**The Easy Approach to Ontology: A Defense**

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Over the past 60 years or more—ever since Quine was seen as reviving metaphysics in the wake of the positivist attacks—metaphysics has been dominated by neo-Quinean methodology, so much so that some simply refer to neo-Quinean metaphysics as ‘mainstream metaphysics’ (Manley 2009, 4). On the neo-Quinean conception, metaphysics is ‘of a piece with’ scientific inquiries, and they are jointly devoted to finding the best ‘total theory’. Yet the neo-Quinean approach is also thought to give metaphysicians serious and difficult work to do in determining what really exists.[[1]](#footnote-1) The metaphysician has work to do, first, in helping determine what our best theories are (weighing up the theoretic virtues of competing theories), and second, in determining what (when best expressed in canonical first-order logic) those theories commit us to. We are then to believe the ontology required by our best theories.[[2]](#footnote-2) The work is neither empirical nor conceptual (indeed those two cannot be separated, according to the neo-Quinean view); instead, it involves a kind of weighing up of theories on grounds of such criteria such as simplicity, explanatory power, unity with other theories, etc. As Sider writes: “Admittedly, those criteria give less clear guidance in metaphysics than elsewhere; but there’s no harm in following this argument where it leads: metaphysical inquiry is by its nature comparatively speculative and uncertain” (2012, 12). The work indeed has proven so difficult and uncertain that during the reign of neo-Quinean metaphysics we have seen a great proliferation of metaphysical views rather than anything like convergence.

But an alternative methodological undercurrent has survived despite the dominance of neo-Quinean metaphysics. This is an approach we may call the ‘easy’ approach to answering existence questions. It has its roots in Carnap’s (1950) treatment of internal existence questions (the only existence questions he saw as meaningful) as answerable straightforwardly by empirical and/or conceptual methods.[[3]](#footnote-3) Questions such as ‘is there a piece of paper on my desk’, Carnap suggests, may be resolved by empirical methods like looking; while questions like ‘is there a prime number between one and five’ we may answer by mathematical methods of reasoning and proof. In either case, we may use the answer to the specific question (obtained by empirical or conceptual methods) to easily answer more general questions: from the first we may infer that if there is a piece of paper, there is at least one material object; and from ‘there is a prime number between one and five’ we may infer that there are numbers (1950, 209).

In more recent metaphysics, the approach has occasionally resurfaced in work on particular topics, though the different cases have seldom been identified as part of a unified movement, the methodology of which we can clarify and assess. One can find a version of the easy approach in the work of neo-Fregeans such as Crispin Wright and Bob Hale about mathematical entities (2001, 2009, and Wright 1983), in Stephen Schiffer’s work on propositions, properties, and events (among other things) (1996, 2003), and in my (2007) defense of ordinary objects.

The basic idea that unifies these approaches, and gives them title to being called ‘easy’, is that certain disputed existence questions can be answered by starting from uncontroversial premises and making trivial inferences that take us to ontological conclusions. As a result, these existence questions are not the subjects for prolonged metaphysical debate, nor do they require difficult and uncertain speculative work.

Although it remains a minority approach, interest in and sympathy for the idea that existence questions may be answered easily has slowly been growing. In addition to those who (like Hale, Wright, Schiffer, and myself) defend it as an approach to at least some debates, it has become increasingly common even for serious metaphysicians to accept that existence questions, asked in ordinary English, may be answered easily in much the way that the easy approach suggests, and as a result to suggest that serious metaphysics must move to other territory.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The view is attractive at least in part because it greatly clarifies and demystifies the methodology and epistemology of metaphysics. For it gives us ways to resolve debates about existence on the basis of nothing more mysterious than straightforward empirical and conceptual work. As a result, it leaves no distinctively metaphysical project of figuring out what exists—except to the extent that some of the conceptual work may be profitably undertaken by philosophers. Moreover, it eases many of the Platonist’s traditional epistemic worries about how we could come to know facts about mathematical entities, properties, etc., given their causal disconnection from us. For on the easy approach, we can come to know mathematical truths, property-truths and the like again by way of trivial inferences from uncontroversial premises.

In this paper I aim to clarify what the easy approach is and what follows from it for first-order metaphysical debates. I also aim to provide a partial defense of the approach—positioning it as a viable and appealing alternative to neo-Quinean mainstream metaphysics.

