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EASY ONTOLOGY

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If you look at metaphysics books and articles from the 1950s onwards, you will find a great many heated debates about what really exists: Do numbers exist? Do properties exist? Do mereological sums exist? Do social groups exist? Does consciousness exist? Do ordinary objects such as tables and chairs exist? Do persons exist?, and so on.

Yet it seems easy to answer such questions using simple arguments that apparently take us from an uncontroversial premise, via a conceptual truth, to a conclusion about what exists. So, for example:

- 1 (Uncontroversial truth): There are two cups on the table.
- 2 (Conceptual truth): If there are n Ks, then the number of Ks is n .
- 3 (Derived claim): The number of cups on the table is two.
- 4 (Ontological claim): There is a number.

- 1 (Uncontroversial truth): That barn is red.
- 2 (Conceptual truth): If x is red, then x has the property of redness.
- 3 (Derived claim): That barn has the property of redness.
- 4 (Ontological claim): There is a property.

In each case, the third premise sounds intuitively redundant with respect to the first (lending credence to the idea that they are linked by a conceptual truth), and the conclusion is just an existential generalization from the third premise. Those who favor ‘easy ontology’ accept such arguments, and so think that existence questions are easy to settle – generally in the positive.

Yet such arguments have often been dismissed or held to be controversial or even paradoxical. Stephen Yablo (2000) calls these ‘overeasy existence proofs,’ and writes, “such arguments carry with them a palpable sense of daring and a distinct feeling of pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Nobody supposes that there are *easy* proofs, from a priori or empirically obvious premises, of the existence of abstracta” (2000, 275).

But why should such straightforward arguments be thought to be paradoxical? Suspicions against *a priori* arguments for the existence of things trace back at least to Kant’s criticisms of ontological arguments for the existence of God.¹ But the easy arguments at issue here are importantly different from the ontological arguments Kant criticized. For they do not treat ‘exists’ as

a predicate, and adding reference to entities like numbers and properties (unlike adding reference to God) ‘conservatively extends’ the prior theory – roughly, not altering the theory’s take on the causal order (see Schiffer 2003, 52–61).

In the contemporary context, as Yablo (2000) brings out, easy arguments are thought to be paradoxical largely because they appear to conflict with the widely accepted ‘Neo-Quinean’ methodology for addressing existence questions. The Neo-Quinean approach dominated metaphysics from the mid-twentieth century through the early twenty-first – so much so that the approach has also simply been labeled “mainstream metaphysics” (Manley 2009, 4).² Tracing their approach back to Quine’s influential article, “On What there Is” (1948/1953), Neo-Quinean ‘mainstream metaphysicians’ hold that we are ontologically committed to, and only to, what we must quantify over in order to render the statements of our best theory true. On this approach, answering an existence question is difficult. It requires, first, establishing one’s theory as the ‘best total theory.’ Since competing ontological theories are generally (according to all disputants) not distinguished empirically, and so don’t differ in their empirical adequacy, this generally means establishing that the favored theory has other ‘theoretical virtues,’ such as explanatory power and parsimony of ontology or ideology. Second, it is thought to require establishing that the entities in dispute *must* be quantified over to render the statements of the theory true – and so that there is no viable *paraphrase* that would do the job as well. As a result, on this model, arguing that numbers or properties exist, say, is no easy matter to be settled via trivial inferences. Instead, it requires extensive debates about which is the best ‘total theory,’ and about the adequacy of various strategies to paraphrase away apparent reference to them.

Easy arguments, however, are in tension with the standard Neo-Quinean way of arguing about existence questions. As Thomas Hofweber puts it, “How can it be that substantial metaphysical questions have apparently trivial answers, answers that are immediately implied by ordinary everyday statements that we all accept and that apparently are not disputed among those who disagree about ontology?” (2005a, 260). Given the dominance of the neo-Quinean approach, it was once fairly common to assume that one must reject the easy arguments, ‘show where they go wrong.’ Yablo, for example, simply assumes that the easy arguments must go: “I am going to assume without argument that [accepting easy arguments] is out of the question. Our feeling of hocus-pocus about the ‘easy’ proof of numbers (etc.) is really very strong and has got to be respected” (2000, 278).

