (in internal discourse, we implicitly report back on the content of the original pretense). So, despite what Acero says, I *do* allow that fictional names "used in the context of fiction hold an intimate relation to their uses in the real context" (Acero 15).

It is also (*pace* Acero 16) not so strange to allow that the same name may be used in different (but related) ways to (attempt to) refer to things of different metaphysical categories. As I argue later (2010), in order to handle nonexistence claims involving fictional names, we need in any case to allow that fictional names may be associated with two different *categories* of (presupposed, assumed, or intended) referent. The nonexistence claims most often considered are those that we might make to correct someone who has mistakenly taken a fictional name for a name of a real person. To the person who wants to find Sherlock Holmes to help solve a crime, we might say 'Sherlock Holmes doesn't exist', or 'There's no such person—it's just a fictional character'. But we can also make claims of existence and nonexistence about *fictional characters*, for example if (in response to claims there are no black characters in the Harry Potter books) we say, "On the contrary, such characters do exist--there's Angelina Johnson, for example". To handle such cases (I argue (2010)) we need to allow that the same name may be associated with different sets of application conditions—say, those for fictional characters (which can be fulfilled by the name being used appropriately in a work of fiction), versus those for people (which would have to be fulfilled by a human being). But this is not so strange as Acero suggests. For there are many cases in which we can use what is in some sense the same term (same letters and pronunciation, related uses) to attempt to refer to things of different

⁴ For the record, though, I reject Acero's claim that I have 'abandoned a substantial part' of my former theory (though I have accepted this alteration in reading the scope of one kind of fictional discourse). I also want to note that the deflationary aspect of my work post-*Fiction and Metaphysics* is not a radical turn onto a different path, but merely makes explicit and more fully develops some themes that were already implicit in the phenomenological tradition, and in my own earlier work inspired by it. For connections between these ideas, see "How it all hangs together" (2023a).

⁵ Depending, of course, on how one analyzes fictional discourse about real individuals.

ontological categories—and this happens especially with terms for abstract artifacts. For example, “*The Third Man* is on the second shelf down” and “*The Third Man* is Graham Greene’s most iconic tale”; or “The Affordable Care Act is nearly 1000 pages long” and “The Affordable Care Act expands the Medicaid program”, or “Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was interrupted by a fire alarm” and “Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony has four movements”.⁶

The short response to the central problem Acero raises, then, is that it’s *not* obvious that I treat the name ‘Harry Lime’ differently in (1) and (2); this depends how we read the scope of the story operator. In *Fiction and Metaphysics* (which Acero claims to limit his discussion to) I read the name as referring to an abstract artifact in both cases. I readily grant that there are other options, and that there are trade-offs to be made whichever way one goes—I ask only that they be explicitly acknowledged and clearly weighed up. In considering the options, I later (2003a) came to adopt the alternative view—that we should take (2) as giving a *de dicto* report on what a story says, where the story doesn’t refer to an abstract artifact but *enables* reference to one (because engaging in such forms of literary pretense are *all it takes* to count as creating a fictional character) (see my 2003b). But this, too, doesn’t leave such names as merely ‘equivocal’, or as ‘two names in disguise’, and does draw crucial connections between these two uses. It also seems to me to aptly report on some of the complexities in the relations among various different uses of fictional names—differences that are part of what makes handling fictional discourse so complicated and challenging.

Otavio Bueno on Fiction and Film

Otavio Bueno raises fascinating issues about whether the artifactual theory of fiction, developed with literary characters in mind, would carry over smoothly to talk about the fictional characters that appear in films.

He makes two major points: first, there seem to be distinctive barriers to treating the characters portrayed in films as abstract artifacts. For it seems that, on my view, one should say that we *see* fictional characters by watching a film (or by seeing images on the screen), but “given fictional characters’ abstract nature, how can one possibly *see* them?” (6). For “only objects that are in space and that reflect light can be seen” (6).

Second, he argues that, in any case, there is no need to accept that there are fictional characters (conceived of as abstract artifacts or otherwise). For a thoroughgoing empiricism can enable us to:

remain largely agnostic about several issues that more substantive metaphysical views aim to settle—including the existence of fictional characters and abstract objects more generally. Settling these issues is ultimately not required to make sense of film or literature as our literary and cinematic practices are largely undisturbed by the way in which these metaphysical issues are resolved (9)

For we can say that we understand a film, including what is supposed to be real or imagined in the content of the film, by means of seeing images and engaging in perceptual imagination—taking the images to ‘stand for’ fictional characters, and imagining that there are the relevant characters and events. On this view, we can account for how we follow a narrative in a film without the need to take any stand on whether the characters apprehended exist—their “existence is not required to make sense of motion pictures” (10).

⁶ The same category shifting ability would go also for names of colors (and color samples); for names of mathematical proofs, (types of) car or other invention; and many more cases.

These are great questions to raise. And neither in *Fiction and Metaphysics*, nor elsewhere in my work, did I address questions about how or whether the artifactual theory of fictional characters might (or might not) carry over to characters that appear in films.

Let me first address the question of how (or whether) one could *see* the characters in films. Bueno assumes that, if such characters are indeed *abstract* (albeit, abstract *artifacts*, as I have it), we could not see them. And he seems to assume that if one accepted that there are cinematic fictional characters, these must be what we see when we view a film. Let me consider these issues in turn, which lead to two different possible lines of response.

The thought that we cannot (in any sense) see abstracta arises from thinking of abstracta on the classic Platonist model. Numbers and Platonic forms are the standard paradigms of abstracta, and they are supposed to be outside of space and time, and not things we can perceive with our senses. But once we shift to thinking in terms of abstract artifacts, it is not so clear that this carries over. For part of the point of the abstract *artifact* model is to note that many everyday entities we care about—including not only fictional characters, but literary works, laws of state, symphonies, etc.—do not fit the Platonistic paradigm, even though they also are not concrete objects. Regrettably, I do not have a theory of perception or a detailed phenomenology of film to offer; that would require a great deal of additional work. But I do argue in *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Chapter 4) that we can extend the causal theory of reference to allow that we can make ‘quasi-indexical’ reference to fictional characters and other dependent abstracta “via the spatiotemporal concreta in which they are exemplified or represented or on which they depend” (1999, 52). So similarly, it would seem to make sense to allow that we can in some sense perceive (or better: quasi-perceive) some abstracta. We can, for example, see the color Hooker’s Green Light through perceiving instances of it, and can hear symphonies via hearing performances of them. Along these lines, there is room for allowing a sense in which we see (or perhaps better: quasi-see) the fictional characters represented in film. Of course, this quasi-seeing must be somewhat different from ordinary visual perception—in ways phenomenologists have explored. As Roman Ingarden writes, “With justification one could say... that the things and people presented in the film are not simply imagined, but rather really seen by the spectator, although it is not a matter of a straightforward perceptual seeing” (1989, 326). Seeing the things presented in a film does, like ordinary perception, require use of our eyes being affected by light. But unlike ordinary visual perception, we are not free to move about to see what Sponge Bob looks like from behind, or what shape Mia Wallace’s toes are—there are, as Bueno notes, places of indeterminacy in the perceived objects. In watching a film, we also cannot confirm what we take in visually by reaching out with touch, smell, or taste. The experience of time is different as well, as Sartre details in Part IV of his *Psychology of Imagination*. It would take far more detailed work in phenomenology to work out the differences fully (and much of this phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl, Roman Ingarden, and Jean-Paul Sartre have worked on). But the short point here is to note that there is not a principled barrier to saying that in some sense fictional characters can (unlike numbers) be quasi-perceived in a way that does require the use of the eyes, as well as the imagination. (And in ways that would draw the contrast between how we see *some* characters in a movie, but not others (as, in “Charlie’s Angels”, we famously see the three women detectives, but never see Charlie). In fact, the interesting discussions Bueno introduces of perceptual imagination may be helpful in articulating what is involved in this sort of ‘quasi-perception’.

But even if we allow that there is a kind of quasi-perception involved in viewing a film (and can see that there are fewer barriers to allowing something like perception of abstract

artifacts), it remains an open question whether we should say that, in viewing the film, we are quasi-perceiving the relevant *abstract artifacts*. There is a parallel to the issue I discuss in the reply to Acero above about literary fiction: in writing a work of fiction, should we say that the author is saying things *about an abstract artifact*, or merely that they are pretending to assert things about a person, *in virtue of which* we are *entitled* to say that an abstract artifact (the fictional character) is created? As I mentioned there, while in *Fiction and Metaphysics* I took the former approach, in my (2003a) paper (2003a), (following Schiffer 1996) I lean in favor of shifting to the latter view. I am inclined to run a parallel approach for films: saying that, in watching a film, we simply engage in perceptual imagination (without saying that the abstract artifacts are (quasi-)seen), while insisting that nonetheless *there* are fictional characters in films, and that we can refer to them in engaging in film history, criticism, and the like. As will become clear below, that leaves intact the primary reason for saying there are fictional characters: to make sense of (external) critical and historical discourse about them.