1. **The easy methodology and its results**

The core idea shared by those who accept an ‘easy’ approach to some debate or other is this: That we may begin from an undisputed claim, and by way of apparently trivial reasoning (making use of what Hale and Wright call a conceptual truth, or what Schiffer calls a transformation rule) derive from it an ontological conclusion. In the philosophy of mathematics, for example, neo-Fregeans such as Bob Hale and Crispin Wright (2009) have argued that the existence of numbers can be inferred as follows:

Undisputed truth: The cups and the saucers are equinumerous

From there, we may make use of Hume’s Principle, which they take to be a:

Conceptual truth: The number of ns=the number of ms iff the ns and the ms are equinumerous

to move from the right to the left and conclude:

Derived claim: The number of cups=the number of saucers.

But since the derived claim is a true identity claim, they hold, we are entitled to conclude that the terms in it (‘the number of cups’ and ‘the number of saucers’) refer, and so get the:

Ontological claim: There are numbers.

Thus we get a resolution to an ancient ontological problem by starting from an undisputed truth that does not make use of the disputed concept (*number*) or make reference to the disputed entities (numbers) at all. There is on this view simply no need for determining whether our best theories include reference to numbers, or whether (if they do) we can find some way of paraphrasing them to relieve us of the apparent commitment.

Schiffer (1994, 1996, 2003) develops similar easy arguments for the existence of such entities as propositions, properties, events, states, and fictional characters. In Schiffer’s terms, an undisputed claim in which there is no mention of an entity of type J (and no use of the concept J or any supposed to be co-referential with J) may be combined with conceptual truth (what he calls a ‘transformation rule’), to give us a derived claim that is, intuitively, redundant with respect to the undisputed claim. Yet the derived claim apparently entails the existence of Js (numbers, propositions, events, possible worlds…)—thus settling what seemed like serious disputed ontological questions easily, by way of undisputed basic claims and their trivial entailments.

So for example (making the intervening steps somewhat more explicit than Schiffer (2003) does), we can move from:

* Undisputed claim: Snow is white
* Conceptual truth: If P then that P is true.
* Derived claim: That snow is white is true
* Ontological claim: There is a proposition (namely that snow is white).

Or from:

* Undisputed claim: Jane was born on a Tuesday
* Conceptual truth: If P was born on D, then P’s birth occurred on D
* Transformed claim: Jane’s birth occurred on a Tuesday
* Ontological claim: There is an event (namely of Jane’s birth)

Given the rules of use that introduce such new terms, existence questions formulated *using* those terms are easy to answer, for the rules of use for the terms enable us to make easy inferences from the undisputed claim to the existence of the entities in question.[[5]](#footnote-5)

There is one important variation to point out here: while, in the above cases, the undisputed claim is an empirical truth, in other cases one may make the relevant transformations from a conceptual truth (cf. Schiffer 2003, 66). So, for example, we may move from ‘Janice is tall or it’s not the case that Janice is tall’ to ‘That Janice is tall is or is not true’ to infer the existence of the proposition that Janice is tall—relying on no empirical truth, though we do begin from an uncontroversial true claim—a conceptual truth. These are genuinely something-from-nothing transformations, for they require nothing of the empirical world for them to be guaranteed to be true.[[6]](#footnote-6)

I have argued elsewhere (2007) that even disputed existence questions about concreta may be answered by easy methods. For example the question ‘Are there tables?’, I have argued, may be straightforwardly answered by beginning from a claim that is not a point of controversy between realists and eliminativists:

* Undisputed claim: There are particles arranged tablewise.

We can move from there to introduce the noun term ‘tablewise arrangement’ as follows:

* Conceptual truth: If there are particles arranged tablewise, there is a tablewise arrangement of particles.

And yet there being a tablewise arrangement of particles seems to guarantee that the conditions are met for the ordinary application conditions of the term ‘table’ to apply. (Or we could, if there weren’t one in our language, introduce the new noun term ‘table’ as short for ‘tablewise arrangement of particles’). Thus we can, by trivial inferences move to:

* Derived claim: There is a tablewise arrangement of particles

And so to the:

* Ontological claim: There is a table.

In this way, ontological debates about the existence of concrete objects may be settled just as easily as debates about disputed abstracta, events, etc.

Defenders of the easy approach sometimes speak as if there is an important difference between the ‘shallowness’ of ‘pleonastic’ entities to which we may become committed via trivial transformations, and the ‘depth’ of ‘more robust’ natural entities like trees (e.g. Schiffer 1996). Indeed Hofweber paraphrases Schiffer’s view as holding that these are “second-class entities, whose existence is guaranteed merely by talking a certain way” (2007, 5), and those who defend an easy approach to resolving certain existence questions are often dubbed ‘deflationists’.