Easy arguments have been important, then, not merely because they seem to answer existence questions, but also because this appearance raises important methodological and metaontological questions that call into question a way of approaching existence questions that was so dominant as to be virtually unquestioned for decades. Those questions include: How are we to go about answering existence questions? Does answering them require extensive, hard to settle, debates about which ‘total theory’ has the greatest virtues, and whether the relevant talk can be successfully paraphrased? Or are such extended ‘deep’ debates in ontology somehow deeply misguided, since existence questions are answerable easily?

1 A brief history of easy arguments

Easy arguments, particularly in the philosophy of mathematics, are often traced back to Frege. Frege held that the ontological category of *object* is simply the correlate of the logical category of *proper name* (Dummett 1973/1981, 55–6), where proper names are taken to include all singular terms. Proper names, on Frege’s view, must be associated with a criterion of identity, and for this he appeals to Hume’s idea: “When two numbers are so combined as that the one has always an unity answering to every unity of the other, we pronounce them equal” (Frege

1884/1968, sec 62). Bob Hale suggests that the Fregean idea that in general our ontological categories are correlates of the “categorization of the types of expressions by means of which we refer to them” (2010, 403) leads to a deflationary approach to existence questions. For we can argue for the existence of entities of a certain kind just by arguing that there are true atomic statements (say, ‘The number of cups equals the number of saucers’) in which the relevant expressions function as singular terms (2010, 406). Hale puts it as follows, “Under the Fregean approach, questions about the existence of entities of this or that kind are transformed into questions about *truth* and *logical form* – are there true statements [of the right form] incorporating expressions of the appropriate logical type?” (2010, 406).

Another historical source of easy arguments is Carnap’s work on existence claims taken in what he called the ‘internal’ sense – questions about the existence of certain entities asked *within* a given linguistic or conceptual framework. Carnap famously held that such internal existence questions could be answered straightforwardly, either by ‘logical’ (broadly: analytic) methods (for questions like “Is there a prime number greater than a hundred?” (1950/1956, 208–9)) or by empirical methods (for questions like, “Are unicorns and centaurs real or merely imaginary?” (1950/1956, 207)). Even a general claim such as “There are numbers,” Carnap suggests, “follows from the analytic statement ‘five is a number’ and is therefore itself analytic” (1950/1956, 209). Similarly, “there are propositions” follows from “*That Chicago is large* is a proposition” and is “analytic ... and even trivial” (1950/1956, 210). Any further questions about the reality of entities of various kinds, Carnap held, are either – taken literally – ill-formed pseudo-questions, or can be reinterpreted as practical questions about whether or not to adopt a certain linguistic framework.

In the contemporary debate, easy arguments were first raised explicitly in the philosophy of mathematics, and were directly inspired by Frege. Bob Hale and Crispin Wright (Hale and Wright 2001, 2009; Wright 1983) develop and defend a ‘neo-Fregean’ or ‘abstractionist’ position in the philosophy of mathematics. Building on Frege’s idea that objects are just the correlates of singular terms, Bob Hale argues that one can argue for the existence of numbers as follows “If ... there are true statements incorporating expressions functioning as singular terms, then there are objects of some corresponding kind. If the singular terms are such that, if they have reference at all, they refer to numbers, there are numbers” (2010, 406). Hale and Wright (again following Frege 1884/1968, Section 63–5) make use of Hume’s Principle, expressed more formally as: The number of ns = the number of ms iff the ns and ms are equinumerous. They take this to be a conceptual truth which enables one to argue as follows:

- The cups and saucers are equinumerous.
- The number of ns = the number of ms iff the ns and the ms are equinumerous.
- The number of cups = the number of saucers.

Since the conclusion is a true identity claim, they argue that the singular terms in it (‘the number of cups,’ ‘the number of saucers’) must refer, and so we can conclude that there are numbers. Oystein Linnebo (2018) develops a more recent ‘abstractionist’ approach in this tradition. He begins from “the Fregean idea that an object, in the most general sense of the word, is a possible referent of a singular term,” so that the question ‘what objects are there?’ may be answered by addressing what forms of singular reference are possible (2018, xii). He goes on to argue that singular reference is easy to achieve, giving us an easy ontology of numbers, considered as ‘thin’ objects.