That brings us to Bueno's second claim: that a thoroughgoing empiricism can enable us to make sense of films, and our experience and interpretation of them, while remaining agnostic about what he calls "more substantive metaphysical views" about the existence of fictional characters and abstract objects more generally (9).

I actually agree that one can make sense of our experience and interpretation of films—or works of literature for that matter—without having to say that there *are* fictional characters (whether literary or cinematic). In *Fiction and Metaphysics* I distinguish two types of discourse: discourse in 'fictional contexts'—about what goes on in the work (here we speak of Anna Karenina and the like as (if they were) *people*, doing certain things, interacting with others, in a fictional world...); and discourse in 'real contexts'—where we speak from the external perspective of the literary critic or historian about the characters *as characters*, created in a certain time and context, with certain sources or influences, picked up in later stories, etc.). It was always the discourse *in real* (external) contexts that, for me, provided the core arguments for saying 'there are' fictional characters. For all the internal talk and experience, say, of Anna Karenina having an affair, lying on the train tracks, etc., can be handled perfectly well by treating it as talking about what is true *according to the story*, or what we *pretend* when we read the story or discuss its contents, etc.

The hard part involves talk from real or *external* contexts, when we talk about Karenina as being *a famous fictional character, well-developed and psychologically realistic, created by Tolstoy, an influence on future literary history*, etc. For claims of those sorts, though central to claims in literary criticism and history, cannot be paraphrased as talking about what is true *according to the story*, or as what the story invites us to pretend. It is this kind of external, critical discourse that brings about the need to talk about fictional characters *as characters*—which (I have argued (1999)) are best thought of as abstract artifacts. Stephen Schiffer (1996, 158-9) brings out a similar point nicely in imagining a society that tells stories, but has no terms for fictional characters (1996, 158-9). As I would now put it, terms for fictional characters are not essential for writing or appreciating literature. But they do function to *enable us* to engage in certain kinds of discussion in literary criticism and history—when we wish to discuss the origins, sources, and influences on and of various characters, the ways they are developed, their impact on later literary history, etc.

Do we have similar needs in engaging in cinematic history and criticism? Clearly we do. Those who analyze films and their history may say things like that (with apologies for bringing down the tone with these examples) Donald Duck has appeared in 197 different Disney movies (giving him the highest count of all characters), that a character that originated in one film figured as a ‘crossover’ character in a later film, that Simba in “The Lion King” was inspired by Kimba in “Kimba the White Lion”, that the Mia Wallace character was modeled after the actress Anna Karina, that the James Bond character has been portrayed by seven different actors and appeared in twenty-seven different films, and so on. We can make sense of this kind of discourse as talking about abstract artifacts—but not as reporting what is true *according to the story* or the pretense it enjoins us to engage in. Nor are these captured in describing ways in which we engage in perceptual imagination in watching the film as we observe the images on the screen. Anyone who wishes to remain agnostic about whether to say there are fictional characters portrayed in film owes some account not just of our experience in viewing the films, but also of how to make sense of these sorts of ‘external’ discourse common among film critics, historians, and fans.

I am inclined to think that we *do* need to allow that we can refer to the fictional characters of films as well as those of literature, and for similar reasons: to give a proper account of external critical and historical discourse. Does this require getting into some ‘substantive metaphysics’ that an empiricist would do better by leaving behind? Obviously, a lot will hinge here on what one means by ‘empiricism’, and what one means by ‘substantive metaphysics’. I was not explicit about views in metaontology when I wrote *Fiction and Metaphysics* (1999), but I have later come to develop explicitly deflationary metaontological views (e.g. in my 2015 and 2020) that are cohesive with what I was doing in my first book. I do not think that it’s a bit of ‘substantive metaphysics’ to say that there are fictional characters. Instead, that there are fictional characters simply falls out of understanding how terms such as ‘fictional character’ are introduced—with rules that entitle us to make trivial inferences from “Jane Austen wrote a novel pretending to refer to a person called ‘Emma Woodhouse’ and attributing properties to her”, to “The fictional character Emma Woodhouse was created by Jane Austen”, to “There is a fictional character” (cf. my 2003a and 2003b). So, given the empirical fact that Jane Austen did so write, we are entitled to conclude that there is such a fictional character. (In my (2015) terms, this is an ‘easy ontological inference’).

In fact, I think that a thoroughgoing empiricism that also draws on empirical work on *language*, understanding its functional roles and entry rules, will give us support for thinking that agnosticism is not the appropriate response. Instead, given the rules that entitle us to introduce terms for fictional characters (and thereby enable us to engage in external discourse), we have sufficient reason to conclude that there are fictional characters, in the only sense that the relevant term (‘fictional character’) has. And the same would go, with slightly different entry rules, for the fictional characters portrayed in films.

Garcia-Carril on the metaontology of art

My work on fiction broadened naturally into work on the ontology of art generally, and Nemesio Garcia-Carril Puy gives me the opportunity to revisit that work. Garcia-Carril addresses my view about how we can and should do work in the ontology of art—which, for me, was the

first step in developing and presenting my metaontological views. He argues against my approach, claiming that it reduces the ontology of art to ‘triviality’, and doesn’t give ontological accounts a ‘substantive role in the enterprise of understanding art objects and artistic practices’ (2). What is that desired ‘substantive role’? Perhaps among other things, Garcia-Carril seems to hold that work on the ontology of art should enable us to cope with difficult cases, borderline cases, and cases of conflict—cases where our tacit ontological conception is ‘ambiguous or confusing’ (11). But he complains that I give no methodological tools for addressing those cases. As he writes: “Thomasson’s methodology does not provide tools to validate and explain this substantive contribution that ontology can and, in fact, makes” (17).

The central point I want to make in response is that, actually, my approach *does* provide these tools, as one can see by reading the wider context of my work. To see this, it may help readers to put my early work in the metaontology of art back in the big picture of the neo-Carnapian meta-metaphysical position I have been working to develop over many years—of which work in the metaontology of art was the first visible step.

The point of my early work in the ontology of art was to argue that (then-) popular work done on the ontology of art goes wrong if we think of it on the model of scientific ‘discovery’, where ontologists purport to (like scientists) make surprising ‘discoveries’ about what works of art ‘really are’, and where ‘theories’ are to be evaluated on grounds of their ‘theoretic virtues’. This approach often leads to metaphysical posturing, with philosophers claiming to know better than the ‘folk’ or practitioners in the art world, and to be in a position to completely overturn their views. Yet at the same time, such an approach to the ontology of art lacks the credentials to make such claims—indeed it has a completely mysterious epistemology—as it is entirely unclear how such ‘discoveries’ could be made, or how we could adjudicate among competing views. Where criteria for supporting these revisionary ontological views are given at all, they are typically quasi-scientific criteria suitable for ‘theoretic choice’ in the sciences, or are based on appeal to unjustified ‘general metaphysical principles’.⁷ But as I have long been arguing, such criteria are completely inappropriate for work in ontology, which lacks the empirical support of scientific theories, and which involves adjudicating among competing ‘theories’ that are nearly always empirically equivalent.⁸

My criticisms of the ‘discovery’ model and my defense of a positive model for answering questions in the ontology of art were both based on broad views about how we should understand existence questions and modal questions in metaphysics—views that I have refined and developed over the years since.⁹ Garcia-Carril suggests that my support for the approach (which he calls ‘descriptivism’ but I call ‘deflationism’) relies solely on what he calls an ‘arbitrarily chosen’ view of reference-fixing (17). This is not so—I make use of a much wider range of arguments, throughout my metaontological work (see my 2015, 2020a, and elsewhere). I do appeal to a view of reference-fixing in support of my view in my early papers on the ontology of art—but this is not an ‘arbitrarily chosen’ view. Instead, I argue that direct reference theories face a ‘qua-problem’: there are always many ontologically/modally distinct things we could *aim*

⁷ Occasionally, arguments are made instead based on alleged contradictions in the relevant concepts, or poor fit with our ordinary practices. Such arguments must be treated on a case-by-case basis.

⁸ For a more thorough discussion of why the criteria for scientific theory choice are inappropriate in metaphysics, see my (forthcoming b).