But we must be cautious about the sense in which the view is and is not ‘deflationary’, and should be hesitant to embrace anything like the view that the entities to which we become committed via trivial transformations are ‘shallow’, ‘deflated’ or ‘second-class’.[[7]](#footnote-7) For, as I have argued, we may answer questions about the existence of tables or trees no less easily than questions about the existence of events or properties. The only significant contrast is between entities the existence of which is guaranteed *given the truth of an undisputed empirical claim*, and entities the existence of which we may infer from a conceptual truth. For in the first case, it does require some empirical work to discover their existence: we must know that some uncontroversial empirical claim that can be fed into the transformation rule is *true* to know that the entities exist. In the latter case, by contrast, no empirical work is required.[[8]](#footnote-8)

But in each case we end up being realists about the questioned entities by affirming that there are properties, propositions, numbers, tables, etc. *in the only sense these terms have.* This is a straightforward, out and out, realism about the entities in question. The proper conclusion to draw is not that the *entities* are deflated or have some ‘second-class’ status. What is deflated instead is the *ontological debates* about the entities: for it is silly to engage in prolonged theoretic disputes about questions that can be answered so easily. Thus, to be clear, I call the first-order position that results from the easy approach ‘simple realism’, and the meta-ontological position that results ‘deflationism’.

1. **Objections to the Easy Approach**

But despite its appeal, a great many objections have been raised against the easy approach to ontology. Perhaps most notorious is the ‘bad company’ objection raised against neo-Fregean views. The easy approach relies on what it takes to be conceptual truths to take us from uncontroversial premises to ontological conclusions. But the ‘bad company’ objection arises from noticing that certain purported conceptual truths (which look quite similar to those the easy ontologist endorses) may lead us to palpable trouble: to contradictions or conflicts with obvious empirical truths. Thus the defender of the easy approach is apparently left with the challenge of saying why what she takes to be conceptual truths are acceptable while the problematic ones are not.[[9]](#footnote-9) Another line of objection is to ask what guarantees that there are the relevant entities to ensure that the conclusion of the easy argument holds true—with the insinuation being that it would take some kind of ‘magic’ to guarantee this.[[10]](#footnote-10) Others have objected that the easy arguments don’t give us ontological conclusions, either because the conclusion should be read as employing a use of the quantifier without ontological import (Hofweber 2005a, 2005b, 2007), or because the conclusion should be read as implicitly in the context of a pretense (Yablo 2001, 2005).[[11]](#footnote-11) Still others have denied that there are any conceptual or analytic truths at all, and so *ipso facto* denied that there are the conceptual truths needed to ground the inferences from the undisputed truth to the ontological claim.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Since they have been much discussed elsewhere, I will leave those objections to the side here. Instead, I want to focus on a recent line of objection that hasn’t yet been given sufficient attention: Sider’s (2012) arguments that the easy ontologist may accept the idea that there are the needed analytic claims only if she also commits herself to claims that would undercut her claim to have epistemic and methodological advantages over serious metaphysics.

**3. Just more metaphysics?**

Sider (2012) argues that deflationists (including easy ontologists) are committed to claims that are *epistemically metaphysical* in the sense that the may be answered neither by empirical nor conceptual methods (nor by a combination of these) (2012, 187). As a result, he argues, the deflationist cannot legitimately claim any epistemic or methodological advantages for her view over that of the serious metaphysician. To see why he thinks this requires a brief detour to describe his alternative meta-metaphysical position.

On Sider’s view, there is a distinctive language, Ontologese, in terms of which metaphysical debates can be phrased, assuring them of being non-trivial and substantive. Lewis (1983) argued that certain natural features of the world (with natural joints between them) serve as ‘reference magnets’ to attract the reference of many of our predicates, and help avoid the indeterminacy of reference. On this view, we can allow that the structure of world (e.g. into natural kinds) contributes to what these terms refer to. Sider’s innovation is to expand that idea beyond predicates, holding that as well as a natural kind structure, the world has a logical structure—so that we can ask, “of expressions in any grammatical category, whether they carve at the joints” (2012, 8). The Ontologese language in which ontological debates can safely be couched is then supposed to be one that stipulates that its quantifier is to have a meaning that carves the world at its logical joints. I will not endeavor here to discuss further what sense we can make of the idea of ‘logical joints’ of reality or of the meanings of Ontologese expressions. Instead, I will focus here just on whether Sider’s arguments against easy ontology hold sway.

Sider argues that those who favor easy ontology turn out to be committed to the thesis that *there are no quantificational joints of reality:* “…any such metametaphysics is committed to at least this much substantive metaphysics: reality *lacks* a certain structure” (2012, vii).This, however, he takes to be a substantive metaphysical thesis about the structure of reality: that that structure does not include quantificational structure—a thesis that cannot be simply established through empirical or conceptual inquiry. But that would undercut the central epistemic and methodological advantages of the easy approach.