Stephen Schiffer (1994, 1996, 2003) broadens the applications of easy arguments substantially. Schiffer’s driving concern is in the theory of meaning, and his central aim is to give a deflationary ontology of propositions considered as ‘pleonastic entities.’ But (in part to warm us

up to the idea of pleonastic entities and provide a clear exposition of them) he also provides easy arguments for the existence of properties, events, states, and fictional characters. Unlike the neo-Fregeans, Schiffer does not require that we make use of an identity statement to infer that the relevant singular terms refer; we may simply make arguments like the following:

- 1 Lassie is a dog.
- 2 *That Lassie is a dog* is true (Schiffer 2003, 71)

Schiffer treats these as pleonastic ‘something from nothing’ inferences. They are pleonastic since (2) is intuitively redundant with respect to (1): Someone who said “Lassie is a dog and ~~it~~ *that Lassie is a dog* is true” would seem to be just pretentiously repeating themselves. They are ‘something from nothing’ inferences since we begin in (1) with no terms that even aim to refer to propositions (only to a dog), and yet can derive a true sentence in (2) with a new singular term (*That Lassie is a dog*) which, as Schiffer puts it, is apparently guaranteed to refer to a proposition – entitling us to infer that there are propositions. Yet these propositions, he insists, are merely ontologically ‘lightweight’ ‘pleonastic’ entities, entities “whose existence is secured by something-from-nothing transformations” (2003, 51), and which “have ‘no hidden and substantial nature for a theory to uncover’” (2003, 63). Schiffer takes these inferences to be connected by a conceptual truth (“a truth knowable a priori via command of the concept” (2003, 52)); in this case the relevant conceptual truth would be: If P, then *that P* is true. It is worth noting that, while neo-Fregeans require that the conceptual truth be an equivalence principle (Hume’s principle) and require that the derived claim take the form of an identity statement, Schiffer’s pleonastic inferences have no such requirements, enabling us to broaden the sorts of entity for which we can apparently get pleonastic arguments (see Thomasson 2015, 138–9).

Amie Thomasson (2015) broadens the approach still further and aims to explicitly draw metaontological conclusions from it. Beyond accepting Schiffer’s easy arguments for properties, propositions, events, states, and the like, Thomasson maintains that parallel arguments can lead us to conclusions about the existence of ordinary concrete objects. Consider disputes about the existence of composite inanimate material objects such as tables and chairs. While realists and eliminativists about tables disagree about whether there are tables, they will agree to the following statement (given in the eliminativist’s ‘language of refuge’)³:

- There are particles arranged tablewise.

Eliminativists introduce these ways of speaking to account for the truth-value of our ordinary claims apparently about tables – so we can still allow that it is true (or ‘nearly as good as true’) that there is a table in my dining room, and false (or ‘nearly as good as false’) that there is a table on my head. These paraphrases also enable eliminativists to distinguish their view from the ‘madman’s’ view that we are all massively deceived in our table experiences. To mimic the truth-conditions of ordinary table-talk, ‘there are particles arranged tablewise’ is supposed to build in all of the ordinary conditions for being a table *except for the existence of composite inanimate material objects* – so it is supposed to require not only certain spatial arrangements of ‘particles,’ but also their joint ability to fulfill the characteristic functions of tables, the presence of whatever intentions and/or cultural contexts are thought necessary for there to be tables, and so on. Given that all of those conditions are in place, Thomasson argues, a competent speaker who has mastered use of both ‘table’ and ‘particles arranged tablewise’ is entitled to infer from ‘there are particles arranged tablewise’ to ‘there is a table,’ thereby answering the ontological question about the existence of ordinary objects. The fact that we can get easy arguments for ordinary

concrete objects (as well as events and states), Thomasson argues, shows that we should not think that the entities we can become committed to via easy arguments have some lightweight or reduced ontological status – and she accordingly drops Schiffer’s term “pleonastic entity.” Instead, she insists, these arguments lead us to conclusions that the disputed entities exist in the only sense that has sense (2015, Section 3.3). Thomasson also argues that in many cases we do not need to make such inferences to answer existence questions: often we can just make use of our conceptual competence (say, with ‘table’) and go have a look in the restaurant to know that there are tables. But whether the existence questions are answered via trivial inferences or ordinary observation, Thomasson follows Carnap (on internal questions) in insisting that well-formed, answerable existence questions can be answered by nothing more mysterious than straightforward empirical and conceptual work – this is another sense in which answering existence questions is ‘easy.’ Thomasson explicitly draws a metaontological conclusion from this: that the neo-Quinean debates about what (*really*) exists are misguided.