⁹ The most developed version of my approach to existence questions is in *Ontology Made Easy* (2015). The fullest development of my views about metaphysical modal claims is in *Norms and Necessity* (2020a), though see also the update, making use of work in systemic functional linguistics (2023b).

to refer to in grounding a term's reference (say, we could aim to refer to a statue or a lump or a temporal part of either; in the case of a symphony we could aim to refer to a performance, a pure sound structure, an indicated structure, etc.). Disambiguating among them (to determine whether and if so to what a term refers) requires that would-be grounders have some background ontological conception of what sort of thing the term is to refer to, if it refers at all.

Garcia-Carril rejects my view that reference-fixing requires ontological disambiguation, by citing Dodd's (2012) appeal to Gareth Evans' view that referential ambiguity may be dispelled by determining which thing (or kind of thing) is the 'dominant or causal source of the relevant body of information' associated with the term by those who ground its reference (10). But as I argue more thoroughly elsewhere (forthcoming a), Evans' suggestion was not designed to disambiguate among purely *ontological* alternatives—which typically differ *not* in their causal powers, but only in their modal properties. It was designed to disambiguate, say, which *person* a certain name refers to—where distinct people are distinct causal sources of information. By contrast, there is simply *no prospect* of determining among merely *ontological alternatives* which is the 'dominant' source of information about *The Burghers of Calais* or *Beethoven's Ninth Symphony*. I urge readers interested in this issue to read my full reply there (forthcoming a) before accepting Garcia-Carril's claim that this approach to reference fixing is 'arbitrarily chosen'. And I humbly ask readers interested generally in the prospects for a deflationary versus quasi-scientific metaontological approach to consider the far wider range of arguments I give for my deflationary metaontological approach in my (2015), (2020a), (forthcoming b) and elsewhere, which there is not space to repeat here.¹⁰

At any rate, let us return to consider this broader metaontological view. The underlying point of my work on the metaontology of art was to insist that such facts as there are about the existence conditions, identity conditions, and persistence conditions of works of art are not quasi-scientific, discoverable features of the world, but instead are "fixed by human intentions and practices" (see my 2010, 128). As a consequence, these conditions may have places of ambiguity, open-endedness, and conflict, so that the corresponding facts are bound to have places of indeterminacy, and answers to the ontological questions are "only answerable to the extent that the way the reference of the term is grounded (and regrounded) disambiguates the ontology by determining the general kind or category of entity that the term is to refer to, if it refers at all" (Thomasson 2010, 120). There may be many different ontological kinds of 'art', and new kinds may be introduced (Thomasson 2010, 121). Where there are gaps and indeterminacies, we must make *decisions* about how we should talk and direct our practices, rather than making *discoveries* of covert ontological facts (see, e.g., my 2010, 120, 124). It is also this that ensures that the relevant ontological conceptions are open to *revision*, and so that work in the ontology of art is relevant to our ongoing, and constantly developing, art-world practices.

My underlying metaontological approach is a neo-Carnapian one.¹¹ Carnap (1950/1956) distinguished between *internal* and *external* questions. Roughly, *internal* questions about, say, the existence of an entity of a given kind (propositions, numbers, symphonies, paintings) are questions to be answered *using* the relevant conceptual or linguistic framework. These were the

¹⁰ Garcia-Carril also refers to a paper by Cumpa and Bueno (2020) arguing that even if we can get easy ontological inferences to the existence of works of art, the view remains 'neutral' about their natures. My arguments about how the ontological 'natures' of things are to be determined are laid out in my views on modality (2020a). Please also see my direct reply to Bueno and Cumpa in my (2020c).

¹¹ The connections to Carnap are most explicitly drawn out in my (2015, Chapter 1).

questions about the ontology of art I was predominantly focused on in my early (2004, 2005, 2006) papers on the topic. But we can also ask what sound like ‘metaphysical’ questions in an *external* mode, asking instead *what linguistic or conceptual framework we ought to adopt* (for various purposes). My more recent work on metalinguistic negotiation (2016) and conceptual engineering (2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2022) has focused on the *external* project. Work on ontology of art is not confined to what Garcia-Carril (following Dodd) calls the ‘descriptive’ task of determining how our art concepts *do* work, and what tacit ontological conception that reveals. It also may include (and at its most interesting ends typically does include) work on what linguistic and conceptual (and correspondingly: ontological) conceptions of art we *should* adopt—whether to better understand or improve our interpretive, conservation, display, or other art-world practices, to keep pace with developments in the art-world, or for other purposes.¹²

Garcia-Carril argues that my approach can’t meet the goal he sets for the ontology of art, “to increase our understanding of artworks and the practices to produce and properly appreciate them” (8), and that it can’t help us cope with difficult cases, borderline cases, cases of conflict; cases where our tacit ontological conception is “ambiguous or confusing” (11). But that is because he only considers half of the story—the internal, not external, side of the story.

I actually agree that work in the ontology of art can and should help us work out how to deal with cases where our tacit ontological conception is incomplete, ambiguous, confusing, outdated, inappropriate, or in need of changes. But the right approach isn’t to pretend we are scientists and making deep ‘discoveries’ about the ‘real (ontological) facts’. Instead, I have tried to show (2020b) how we can develop a *pragmatic* approach to conceptual engineering to help us navigate these normative questions about what linguistic and conceptual scheme to choose, and how we might need to modify it as our needs, the world, and our understanding of the world change. In this way, the total deflationary approach to metaphysics I have developed over the past two decades can help us better deal with these questions, too—and build an approach to the ontology of art that is relevant to our art-world practices, while avoiding epistemological mystery.

Donato-Rodriguez and Falguera on abstract artifacts and theoretical entities

As mentioned above, I develop the idea of ‘abstract artifacts’ in characterizing the ontology of fictional characters, as well as many other abstract social and cultural entities such as works of literature, symphonies and laws of state. Xavier de Donato-Rodriguez and Jose L. Falguera develop an interesting application the notion of ‘abstract artifacts’ to the theoretical entities posited in natural scientific theories. I thank them for the suggestion—it is certainly an interesting idea worth exploring further. Here I will raise a couple of questions I have about how this idea would work, as well as addressing a couple of interpretive issues about my work and Carnap’s.

First, I would like to clarify a couple of interpretive issues. The authors claim that simple realism and metaontological deflationism are independent, in part because ‘from a strictly Carnapian view’ one could be a metaontological deflationist and not accept simple realism, understood as realism ‘in an external sense’. To clarify, I do *not* mean to be embracing realism ‘in an external sense’—whatever that would mean. On the interpretation of Carnap I develop in Chapter 1 of *Ontology Made Easy* (2015),¹³ internal questions are those asked *using* the terms in

¹² And in this way, the approach harmonizes nicely with parts of Davies’ (2004) work.

¹³ Following Huw Price’s (2009) reading of Carnap.

question, with their rules of use established by the relevant linguistic framework ('number', 'property', 'table'). These are the existence questions that generally receive a positive answer, given the easy approach to ontology, leading to a 'simple' (not explanatory) realism about numbers, properties, ordinary objects, etc. In fact, the whole of *Ontology Made Easy* may be seen as concerned with existence questions asked 'internally', which (I argue, following Carnap) is the only sense that has sense. I argue there that 'external' questions, taken straightforwardly, would have to sever the terms from the rules of use that give them meaning—and so would be meaningless pseudo-questions (see my 2015, 38-41). So I should not be taken there or elsewhere to be endorsing answers to the 'external' questions of 'hard metaphysics', nor do I think of the entities described by the sciences as "real entities in the sense of hard metaphysics" (14). Whether we are speaking of mortgages, symphonies, tables, genes, tigers or electrons, the approach to answering existence questions requires determining the rules of use for the relevant terms, including their introduction rules.¹⁴ Sometimes the introduction rules can enable us to make easy (conceptual) inferences to the existence of the relevant entities, without relying on any empirical facts. For example, from *either* 'there are two cups on the table' or its negation, we can infer that there is a number (two) which numbers (or fails to number) the cups. Other times ('there are tables' or 'there are Ivory-billed woodpeckers'), the introduction rules for the relevant terms include application conditions, and we need empirical investigation to determine whether application conditions are met, and so whether the existence claims are true. But in neither case do we need something beyond conceptual and empirical work—we need nothing 'epistemically metaphysical' (to use Sider's phrase (2011, 187)). And (as I argue extensively) in neither case are the methods of neo-Quinean 'hard ontology' appropriate.