Sider gives two separate arguments for the conclusion that the friend of easy ontology must reject the idea that there is a joint-carving quantifier available in which ontological disputes are, or may be, couched. The first is that she must do so to preserve her easy arguments. For those arguments rely on the idea that there are conceptual truths to take us from the undisputed claim to the ontological conclusion. These are supposed to be definitional, in a sense (they introduce the noun term ‘property’, ‘event’, etc.), and to entitle us to reason from, for example, ‘this shirt is red’ to conclude that there are properties. But Sider argues that we should call a sentence ‘analytic’ only if it is both definitional and true (2012, 193). Once we stipulate that our terms—particularly the quantifier or ‘there is’—are to be joint-carvers, however, we can no longer know, just by mastering the use of the terms, whether a definitional claim is also true: “…linguistic reflection can deliver at best the conclusion that [a given claim] T is definitional. And being definitional is insufficient for truth: (T)’s definitional status might be trumped by some other factor” (2012, 196): there might be a more natural joint-carving candidate to be meant by ‘there is’ that does not make (T) true. Thus if we are making use of a joint-carving Ontologese meaning for the quantifier, easy arguments can no longer settle ontological disputes, for any linking principle we may think of as analytic could turn out not to be so. “Easy ontologists cannot, therefore, claim merely that (T) is definitional. They must also reject joint-carving quantification” (2012, 196).

To this, Sider adds a second argument: Even if the deflationist is right, and *ordinary English* quantifiers do not (and do not aim to) carve at the joints, this will not render ontological disputes pointless. For the serious ontologist can say to the easy ontologist:

…when applied to *English* quantification, [your] picture might well be correct, even if ontological realism [taken as the thesis that there are ontological questions that are epistemically metaphyisical] is true. But in that case, the appropriate language for conducting ontology would be Ontologese, in which the quantifiers are stipulated to carve at the joints… Ontology in Ontologese remains hard—and better. (2012, 197)

That is, even if the easy ontologist is right about how our standard English quantifier works (and right about the easy inferences we can make using our English terms), serious metaphysics may be retained—and relocated to the metaphysics room—as long as we can shift to Ontologese and make use of a quantifier that does carve the world at its logical joints:

….we could discard [the ordinary, natural language expression] E, and enter the metaphysics room, so to speak. We could replace the ordinary expression E with an improved expression E\* that we stipulate is to stand for the joint-carving meaning in the vicinity… This is plan B. (2012, 74)

Thus if the easy ontologist wants to render *all* existence disputes pointless, she must reject the idea that idea that we can introduce a joint-carving use of the quantifier.

In each case, the key point Sider wants to press is that the easy ontologist—along with all meta-ontological deflationists—must reject the idea that there is, or could be defined, a joint-carving quantifier. But, he assumes, the only way to reject joint-carving quantification is to deny that there is any structure of the right sort to attract the reference of the quantifier, so that the attempted introduction of the Ontologese quantifier must fail: “Of course, ontological deflationists will think that the attempted introduction of Ontologese misfires, since the world lacks the necessary structure” (2012, 172). But this in itself, he holds, is a metaphysical claim about the world, “this rejection of joint-carving is just more metaphysics” (2012, 83)—for it involves a claim about what does and does not belong to the structure of the world. Moreover, it is metaphysics in precisely the sense the deflationist claims to be suspicious of: “the assertion that quantifiers do *not* carve at the joints… seems to be epistemically metaphysical” in the sense that they “resist direct empirical methods but are nevertheless not answerable by conceptual analysis” (2012, 187).

This, Sider holds, prevents the deflationist from holding the ‘epistemic high ground’. That is, the deflationist wants to insist that an attraction of her view is that she can put to rest the old debates, and needn’t rely on the idea that there are ontological questions that cannot be straightforwardly answered by conceptual and/or empirical means. But if the deflationist, too, relies on claims that are epistemically metaphysical—claims about what is and is not part of the structure of the world—she cedes the metaphysical high ground and can claim no such advantage for her view.

**4. Rejecting joint-carving quantifiers**

Is the easy ontologist just relying on more metaphysics—of an epistemically metaphysical sort she herself should find objectionable? I will argue that the easy ontologist does *not* need to make the metaphysical claim that reality’s structure does not include logical joints in order to reject the idea that there is a meaningful joint-carving quantifier.

It is true, as Sider says, that those who endorse easy ontological arguments had better not *accept* the idea that the world has quantificational structure tracked by our (actual or Ontologese) quantifier. Sider’s main motivation for broadening the notion of structure beyond the predicate is because it can then be used to help distinguish which metaphysical disputes are and are not substantive (2012, 86) and to enable us to better evaluate trades of ideology for ontology (2012, 87). But the latter is only motivating for those who share the neo-Quinean methodology; the former only for those looking for a way to draw the line between substantive and non-substantive debates in metaphysics. (This is not a task I have undertaken: I have little interest in the terminology of ‘substantiveness’, and I think that ontological debates can be answered, but that the answers come as the straightforward result of conceptual and/or empirical inquiry. Does that make them non-substantive or substantive? I suppose that makes them substantive, but nonetheless not distinctively metaphysical.) So the deflationist will not be moved by these motives to accept the notion of quantificational structure.

The deflationist also can easily refrain from accepting what Sider calls the ‘best argument’ for the view that quantifiers carve at the joints. For that ‘best argument’ is squarely based on (neo-)Quinean methodology: that we should accept that quantificational structure is part of the ‘objective structure of the world’ given its indispensability in our theories (2012, 188). But of course the easy ontologist in any case rejects this neo-Quinean methodology and so has no reason to be moved by an argument like this one. So she has no reason to endorse the view that follows from this neo-Quinean argument either.

So: the defender of easy ontology can (and should) refrain from *endorsing* the idea that there is quantificational structure. This is precisely where Sider’s argument comes in, as he claims that the deflationist must reject it—but is thereby making a(n epistemically) metaphysical claim herself: the claim that reality lacks the structure needed to ground the reference of a joint-carving quantifier.

There is, however, more than one way to refrain from endorsing a statement. To refrain from endorsing P is not to endorse its negation; there are other attitudes one can take. Even if the easy ontologist wishes to *reject* the claim that reality has quantificational structure, she need not do so by *endorsing* the metaphysical claim that the structure of reality is such as to lack quantificational structure. One need only look at the history of philosophical debates to see that that is not the only move available in rejecting a position. Consider Ryle’s (1949) way of rejecting the claim that the mind is immaterial: it was not by embracing the contrary position that the mind is material, but rather by showing that the whole way in which the debate was set up was based on a faulty set of categories: thinking of talk of mental states as aiming to describe some special features in a substance of a particular kind (a mind) rather than thinking of it as licensing inferences. Or think of Husserl’s rejection of serious forms of metaphysical realism (1960, 84-8): he does not reject the realist’s claim that there is a real world outside of experience by making the opposing idealist assertion (or even embracing a Kantian transcendental idealism). Instead he argues that all it can *mean* to say that something is real is given in terms of actual or possible experiences—so that both the traditional positions of metaphysical realism and idealism are without sense. I don’t mean to endorse either of those positions, but merely to issue a reminder that one classical way of rejecting a philosophical position is not to embrace its negation, but rather to show that something is wrong with the way the position (and thus perhaps its negation too) is put: that the terms involve lack sense, employ the wrong set of categories, involve a mistake about the role of the terms involved, or something along those lines.

To choose an ordinary life example, imagine that you are taking a two year old to the zoo, and approaching the giraffes. The child says: ‘Can we go see the elephant now’; you reply: ‘We’ll see that after’. “The after! I want to see that after! Pick me up now so I can see the after!”. Now you need to correct the child’s misunderstanding—‘No, I didn’t mean to say we could see an after…’ you begin. ‘What!’ the (curiously precocious) child responds. ‘Are you saying that of all the creatures in the world none are afters? Why, you’re making a substantive biological claim about the kinds of creatures there are and aren’t—but how do you know that, of all the kinds of animal in the world, none are afters!’ But of course to correct the child’s mistake you needn’t be making a substantive claim about the kinds of creature there are (and are not). You need only be pointing out that a mistake has been made about the role of a term like ‘after’: that it is to mark an ordering of events (we’ll go see the elephant *after* we see the giraffes), not a term attempting to name a sort of creature.

In Charlotte Zolotow’s classic story *The Bunny who Found Easter*, a lonesome rabbit heads off to the East in search of Easter, after being told that “There are always rabbits at Easter”. The owl, of course, (had he not dozed off) could have corrected the bunny without making substantive geographical commitments about what places did and did not lie to the East.

1. **Problematizing the Joint-Carving Quantifier**

The deflationist about ontology may employ a similar strategy: not saying that the structure of the world is such as to lack quantificational structure, but rather problematizing the very idea of joint-carving quantification that plays the central role in both the statement that there is quantificational structure and its negation. The idea of terms that carve at the joints of course (as Sider fully acknowledges) was introduced to characterize natural kind terms—predicates of a particular kind. And in that context it may be well motivated. But whether it generalizes to logical terms such as the quantifier is another question.