One can of course instead treat external questions as (external) *practical* questions about whether or how we should use (parts of) a given linguistic framework. So understood, they may be perfectly meaningful, practical questions (2015, 40-41). Donato-Rodriguez and Falguera mention that Carnap paves the way to reconsider ontological disputes as 'pragmatic matters' (14) where, by contrast, I make it 'too easy'. But throughout my recent work I have embraced and developed the idea that we can reconstrue and address many debates in metaphysics as practical disputes to be addressed by conceptual engineering (see my 2017, 2020b, 2021). So here, too, my view is *Carnapian*, not in tension with Carnap. The view they outline as 'even more Carnapian' than mine (20) is essentially mine—so I think we are actually on the same page here.

Let us move on to Donato-Rodriguez and Falguera's positive suggestion: that theoretical entities can be understood as abstract artifacts, in the sense in which I claim that fictional characters (and many other social/cultural entities, such as novels, symphonies, and laws of state) are abstract artifacts. I think this is an interesting suggestion, though I also have some hesitation, and some questions.

We can certainly think of the theoretic entities of the sciences in this way, and in some contexts (for example in discussions in the history of science, or in discussing the contents of scientific theories) it may be useful to do so. That is, we can think of scientific theories as 'texts', and the entities described in them as like 'characters' in works of literature. We can similarly

¹⁴ My remarks on natural kind terms (which I mean to include such paradigmatic examples as 'water', 'tiger', and 'gold') are not meant to suggest some kind of 'external realism' for these entities, but only to acknowledge that the rules of use for some terms (such as these) may include application conditions that are deferential to worldly conditions that will require empirical discovery (e.g. 'what is the chemical composition of gold?'). For further details see Chapter 4 of my (2020a). To acknowledge variations in the types of rules of use governing different sorts of terms is not to say that existence questions may be meaningful and answerable 'externally'—that is, while severing the terms from their rules of use.

think of the people described in texts (whether they are historical works or fictional works, characters originating in that work or purporting to be some historical figure) as fictional characters—and in this regard it may be useful to be able to speak about the features of Aaron Burr *as a character in 'Hamilton'* (or Aaron Burr as represented in David Stewart's biography *Fallen Emperor*), separately from speaking of the features of Aaron Burr, the historical man. So similarly, we may often want or need to speak of the features of the entities represented in scientific theories *as they are there represented*—we can speak (for example) of atoms, *as they are represented in X theory* distinctly from atoms *as they are represented in Y theory*.

But there are also important disanalogies between the functions and rules that govern use of fictional terms, versus of theoretical terms. Terms used in works of fiction typically have two uses: In works of fiction, authors typically use ordinary terms such as 'dog', 'tree', or 'person', for purposes of telling a story, and as readers we may engage in something like a pretense that the relevant conditions (established in ordinary speech) are fulfilled, even if we know that they aren't (we all know that there is no such person, say, as Sherlock Holmes, but we may still pretentingly use 'Holmes' as a person name). We may also use fictional names in discussions of literary history (say) to refer back to the abstract artifact created by an author, at a particular point in literary history, developed in different ways by different authors, etc. Given these two different uses, we can also (as I discuss elsewhere (2010)) distinguish two sorts of existence claims, depending on whether the assumption is that the name is used with the application conditions for a person (say), or with those for a fictional character. The claims of the first sort are false; claims of the second sort are generally true (though they can also be false, say, if we attempt to speak of the fictional character *Harry Potter's little sister*, when there is no such character).

Terms for theoretical entities introduced in scientific theories, however, can't be thought to be introduced with the same functions and rules of use as terms for fictional characters. Theoretical terms (unlike general terms for used in stories for persons, trees, or dogs) often do not have an antecedent meaning given outside the theory. It is common to think of terms for theoretical entities like electrons, black holes, gravitational forces, or genes as being given meaning by the theories that introduce them. If so, it is these theories that would introduce the application conditions (or other rules of use) for the relevant terms. In short, the authors of scientific theories (unlike the authors of fiction) are not engaging in a pretense that piggybacks on the rules of use for the terms *outside the* pretense. Moreover, of course, theoretic terms are not introduced for purposes of story-telling, but rather are typically introduced as terms for things that are supposed to play a role in *explaining* our observations (even if we can't observe electrons, we can 'posit' them to causally explain traces we can observe on a screen). In short, the interest we typically take in theoretic entities is not as characters in a story (though we certainly can do this, if our interest is in the history of science), but as posited *explainers*.

Of course, abstract artifacts can't fulfill that role. Given their abstractness, abstract artifacts can't cause a trace to appear on a screen, cause light to bend, etc.. Similarly, some things are literally true of abstract artifacts—as Donato-Rodriguez and Falguera put it, such a “kind of abstract entity... depends on particular concrete entities, such as the scientists that formulate the scientific theories in which the terms for these entities occur” (17). But few would want to say that it's literally true that electrons depend on, and only come into existence through, the activities of scientists. So abstract artifacts *can't* be the intended referents of the theoretic terms of the sciences, *as they are used* in those theories—they can't fulfill the application conditions that give the terms meaning in the relevant theories. We can certainly speak of theoretic entities

as the ‘characters’ of scientific theories, and of what they are like, *according to those theories*—and if our interests lie in the history of science, it may be useful to do so. But it seems more problematic to allow that terms for theoretic entities, *as they are used in those theories*, refer to abstract artifacts.

Similar issues arise for discourse about fictional characters, of course. We have to distinguish talk about what Sherlock Holmes is like *according to the story* (a man, a detective, born to a human mother) versus what the character is *really* like (an abstract artifact created by Arthur Conan Doyle). And we have to distinguish talk about what Sherlock Holmes does and causes *according to the story* from out and out talk about the role of the *character* (the abstract artifact) in literary history. And (as mentioned above) I came to think (by my (2003a)) that we also shouldn’t take the names of fictional characters *as used within a story* to refer to abstract artifacts, though their use in stories may *entitle* us to refer to the relevant abstract artifacts in our literary critical discussions. Similarly, we can certainly take terms for theoretic entities *as used within a theory* to entitle us to refer to the relevant abstract artifacts in our discussions in the history of science. But the question will remain of how we should understand theoretic terms to work *within a theory*—whether we should think they refer or not, and if so, to what. We can rest content with the idea that fictional names as used *within a story* are used merely pretensefully, without any aim of referring to real people, dogs, or trees. But the same sort of account doesn’t transfer easily to the uses of theoretic terms *within a scientific theory*, which seem to be introduced with very different aims. In short, we can ask whether phlogiston exists *as an abstract artifact characterized in a theory*; but we can also ask whether *anything matching the theory’s descriptions* exists and can explain what we observe during combustion. The latter seems like a remaining question of interest, even if we agree that we *can* speak of theoretic entities as abstract artifacts, when we are writing the history of science. Nonetheless, I agree with Donato-Rodriguez and Falguera that the notion of ‘abstract artifacts’ may have wide application to other areas of philosophical interest—including to the history and philosophy of science.

Rychter on an easy ontology of facts

The neo-Carnapian approach I take to existence questions leads to ‘easy’ answers to many existence questions, including questions about the existence of facts. In “Fictionalism and the easy approach to the existence of facts”, Pablo Rychter challenges the idea that we should accept an ‘easy ontological’ approach to the existence of facts. He argues instead in favor of a fictionalist approach to talk about facts, and claims to answer my challenge of saying *what more it would take* for the claim that ‘there are facts’ to *really* be true, as opposed to being merely *pretended*. I will address those challenges here.

On the easy approach to ontology that I develop and defend in *Ontology Made Easy* (2015), we can often answer existence questions by way of trivial inferences from undisputed premises. In the case of facts, plausibly, this would involve, as Rychter suggests, an inference such as:

1. Socrates is wise.
2. If Socrates is wise, then it is a fact that Socrates is wise.¹⁵

¹⁵ To avoid worries that ‘wisdom’ is unobservable or a vague term, I prefer to use more down to earth examples, such as ‘the fact that the barn is red’ or ‘the fact that this electron has a negative charge’. But for coherence, I will follow through with Rychter’s example here—if the term ‘wisdom’ concerns you, please just shift to a different example.

3. There is a fact (namely, that Socrates is wise).

Such inferences entitle us to accept that there are facts, where this is a form of what I call ‘simple realism’ that (unlike David Armstrong’s explanatory realism) doesn’t make or rely on any *explanatory claims* (for example, that facts are needed to ‘explain’ how truth is grounded).