Against the idea that some predicates may carve at the joints, although quantifiers do not, Sider says that is “hard to square with purity” (2012, 187)—the idea that fundamental truths involve only fundamental notions.But why accept purity? The only motivation Sider gives for it is the idea that “When God was creating the world, she was not required to think in terms of nonfundamental notions like city, smile, or candy” (2012, 106). But however compelling that may seem, it does nothing to argue for full-blown purity, in which *every notion in a fundamental truth must be fundamental*, over a restricted sort of purity of the form that every *predicate* in a fundamental truth must be fundamental. Both theses would handle the motivating examples equally well, acknowledging that God would not have to think in terms of notions like city, smile or candy to create the world. The examples only speak to the need to state fundamental truths using fundamental *predicates,* and don’t motivate thinking that the quantifier must be fundamental (joint-carving) in order for there to be fundamental truths expressed using the quantifier.

Do we have any grounds to resist broadening the notion of structure in this way? I think we do. It is roughly the fourth source of resistance Sider notes to treating logical notions as joint-carving:

It is the thought that it is appropriate to evaluate expressions for carving at the joints only when they are ‘contentful’. *Predicates* are paradigmatically contentful. But logical expressions, on the other hand, are purely ‘formal’, so the thought goes. They do not describe features of the world… Since logical expressions are not ‘worldly’, it is inappropriate to speak of the world as containing structure corresponding to those expressions. (2012, 97)

To overcome this source of resistance, Sider suggests that it arises from a covert attachment to conventionalism, and proceeds to critique “the very idea of something’s being ‘true by convention’” (2012, 100-104). His criticisms center on the idea that we cannot, merely by legislation, make logical truths true: “the world must also cooperate; the world must really be as the sentence says” (2012, 101); we cannot make sense of the idea that adopting conventions makes the claims true (2012, 101). His criticisms are aimed at the following target understanding of conventionalism: as the view that “We can *legislate-true* the truths of logic” (2012, 103).[[13]](#footnote-13)

But the idea that logical notions are merely *formal* by far predates logical conventionalism. Early versions of the idea appear already in Aristotle, and arise again among medieval philosophers such as Duns Scotus. In its modern form, the view can be traced back at the very least to Kant (who was certainly no conventionalist).[[14]](#footnote-14) In Kant’s memorable summary at the start of the *Groundwork*:

All philosophy insofar as it is founded on experience may be called empirical, while that which sets forth its doctrines as founded entirely on a priori principles may be called pure. The latter, when merely formal, is called logic; but when limited to determinate objects of the understanding, it is called metaphysics. (1785/1981, 1)

The idea that logic is—in some sense—formal or topic-neutral is, as John McFarlane (2000) makes clear, historically *central,* indeed perhaps *the* historically dominant conception of logic—and one endorsed by such diverse philosophers as Kant, Lotze, Husserl, Frege, and de Morgan. It is not to be quickly tossed aside by associations with the conventionalism of logical positivists. The basic idea has nothing to do with logical truths being ‘made true’ by our adoption of certain conventions, or with the idea that we may ‘legislate’ certain sentences to be logically true. Sider’s arguments against conventionalism (however successful they may or may not be against the views of the positivists[[15]](#footnote-15)) leave this view untouched.

So how else, apart from by embracing conventionalism, can we develop the idea that logical terms (including quantifiers) are not ‘contentful’, are purely ‘formal’, or ‘do not describe features of the world’—to justify saying that, even if it may be appropriate to think of (many) predicates as attempting to carve the world at its joints, it is inappropriate to think of logical terms as even attempting to map structure?

We can again look to the history of treatments of logic as formal for some ideas along these lines. The basic idea behind the classical treatment of logic as formal is the idea that logic is topic-neutral, or independent of subject matter (MacFarlane 2000, 51). But if logic is topic-neutral, then its topic is not the structure of the world; unlike the terminology of biology, political science, or physics, it is not attempting to map the structure of a particular part of reality. Once we have a formal/material distinction to hand, we can suggest a picture like this: material predicates may (often) be designed carve the world at (certain of) its joints; to map a certain structure—e.g. a structure of the world into biological or physical natural kinds.

But the distinctive feature of logical terms is that they may apply to material terms of any kind, indifferent to the distinctions among the objects and properties described, or the domains discussed (MacFarlane 2000, 57). This provides at least one way of articulating the idea that logical terms such as the quantifier are content-neutral: they may govern terms with any particular material content, many of which may aim to map different structural features of the world, while logical terms are neutral between them.

What of the idea that logical terms do not aim to describe the world, or tell us anything about the world? Kant employs a slightly different conception of formality that may express a version of this idea: that logical terms abstract entirely from semantic content:

For example, general logic treats ‘all horses are mammals’ simply as the unification of two concepts in a universal, affirmative, categorical, and assertoric judgment. It abstracts entirely from the content of the concepts. The way in which the concepts are united in thought is not, for Kant, a further constituent of the thought (a ‘binding’ concept), but a feature of the thought’s *form.* (McFarlane 2000, 61).

To the extent that we think of semantic content as what connects our words to the world, we can then also see a way of making sense of the idea that logical terms are not ‘about the world’, and even that pure logical truths do not aim to describe features of the world.

I don’t mean to endorse either of these conceptions of formality. They are not equivalent, and adopting either (even without the other) might take us a good way towards making good on the idea that logical terms do not have a structure-mapping function. Other conceptions of formality are also available that might do the job—I have simply focused on two that most nearly match Sider’s initial description.[[16]](#footnote-16) Certainly I have not argued for them, but have merely sketched them. But all that is crucial here is to point out at least two ways—both of which are intuitively plausible and have played a central role in the history of philosophical thought about logic—in which we can develop the idea that logical terms are merely formal without embracing anything like the conventionalism Sider argues against; an idea that may enable us to raise suspicions against the idea that the quantifier is intended to carve at joints of any kind.

The idea that there is a distinction between the formal and material terms of our language may be adopted as part of a functional pluralist view about language.[[17]](#footnote-17) The mistake of thinking that a structure-tracking Ontologese quantifier may be defined can be thought of as arising from an implicit functional monism. Ryle warned against this long ago (1957) in accusing Mill of assimilating far too much of language to names (thinking that their role is to name entities in the world). Thinking of the quantifier as a would-be joint carving term seems to arise from the attempt to assimilate all parts of speech to the structure-tracking function of (some) predicates.

But if the role of logical terms such as the quantifier and connectives is not to carve the world at the joints of its ‘logical’ structure, what roles do such terms serve? We can gain some ideas from the above discussion. Even if some terms (certain predicates) aim to describe features of the world (perhaps even natural features distinguished by natural joints), other terms may serve other roles: they may, for example, instead enable us to make *use* of these predicates in *making judgments* and *reasoning with* those judgments. Terms like ‘is’ enable us to combine names and predicates into a judgment, as when we say “Lucky Feet *is* a horse”. Other terms enable us to reason with judgments, as the quantifier enables us to reason from ‘Lucky Feet is a horse’ to ‘∃x(Hx)’, and ‘or’ enables us to infer ‘Lucky Feet is a horse or Lucky Feet is a cow’. There is no need to think of these terms as aiming to map a special kind of logical structure to account for their role and importance in our thought and language: not a role in tracking structure but enabling us to reason with concepts that do involve material (sometimes perhaps structure-tracking) content.

It is also important to note that taking our logical terms to have a function other than tracking a ‘logical’ structure of the world does not commit us to the idea that our choice of certain logical terms and concepts (with certain rules of use rather than others) is merely arbitrary, conventional, or unconstrained. On the contrary, it is entirely compatible with the idea that what logical language we use is subject to constraints that are transcendentally grounded, and/or pragmatic, and/or based on what it takes for these terms to fulfill their characteristic functions. We are only barred from appealing to constraints to match some ‘logical structure’ of the world.

If our logical terms, including the quantifier, are not aiming to map structure—if they are not terms with that function at all—then we can reject the Ontologese quantifier without pronouncing on what the actual structure of the world does or does not include. This is fundamentally a thesis about the role of logical terms in our discourse, not about what sort of metaphysical structure the world has or lacks. We can even deny that any term with such a material content as to be joint-carving could be a good candidate meaning for anything deserving the name ‘quantifier’ (just as we may reject the idea that any kind of creature could be a good candidate for the meaning of ‘after’). And so we can reject the claim that the quantifier is joint-carving (or that there is a joint-carving quantifier to retreat to on Plan B) without making a new and substantive metaphysical commitment.

Sider admits that “all I have to offer in support of Russellian realism about logic is a critique of conventionalism; discussion of intermediate positions remains a lacuna” (2012, 98). If I am right it is an important lacuna. For the view that logical terms are formal (so far only broadly sketched, but widely held throughout the history of modern and contemporary philosophy), while associated by some with conventionalism, is merely *associated* with it in the minds of some, not tied to it, and not defeated by the standard arguments Sider invokes against the idea that we can legislate-true the truths of logic. There are many ways—indeed the most dominant ways in the history of philosophy of thinking about logical terms—of resisting the move to Ontologese without embracing conventionalism or any substantive metaphysical position about what sort of structure the world has and lacks. While I have not fully developed and defended any particular conception of logic as purely formal, I hope to have shown that Sider’s arguments have not *defeated* that conception. Moreover, given the prominence of the idea of formality in thought about logic throughout the history of philosophy, the burden of proof would seem to fall on those who reject that idea and propose a different, structure-mapping, function for our logical notions. But if we can retain the idea that logical terms are merely formal—not contentful—easy ontologists may have grounds for rejecting the idea that the quantifier carves at the joints without making a metaphysical claim about the structure of the world, and thus without being committed to any epistemically metaphysical claim.