Premises such as (2) above are based on a conceptual truth, e.g. that if an object *o* has a property *P*, then the fact that that *o* has that *P* obtains.¹⁶ And this conceptual truth, I hold, reflects a rule of use for introducing ‘fact’ talk: that in ordinary English we are, without any further evidence, entitled to make the inference from ‘Socrates is wise’ to ‘it is a fact that Socrates is wise’, and so on for other introductions of ‘fact’ talk. Moreover, given these rules (I argued (2015)), the fictionalist about facts has no way of articulating *what more it would take* for claims about facts to ‘really’ be true, rather than being mere pretenses.

Rychter’s resistance to the easy argument comes in here—for he denies that there is such a conceptual truth. For, as he writes, “it is *conceivable* that *o* is *P* and ‘fact’ fails to apply because there is nothing, other than *o* or *P*, for ‘fact’ to latch on to.” (7) Why? What more might one think is required for the fact that Socrates is wise to obtain (what could we expect to ‘latch on to’)? According to Rychter, what more is required is that “there *exists an extra thing, x*, that is not identical to any of its components” (8, italics mine). And by appealing to this, Rychter also claims to respond to my challenge to fictionalism—to articulate what more it would take for claims about facts to ‘really be true’ rather than just pretended.

As Rychter notes, the thought that what more is required is that ‘*there exists an extra thing*’ is a line of thought I argued against extensively in my earlier work (especially 2007a). Cohesively with the easy approach to ontology, to ask whether there is ‘an extra thing’, we must ask for the application conditions for ‘thing’: what would it take for there to be some ‘composed unified structure’, or some ‘extra thing’? I identified there three uses of ‘thing’: (1) as a term for a ‘Spelke-object’ (a roughly unified, trackable, independently mobile lump of stuff); (2) as a ‘covering term’, such that ‘thing’ is guaranteed to apply if any first-order sortal term applies (if there is a ball, or a protest, or a speck of dust, or...); and (3) the alleged ‘neutral’ use of heavyweight ontologists. I have seen no clear sense made of the application conditions for, or other coherent rules of use for, the heavyweight ontologist’s use of ‘thing’, and I think that we have every reason to suspect that this term is not being used in a way that gives us fully meaningful, truth-evaluable claims at all—and that this is part of what makes the heavyweight ontologist’s disputes unresolvable. While Rychter seems sympathetic with the heavyweight ontologist’s use (see p. 11 n. 3), he does not try to defend it here. That leaves us with (1) or (2). Rychter agrees that (1) can’t be what’s relevant here (anyone who thought that ‘the fact that the barn is red’ should refer to a separate additional lump of stuff (beyond the barn) is essentially making a category mistake and failing to understand how ‘fact’ talk works. That leaves us with (2).

This is where Rychter claims to give a response to my earlier arguments. What more is required, he claims, for ‘It is a fact that Socrates is wise’ to be *really* true, is “the existence of an *object* constituted by Socrates and the property of being wise, and not to be identified with either of those other two things” (17), where ‘object’ is used in the *covering sense*.

But I cannot see how this helps. For, in the covering sense, ‘object’ is just used as a term of generalization—a place-holder for genuine sortal terms. And it is guaranteed to apply if the application conditions for any (genuine) sortal term are fulfilled. The most relevant sortal, in this case, obviously is ‘fact’, not ‘building’ or ‘squirrel’, or.... So, what Rychter has given us, in

¹⁶ For simplicity, I will leave out the relational case here—take it as implied throughout.

response to my question, is essentially this. I ask: what more could it take for ‘fact’ to apply, other than that some object instantiate some property? He replies: What more it could take, is for there to be some other ‘object’ (*in the covering sense*—where ‘fact’ is among the terms covered). That is, in response to my question: ‘What more would it take for ‘fact’ to apply?’, we get only the answer: For ‘fact’ to apply. But that is no answer, it is just an empty triviality. Moreover, if he is assuming that for ‘fact’ to apply would require that *more* conditions be fulfilled than just for an object to instantiate a property, then he hasn’t yet said *what* more is required, and so hasn’t addressed the challenge to fictionalism.

Now some might be inclined to think that we just reach a standstill here—are the application conditions for ‘fact’ just that some object instantiates some property (as I hold), or is there (as Rychter holds) more required—that there be some other ‘object’ there than just Socrates and the wisdom? But I don’t think this is the right reading of the situation. First, Rychter has given us *no clear content to the claim at all*—*no sense of what more is required*. It is not clear that he is meaningfully articulating different application conditions at all.

By contrast, my view not only articulates application conditions (or perhaps better: rules for introducing fact talk) clearly, these are also rules that reflect the ordinary use of ‘fact’ in English. For in ordinary English conversation, we are entitled to introduce ‘fact’ talk without requiring any additional evidence. Imagine the following courtroom dialogue:

- Prosecutor: It’s a fact that the gun was found in the defendant’s car.
- Defense attorney: No it isn’t.
- Prosecutor: Are you denying that the gun was found in the defendant’s car?
- Defense attorney: No: the gun was found in the defendant’s car, but it’s not a fact that the gun was found in the defendant’s car. There are no facts.
- Everyone else in the courtroom: *Whaaaaat?*

There is something Moore-paradoxical about the defense attorney’s second assertion: The gun was found in the defendant’s car, *but it’s not a fact* (that the gun was found in the defendant’s car). In ordinary English, it is hard to see the defense attorney as making any comprehensible speech act (they seem to be both asserting and taking back the assertion). (“But it does make sense *in the ontology room*”, some will want to say. But, as I have argued, what we have in the ‘ontology room’ is merely an *appearance of sense* by introducing a use of ‘object’ lacking in meaning, along with adopting inappropriate criteria for resolving what are thought of as ‘ontological debates’—criteria I have argued against extensively elsewhere (2007a, 2015, forthcoming b).)

I argued in *Ontology Made Easy* that the ordinary rules governing fact talk entitle us to make easy inferences to the existence of facts—it is redundant to say, “The gun was in the defendant’s car, *and* it is a fact that the gun was in the defendant’s car”. But (one might ask) why would we want to add ‘fact’ talk to our language, via *redundant* inferences that require no additional ‘evidence’? I can now answer that question, based on work from systemic functional linguistics.¹⁷ Introducing talk of ‘facts’ is a way of introducing a new noun term from a proposition—so from ‘The barn is red’, we may refer to ‘The fact that the barn is red’. This involves introducing what Michael Halliday (2009) calls ‘grammatical metaphors’—shifts in grammatical category. As Halliday shows, grammatical metaphors are useful in a language

¹⁷ See, e.g. Halliday 2009. For summary of some of this work, see my (2022). I had not yet discovered the work in systemic functional linguistics when I wrote *Ontology Made Easy*.

because they enable us to do new things with language—including showing relations among ideas across a longer text, and generalizing in ways important to reasoning, and to developing scientific theories and bureaucracies. In the case of ‘fact’ talk, we can easily see the use of introducing reference to ‘facts’, not to ‘pick out’ or ‘track’ some ‘additional object’ in the region, but rather as a way of enabling us to generalize and lay out general principles of reasoning. For example, it may be redundant to simply move from ‘The gun was in his car’ to ‘It is a fact that the gun was in his car’. But introducing talk of facts enables us to generalize and say things like ‘Everything the prosecutor asserted is a fact’, or ‘There are facts that do not fit with the defendant’s account of the case’. It also enables us to lay out general principles of legal reasoning, such as: ‘If there are facts that don’t fit a defendant’s account, then that account should be rejected’, or ‘in a jury trial, the jury’s job is to decide the facts’.

If this is the correct account from linguistics of the functions of fact talk, and of the redundant inferences by which that talk is introduced, then we *do* have reason to accept that it is a conceptual truth that *nothing more is required* for the fact that o is P to obtain, than that o is P. There is no reason to go fictionalist, rather than simple realist, about fact talk, and fictionalists remain with the unanswered challenge of saying what more we should think is required for there to *really be* facts, and *why* we should think these additional demands hold.¹⁸

Sambrotta on ontological discourse

Mirco Sambrotta’s paper brings together my work on easy ontology with some of the neo-pragmatist themes of my most recent work. He argues that my account in *Ontology Made Easy* doesn’t do sufficient justice to ontological discourse and what it can do for us, and he raises a good question: Why do we do ontology? What do ontological vocabulary and constructions do for us? (8-9).¹⁹ He also gives a pragmatic answer that I am very sympathetic to.

For me, there are (at least) two different questions we might raise about ‘ontological discourse’, depending on what is meant by ‘ontology’ and ‘ontological vocabulary’: One is, why does our shared public language include terms such as ‘exist’ or ‘there are’? What are the functions of such terms? The other is: what is the use of doing *philosophical* work in ontology, of debating about what our ‘ontological commitments’ are, about whether there ‘*really are*’ tables, numbers, or trees, and the like? I am happy to assume that the former has some interesting positive answer—that there are functions such terms serve in our shared vocabulary. But I would not simply assume that all of the discourse of philosophical ontology (that asks about ‘ontological commitments’ or what there ‘*really is*’) makes sense and serves some useful

¹⁸ The same form of argument applies not just for talk of ‘facts’, but also of ‘propositions’, ‘properties’, ‘events’, and many other sorts of terms that serve as grammatical metaphors, introduced via redundant inferences to serve textual functions.

¹⁹ A few clarifications are also in order. I do not (as Sambrotta says) see “all our existential claims as genuinely descriptive” (4) (though much depends on what one means by ‘descriptive’ here). I do think that such claims, interpreted *internally*, generally can ‘easily’ (through empirical and/or conceptual means) be assessed as true or false; but I deny that they aim to describe some property of existence possessed by an object tracked in the world. I also don’t use terms such as ‘substantial’ or ‘robust’ realism, factuality, etc., as I find them typically unclear. I also do not hold that *ontological conclusions* play no ‘explanatory or justificatory role’; I simply hold that *numbers, propositions, properties*, and other entities the easy ontologist accepts aren’t to be treated as ‘posits’ to ‘explain’ anything, as I reject the explanatory power approach to answering questions about what exists (see my forthcoming b). It is also worth noting (p. 9 footnote 26) that one can find more than a ‘trace’ of distinctions between different functional roles of different parts of language in any of my recent work on modality, conceptual engineering, and linguistic functions (see, e.g., 2020a, 2022, 2023b, forthcoming b).

functions. So I would not go so far as to join with Sambrotta in taking for granted that “ontological practice is itself a legitimate discursive social practice” (9). There may be problems, at least with some parts of contemporary metaphysics, as I have tried to show throughout my work.

So, let us turn to the uncontroversially good first question: What are the functions of having a term like ‘exists’ in our language? In answering this question, Sambrotta offers various suggestions about the functions of ‘ontological judgments’: Ontological judgments “determine what should and should not count as evidence in support of them” (10), express “norms of reasoning”, endorse “a certain epistemic principle”, “articulate what should or should not count as a factual claim”, elucidate “norms governing our social practice” (11), “express commitments to the adoption of [linguistic or conceptual] frameworks” (11), etc. To my ears, these suggestions seem potentially different from each other—so I would want to move more slowly—asking which sorts of ‘ontological judgments’ are at issue in each case, and which of these functions each type of ‘ontological discourse’ is supposed to fulfill.²⁰ But some of the answers Sambrotta gives I not only like, but explicitly endorse. For example, he argues (in a Carnapian spirit) that ontological discourse expresses “commitments to the adoption of conceptual structures within which alone description is possible” (13-14). I develop an idea along these lines explicitly in my (2017) paper on metalinguistic negotiation, arguing that “some classic philosophical debates about existence can be readily seen as reflecting disagreements... about whether the term *should be used at all*” (2017, 16).

Sambrotta briefly notes the parallels between my view there and the view he defends here (13). But he expresses puzzlement about how this understanding of ontological debates fits with my easy approach to ontology (2015). As he writes:

“...it is unclear how to reconcile this view [that ontological disputes can sometimes be understood as implicitly advocating for views about whether certain terms or concepts should be used] with [the] metaontological deflationism (and first-order ontological realism) [Thomasson] advances in most of her works... if ontological disputes are easy to settle, they will turn out to be factual debates of some sort rather than metalinguistic negotiations” (13)

So, this provides a good opportunity for me to clarify how these parts of my work fit together. We can, following Carnap, distinguish two senses in which existence claims may be made: internal or external. As I say in my (2017), the work of *Ontology Made Easy* is about existence questions taken in what Carnap calls an ‘internal’ sense, which I interpret (following Price 2009) as questions asked *using* the terms of the relevant framework (with their customary rules of use intact) (2017, 6-7). If we want to simply ask “do numbers exist?”, “do tables exist?”, “do properties exist”, and so on, *using* these terms (both ‘exist’ and ‘numbers’, ‘tables’, ‘properties’) in their ordinary senses, with their ordinary rules of use intact, we can answer these questions easily: Yes. For we can derive claims of their existence from uncontroversial claims, in accord with the standard rules of use for these terms (see my 2015, Chapters 2 and 3).

Nonetheless, what serious ontologists are *doing* in uttering such obvious truths or falsehoods may often be interpreted instead as addressing *external* questions, where these are taken not as (meaningless) factual questions, but rather as *practical* questions about whether we

²⁰ I would be more inclined to think (following Restall 2005 and Ripley 2013) that it is *logical* claims that express norms of reasoning (at least where these are formal norms). Metaphysical modal claims, I claim (2020) express certain kinds of *semantic norms* and what follows from them (and these may be treated as a certain kind of norm governing a social practice of speaking).

should adopt the relevant linguistic framework (see my 2017, 9). If we interpret what they are doing in this way, those who deny that tables exist may be seen as uttering a literal falsehood, but as implicitly *recommending* that we give up talk of composite material objects, e.g., since it leads us into puzzles and contradictions. Those who deny that numbers exist may be seen as recommending that we give up the use of number terminology, given, perhaps, presumed conflicts with commitment to a physicalistic or naturalistic view of the world (see my 2017, 17-18).²¹

This assessment of the role of *external* claims, practically interpreted, fits well with views I have been developing more broadly elsewhere: that much of traditional philosophical work, including in metaphysics, can be helpfully reconceived as work on the *practical* questions of what linguistic or conceptual scheme we *should* use, and how we should use it (see my 2021a, 2021b, 2020b, 2017a, 2017b, and forthcoming b). One point of difference from what Sambrotta says is worth bringing out here, however. That is: I would *not* say that debates about such questions “lie beyond the scope of rational resolution” or “cannot be in the market of rational considerations” (10). On the contrary, I have argued (2020b) that many of these debates may be addressed in pragmatic terms, provided we are clear about what functions the relevant parts of language are to serve.

Once we see the difference between internal and external readings of existence claims, we can see how to reconcile these two sides of my work. (And the distinction between internal and external claims lines up with different things we can be *doing*: asking (first-order) ‘factual’ questions while *using* our extant language or concepts; or addressing metalinguistic questions about what linguistic or conceptual scheme we *should* be using). As a result, I don’t see Sambrotta’s view as telling *against* any part of my view. Instead, I see him as finding his own way to very similar conclusions to those I develop and discuss at length in my post-2015 work, and developing them in an interesting way. It is always heartening to find others driven to the same sorts of conclusions.

Dohrn on modal metaphysics

While I develop a deflationary approach to existence claims in *Ontology Made Easy*, I develop a deflationary approach to metaphysical modal claims in *Norms and Necessity*. Daniel Dohrn addresses my approach to metaphysical modality, arguing that it unduly rules out ‘substantial metaphysical inquiry’ about certain deep metaphysical modal claims—for example, about personal identity and fundamentality.

Before evaluating how normativism fares on these issues, however, it’s worth pausing to correct some misunderstandings about my view. (Readers interested in my views about metaphysical modality are referred to my (2020a) book *Norms and Necessity*. Curiously, Dohrn does not discuss or cite this work, which gives by far the fullest development and defense of my views on modality—the views he aims to criticize.)

The first point to clarify concerns the subject-matter of metaphysical modal claims, and the second concerns their mind-independence. Dohrn alleges that modal normativism “chang[es]

²¹ It is worth noting, however, that many ontologists resist this interpretation of their debates, that I am not committed to seeing *all* ontological disputes in this light, and that this move still won’t make all debates, or all moves, sensible. Once we are carefully attuned to the actual functions served by our number terms, say, or even our terms for ordinary material objects, we can see pretty clearly that it would be a terrible idea to remove such terms from our vocabulary. For further discussion, see my (forthcoming b, Chapter 9).

the subject matter” of modal knowledge (1) as it “comes with a hypothesis about the subject matter of modal claims... they state semantic rules” (5). Against this, he argues that it “violates the intuition that the subject matter of a claim should be determined independently of asking whether and how we know that claim” (8). But this is a misunderstanding. I do not say that metaphysical modal claims are *about* semantic rules nor that they *state* semantic rules—modal normativism is not a claim about the *subject matter* of metaphysical modal claims. Instead, I take pains to distinguish my normativist view from classic conventionalist views (as standardly—and uncharitably—interpreted) (see my 2020a, 27-31)—and explicitly deny that on my view, metaphysical modal truths (such as ‘the statue could not survive drastic changes of shape’) are *about* our linguistic conventions or semantic rules or *made true by them*. The central thesis of normativism is that modal metaphysical language doesn’t have the function of *tracking* or *describing* at all—neither possible worlds, nor modal features of this world, nor our linguistic conventions. Instead, the function of metaphysical modal vocabulary is to enable speakers to convey, enforce, and re-negotiate semantic rules in useful ways, while remaining in the object language (Thomasson 2020a, 58). But, given easy ontological inferences, we can still take modal claims to be (in a harmless sense) ‘about’ modal facts and properties (2020a, 137-8). As I insist, “the literal semantic content *is* world-oriented content about [e.g.] statues, and may say something true about the world” (Thomasson 2020a, 138)).