1. **Conclusion**

I hope to have made clear that, despite the dominance of neo-Quinean approaches to metaphysics, there is a competing alternative method available. The easy approach, descended from Carnap’s treatment of internal questions, has often been overlooked, and even those who employ it have seldom presented it as part of a unified methodology for addressing ontological questions. I have aimed to show that there is a unified approach available, which in many ways presents an appealing alternative. For it enables us to clarify the epistemology of metaphysics, to put an end to seemingly endless ontological debates, and to answer existence questions using nothing more mysterious than straightforward empirical and conceptual work.

Many objections have been raised to the easy approach (or versions of it)—particularly by those who dedicate their careers to pursuing existence questions they regard as deep and difficult. Much work remains to be done to respond to each of those objections, only one of which has been discussed here. Nonetheless, I hope at least to have shown what the approach is, why it would be attractive, and how it can resist accusations that it relies on claims about the world’s structure that are themselves epistemically metaphysical.

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1. Though see Price (2009) for doubts that this conception of metaphysics is truly *Quinean.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sider (2012, 12) argues for that one should not only accept the ontology of our best theory, but also regard the ideology of our best theory as carving at the joints, revealing the structure of reality. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Carnap of course considered external questions—existence questions asked outside of a linguistic framework—as pseudo-questions if construed as factual questions, and as better treated as pragmatic questions about which framework to adopt. For an interpretation and discussion of Carnap’s distinction, see my (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Fine (2009); Cameron (2010), Schaffer (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This seems to correspond to Carnap’s talk of introducing new noun terms with new rules of use, as parts of new (or expanded) linguistic frameworks. (1947/1956, 211-212). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. While the pleonastic and neo-Fregean views have much in common, there are also some notable differences between them. First, the neo-Fregeans employ an equivalence principle, Hume’s Principle, in reaching their ontological conclusions, whereas Schiffer’s pleonastic inferences take the form of S🡪 Ex(Fx), only requiring one-way entailments from the uncontroversial premise to the transformed claim. Secondly, the transformed claim of the neo-Fregean has the form of an identity statement, and it is because it has the structure of an identity statement that Hale and Wright insist that the terms in it must refer, and thus that we are licensed to say that numbers exist. By contrast, Schiffer’s transformed claims do not have to take the form of an identity statement, and he makes no use of that idea in reaching the ontological conclusion that there are the disputed entities. I will leave those differences to the side for the present. For discussion see my (manuscript, Chapter 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See also my (2001) for criticism of Schiffer’s claims that pleonastic entities are lightweight entities that are in some sense creations of our linguistic and conceptual practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There may also be a difference in the discoverability of their modal properties: In the first case, although the most basic modal features of the entities to be referred to are fixed by way of the rules of use for the relevant terms, talk of their natures may also be deferential to the world in ways that enable us to fill in the details via empirical investigation. So, for example, it may be knowable simply to anyone competent in use of the term ‘tree’ that a tree cannot survive being burned to the ground, but we may go on to discover exactly what temperatures lead a tree to burn to the ground, and thus lead to its destruction—thereby learning more about the ‘natures’ of trees. There doesn’t seem to be any comparable empirical role of learning about the natures of those entities whose existence we may infer from a conceptual truth. I will, however, leave issues about modal properties to the side here, to focus on existence questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For discussions of the bad company objection see Matti Eklund (2009), Oystein Linnebo (2009), Stephen Yablo (2000), Hale/Wright (2009 and 2001, 132-7), and Schiffer (2003, 53-61). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Yablo (2000, 197-199); Bennett (2009, 50-57). For replies see my (2009a) and Hale/Wright (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Replies to both of these objections appear in (Thomasson, manuscript, Chapters 6 and 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Quine’s (1953) for the original objection, along with replies in Strawson and Grice (1956) and my (2007). For more recent objections to the idea that any claims are epistemically analytic, see Williamson (2007, 73-133). For replies see my (manuscript, Chapter 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I have argued elsewhere (2009b) that this interpretation also misrepresents classical conventionalism—the point of which was not to hold that logical truths are made true by our legislating or adopting certain conventions, but rather to deny that logical truths should be taken as attempted descriptions (in need of truthmakers) at all. But I will leave that to one side here. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For an excellent discussion of the history of formal conceptions of logic, see McFarlane (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For discussion of this, see my (2009b). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. McFarlane (2000) identifies three separate conceptions of logic as formal, and argues that they are not equivalent. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Along the lines of the functional pluralism advocated (for different terms) by Price (2009, 334-5 and 2011, 136-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)