The reason this subtle point makes a difference is not just that it shows accusations about misplacing the ‘subject-matter’ to be baseless. It is also essential to avoid accusations that the view leaves metaphysical modal claims *mind-dependent*. This is the second (and even more important) point to clarify. Dohrn repeatedly asserts (allegedly against my view) that “It is not our practice but the independent structure of reality that fixes... modal profiles” (2; see also 20, 22, 23), and that normativism “jeopardize[s] our notion of an independent reality” (20). This would follow if one took the conventionalist view that modal claims *describe* semantic rules, so that it *requires the adoption of certain semantic rules to make them true*. But I repeatedly take pains to show that this is *not* the normativist view, and that the normativist approach does *not* make the truths of metaphysical modal claims contingent on our practices (see my 2020a, 90 and 170-171)—though of course the *meanings* of these (and all) claims depend on our linguistic practices. On the contrary, as I argue, the modal normativist is entitled to accept independence counterfactuals such as “even if there had been no language, ‘Seals are necessarily mammals’ would have been true” (2020a, 81-83 and 158-9). Dohrn’s suggestion that we accept the normativist view for mind-dependent entities (such as artifacts and works of art), but not for ‘independent’ parts of the world also relies on this misunderstanding.

One final point of correction: it is not true that my only argument for modal normativism is the epistemological one.²² In the book (2020a), I lay out separate epistemological, methodological, and ontological advantages of modal normativism. Moreover, in my most recent work (2023b), I have added to this evidence from systemic functional linguistics that supports (and enriches) my account of the functions of modal language. In assessing the view, I ask readers to consider *all* of these reasons in its favor.

But let us now turn to the central point of Dorhn’s paper: that there are certain ‘substantive’ metaphysical modal truths that modal normativism can’t account for, and that we should not rule out. He gives three examples of cases in which serious metaphysical inquiry is

²² Nor is it true that I only criticize Lewis’ modal epistemology, as Dorhn suggests (11). Instead, I consider a wide variety of recent approaches (2020a, 147-85).

called for (2), since (he alleges) appeal to semantic rules plus empirical data couldn't decide the issue:

1. "I could undergo fission and be precisely one of the two resulting persons"
2. "No particle could be both positively and negatively charged" (21)
3. "Necessarily, the whole is fundamental" (23)

Let us begin with the second. This is presumably a question of *physical* (or 'nomological', not metaphysical) possibility or impossibility. If someone were to seriously ask me, I would suggest that they ask a physicist—not a philosopher. Matters of physical possibility I don't discuss (much) in the book; though I do suggest that the view of metaphysical possibility I develop would fit well with a treatment of physical necessities along the lines of Sellars' as giving object-language expression of norms of inference based on empirical evidence—regarding which sorts of inferences succeed and which fail, and which inferential rules serve well in a predictive and explanatory theory (see my 2020a, 121-2). But it is to physics we must look to know what the empirical evidence is, and (accordingly) which inferences serve well in a predictive and explanatory theory.

The first case, concerning claims of personal identity, is more interesting. For claims about personal identity more plausibly concern claims of *metaphysical* modality that have long been of central interest in metaphysics. Dohrn suggests that a normativist could (implausibly) deny that there is an answer to this question (20), but in a footnote (5, p. 20) concedes that a normativist might say that there is an answer, but that we lack some relevant empirical data. The latter is just what I would be inclined to say. The 'I' that is central to our self-conception comes with a claim of continuity of experience *from the first-person point of view*.²³ When I wonder whether I would survive fission, or who I would be, a central condition for continuing to apply the 'I' is the continuation of that sort of experience, as is knowable only from the first person point of view (though it is still a sort of *experience*, and thus empirical). It is not a case in which we need some deeper metaphysical 'inquiry' to 'tell us' what the answer is (how, precisely, could that go?). It is a case in which the relevant modal facts can be determined by nothing more than grasping our concept of person (which includes a tie to the continuity of first-person experience) and having empirical knowledge (about how that, perhaps among other empirical facts, would go). Since no one has undergone fission, no one at this stage can say. But this is not a counterexample involving some deep 'metaphysical' fact about modality that normativism can't reach.

What then of the third case—of Jonathan Schaffer's claim (2010, 61-64) that it is necessary that the whole is fundamental? It is worth noting that a long-term goal of my work (from *Ordinary Objects* (2007) onward) is to demystify metaphysics—not to preserve all appearances of 'deep and substantive' metaphysical debates claimed by its practitioners. As such, I have long aimed to identify and root out claims or questions that seem to make sense on the surface, but turn out to be based on misuses of language, faulty presuppositions, or other difficulties. I would not assume that any claim made by a prominent metaphysician must be worthy of serious inquiry. Without further details about how terms such as 'whole' and 'fundamental' are being used here, it is difficult to assess whether the above claim is fully meaningful and truth-evaluable, or how we could come to know whether it is true or false.²⁴ Further assessing this issue would require a great deal more discussion than there is space for

²³ This is brought out nicely in much of Lynne Rudder Baker's work on personhood.

²⁴ I also would reject the presupposition of Schaffer's inquiry, that there is one "metaphysically correct way to carve up the cosmos" (2010, 46).

here. I will have to leave it by saying simply that it is far from clear that we have here a substantive and interesting metaphysical modal claim that must be true or false, and yet that we cannot establish by way of some combination of semantic rules and empirical work (even Schaffer thinks empirical matters are at least *relevant* here, and they form half of his argument; and anyone should accept that we must understand the meanings of our terms before we can assess the truth-value of claims they figure in). In any case, I thank Dohrn for raising these cases, as examining them can give us a better sense of the resources available for the normativist to approach various kinds of modal claims.

Locke on modal normativism and possible worlds

Theodore Locke's paper works to extend my modal normativist framework to forms of discourse I did not discuss much in *Norms and Necessity*, namely talk about possible worlds, 'ways things could be', and counterfactuals.²⁵ He develops valuable suggestions for how to extend a normativist account to these other forms of modal talk, providing interesting and helpful ways of further developing the normativist framework.

Possible worlds talk can give perhaps the strongest illusion that modal talk aims to track and describe certain entities posited in metaphysics: that it is *about* possible worlds—treated along David Lewis's (1986) lines, as 'concrete worlds' spatio-temporally and causally isolated from us—and that the latter serve as the truthmakers for modal claims. But why would we want possible worlds talk? In *Norms and Necessity* I suggest (following Lewis) that doing so adds expressive power to our language (2020a, 133) in ways that, for example, enable us to express philosophical theses (of global supervenience, etc.) that we could not otherwise express.

Locke goes beyond this, developing a far more detailed account of what difference it makes to add possible worlds talk to our modal vocabulary—while still remaining cohesive with the normativist idea that modal talk functions primarily to convey, enforce, or renegotiate semantic rules and their consequences (while remaining in the object language). Talk of possible worlds, on Locke's view, "provides a different syntactic framework for offering alternative illustrations of semantic rules, or consequences of those rules" (13) for "talk of worlds, ways, and possibilities is just a syntactic metaphor for talk about what is possible and necessary" (14). In saying this, Locke draws on work from systemic functional linguistics, work that is extremely helpful for justifying the claim that we can get trivial inferences to claims that there are possible worlds, and for understanding why we would want to add nominalized terms for possible worlds and the like to our modal vocabulary.²⁶ Locke builds on the idea from systemic functional linguistics mentioned above: that language often permits shifts in grammatical category to introduce what Michael Halliday (2009) calls 'grammatical metaphors' (Locke uses the term 'syntactic metaphors'). Introducing grammatical metaphors, as Halliday notes, is typically useful since it adds *textual* functions to a language, in ways that enable us to show connections among ideas in longer texts, and to form generalizations that enable us to build complex scientific

²⁵ In *Norms and Necessity* I say only a little about possible worlds talk (see, 2020a, 132-7), arguing that we can accept possible worlds through 'easy' ontological arguments (2020a, 135), so that we are indeed entitled to quantify over possible worlds. I don't discuss 'ways' talk at all, and only discuss *empirically grounded* counterfactuals, not metaphysical counterfactuals (see 2020a, 121-2 and 153-4).

²⁶ For an updated development of my views on modal discourse, expanded to take into account work in systemic functional linguistics, combined with other empirical work on the development of modal thought and talk, see my (2023b).

theories and bureaucracies (2009, 138). This fits neatly with David Lewis's (1986) observation that speaking of possible worlds adds expressive power to our (philosophical) theories.

But as Locke shows, there is still more that can be said. Halliday notes that introducing nominalizations enables us to *quantify and qualify* in ways we could not without the change in grammatical category: we can say "they danced in the second act" with the verb 'danced'. But we can only say "they did three Romanian folk-dances in the second act" if we shift from the verb form 'danced' to the nominalization 'dances'. Much the same (as Locke shows) can be said about possible worlds talk, as it enables us to serve functions beyond those we can reach with simple modal verbs. While we can say, 'the Patriots could have won the game last night' with just a modal verb, possible worlds talk enables us to *quantify* various *ways things could have been different*—saying, e.g. 'there are at least three ways the Patriots could have won the game...' It also enables us to *qualify* talk of possibilities, so that we can say, e.g. that some of those possible worlds are *more similar* to the actual world than others (these are 'more nearby' worlds, as the saying goes). None of this can be achieved with simple modal talk that merely insists that the Patriots *could have* won.

While Lewis emphasized the importance of possible worlds talk to articulating theoretic differences in philosophy, something I particularly like in Locke's paper is the way he shows that informal talk along these lines, talk of 'ways things could have been', plays important roles in everyday contexts as well. For, as he shows, it helps us with our 'conversational scorekeeping'. For, "talk of ways (worlds or possibilities)... [enables] speakers to change permissibility facts in a game of linguistic scorekeeping" (19-20). In everyday contexts, if a speaker says, "there is no way the Patriots could have won last night", they attempt to add to the conversational scorecard that saying the Patriots could have won is 'out of bounds'. But by describing different *ways* they could have won (e.g. by kicking a field goal in the last second), the interlocutor justifies removing this prohibition from the conversational record. Similarly, in uttering 'It's necessary that water is H₂O', chemists make any claims about water's being of some other chemical kind 'off-limits' (21-22), foreclosing 'any conceptual or empirical inquiry' into ways water could be of a different chemical kind. We can then see talk of possible worlds as a way of formalizing the useful roles that 'ways' talk has in ordinary speech, in noting or adjusting the required and permissible moves in a conversation and enabling speakers to "change permissibility facts in a game of linguistic scorekeeping" (20).

Another important contribution of Locke's paper is extending the normativist approach by showing how counterfactuals, too, may be seen as conveying rules and permissions. Claims of the form 'if P were the case, then Q would be the case', he suggests, "express a semantic requirement to accept that Q given P as a hypothetical supposition and a range of relevant auxiliary assumptions determined by the context" (25-26). I would only add this: that in some cases the relevant requirements and permissions (to make the inference under the hypothetical supposition) may be *semantic*, and in others they may be *empirically grounded*. 'If Sam were married, then she would have a spouse' may convey a consequence of semantic requirements (to accept that Sam has a spouse if we accept that Sam is married); correlatively, 'If Sam were married, then she would have a husband' may be countered by 'No, she *might* instead have a wife'. Some such counterfactuals do play roles in metaphysical arguments, e.g. 'If minds were physical objects, then they would have extension', or, 'If a work of literature were identical to a copy of it, then it could be destroyed by fire'. These I am happy to see, with Locke, as expressing semantic requirements to accept the consequent, on hypothesis of the antecedent. Other counterfactuals, e.g., 'If the match were struck, it would ignite' may convey a requirement to

make an inference, not given the semantic rules alone, but given past experience (with matches or the relevant chemicals). In either case, the relevant counterfactuals can be treated as conveying inferential permissions and requirements (that apply given certain hypothetical suppositions and auxiliary assumptions), even though there is variation in which norms are at stake. As Locke aptly suggests, one way of laying out the relations between them is to say that where the relevant inferential requirements come from semantic rules alone, those inferences are “maximally robust insofar as the addition of *any* range of relevant auxiliary hypotheses will not infirm the inference between p and q” (26).

In any case, I heartily agree with Locke’s chief conclusion, that we can retain talk of possible worlds without the need to ‘fit’ such worlds into a naturalistic ontology. The work he does in showing the functions added to language by talking of *ways things could have been*, of *possible worlds*, and of talk using counterfactuals, is an important contribution to the normativist project, and is precisely the sort of thing we need to show why such talk should be retained, and why we can use it without concerning ourselves with spurious metaphysical problems.

Olivero on modal normativism and artifactual kind terms

Irene Olivero makes an important contribution that connects portions of my earlier and more recent work, by applying some of my (2020a) work on modal normativism to debates about the meaning of artifactual and natural kind terms. There have been extensive and high-profile debates about whether *all* kind terms work on the direct-reference model that has been so popular for natural kind terms (these were debates I entered into in some of my earlier work (2003c, 2007b)). Many followed Kripke and Putnam in accepting that terms like ‘water’ or ‘tiger’ refer not by description, but rather to ‘whatever shares the same nature’ as members of some ostended sample. But there has been far more debate about whether (as Putnam (1975, 160-165) alleges) the same theory of reference applies to artifactual terms such as ‘pencil’ or to social kind terms such as ‘pediatrician’.

Olivero plausibly argues that many such debates can be better seen not as debates about what the ‘real meaning’ of the term is, or what the ‘real nature’ of pencils or pediatricians is, but rather as what I (2016), following David Plunkett and Tim Sundell (2013) have called ‘metalinguistic negotiations’. That is, in at least many of these cases, what’s going on is that disputants are implicitly arguing about how the relevant term (‘cat’, ‘pencil’, ‘pediatrician’...) *ought to be used*. This is closely related to a point I emphasize in *Norms and Necessity*: that the meanings for our terms are often “incomplete, open-textured and open to change and renegotiation” (2020a, 214). Many of the difficulties which arise are cases in which it has simply not been considered or decided whether, say, the term ‘pencil’ could still be applied in cases where these familiar things grow on trees. As Olivero emphasizes, this does not mean that such decisions can’t be made rationally—instead, we can make such decisions based on a combination of pragmatic and empirical factors. Decisions may also go in different directions depending on the interests involved. For example, as I argued (2007a, 48-53; see also my 2020a, 95-105), if we had a term that we always presumed to apply to animals (say ‘cat’ or ‘Key Sparrow’) and it turns out that what we were observing was little robots, our decisions might go in different directions if our interests are in tracking the mouse-catchers around our house (in Putnam’s famous case), versus if our interests are in completing a guide to ornithology (in the Key Sparrows case). But we will be able to understand such debates better, and assess them more authentically, if we present them transparently as debates about how we *ought to go on* in such unexpected cases,

rather than presenting them as if we have made ‘discoveries’ about how such terms ‘really work’ or about what the metaphysical modal facts ‘really are’.

To outsiders uninterested in semantics, it may seem uninteresting or unimportant to work through how a term like ‘pencil’ should be used, in cases in which the pencil-like objects grew on trees; or cases in which cats turned out to be ‘little robots’ or pediatricians were Martian spies. But Olivero nicely brings out the general importance of the idea that we can and often must make practical decisions about how our terms should be used, by connecting it to work in conceptual engineering. Questions (for example) about how our gender terms *should* be used (especially once intersex and trans people are brought into consideration), or how a term like ‘parent’ *should* be used, given the complex biological, social, and institutional relations that may hold between adults and children, are centrally important to how we live and organize our social and legal institutions. Such cases are clearly not a matter of a philosopher’s speculation about way-out cases. Instead, they are cases that bring out the importance of thinking through how terms should be applied in such cases, while being transparent that we are not *discovering* essences or meanings, but *deciding* how we should go on, while taking relevant interests and empirical facts into consideration. As such, they bring out the way in which there is a crucial role for conceptual engineering, which can (as I argue (2020b) and (forthcoming b)) be done in a clear and pragmatic way. Olivero’s development of a ‘negotiating’ approach to understanding disputes about meaning is an important contribution to developing and defending this view, for a wide range of debates. And the view, in turn, is important for not only addressing philosophical issues about reference, but also to seeing the relevance of philosophy to how we think, talk, and live.

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