2 The importance of easy ontology

Easy ontological arguments are important both to first-order philosophical problems and, more broadly, to methodological and metaphilosophical concerns. At the first-order level, they are relevant to resolving old debates about such things as numbers, propositions, or properties. Their relevance here is not merely that they give us a straightforward answer (‘yes’) to the question of whether such things exist. Taking an easy ontological approach also is thought to bring clear benefits in solving problems about how we could come to *know about* such entities. Indeed in the philosophy of mathematics, the original motivations for a neo-Fregean position were largely epistemological (see Hale and Wright 2009). There have been longstanding problems in the philosophy of mathematics about how we could possibly come to know about numbers and other mathematical objects given that, as Hale and Wright put it, such entities “do not, seemingly, participate in the causal swim” (2009, 178). Neo-Fregeans aim to approach the problem of how we could come to *know* mathematical entities “by reference to an account of how meaning is conferred upon the ordinary statements that concern such objects” (2009, 178–9). For on the easy ontological model, we do not need to ‘peer into’ a Platonic heaven to discover whether certain numbers are identical – we need only be inducted into a way of speaking by adopting certain implicit definitions that entitle us to make inferences, say, from the fact that the cups and saucers are equinumerous, to conclude that the number of plates equals the number of saucers. As long as we can have a non-mysterious account of how we know, e.g., that the cups and saucers are equinumerous, we can have a non-mysterious account of how we can come to know ‘the identities and distinctions’ among numbers (Hale and Wright 2009, 179). The full neo-Fregean story indeed aims to go further in showing how to recover other mathematical knowledge as well (see Hale and Wright 2009, 180).⁴

In Schiffer’s work, the most direct concerns are with defending a ‘face value’ theory of propositions as an important contender in theories of content. But epistemological concerns also play a role here. For once we have a pleonastic account of certain entities (propositions, properties, etc.),

the account in these terms is used to show how our knowledge of something-from-nothing entailments (e.g. if Lassie is a dog, then Lassie has the property of being a dog) is a priori conceptual knowledge, thus explaining how we’re able to have knowledge and reliable beliefs about these sorts of entity.

(2003, 3)

Similarly, an important point Schiffer raises in favor of the pleonastic account of fictional characters is that it enables us to answer the question of how it is possible for us to have knowledge of fictional entities (2003, 52). Epistemological concerns are again at the forefront in Thomasson's development of easy ontology. For on her view, easy inferences enable us to acquire knowledge of such things as modal facts and properties – thereby resolving the long-standing problems of modal epistemology (Thomasson 2018 and 2020).

The most significant impact of easy arguments, however, has to do with their relevance to methodological and meta-philosophical issues. Most particularly, the availability of easy arguments raise questions about whether the existence questions are suitable topics for 'deep' philosophical debate. Here again, the underlying motivations are epistemological. For accepting easy arguments for the existence of various disputed entities – and accepting that we never need more than empirical and/or conceptual methods to answer those existence questions that are well-formed and answerable – demystifies the epistemology of metaphysics. Thomasson argues (2015, 2017) that the Neo-Quinean approach makes the epistemology of metaphysics completely mysterious. Its defenders typically insist that the answers to the relevant existence questions cannot be known through conceptual nor straightforward empirical means – they are (in Theodore Sider's phrase) "epistemically metaphysical" (2011, 187). Some aim to defend their views by appeal to general metaphysical principles, but it remains unclear how these are to be known. Others appeal to the 'theoretic virtues' exhibited by the favored theory. But Bennett (2009) and Kriegel (2013) present detailed analyses in which prominent competing theories simply trade off one theoretic virtue for another, leaving doubt that comparisons of theoretic virtues can settle many metaphysical disputes. Neo-Quinean metaphysicians tend to respond to concerns about epistemological mystery by insisting that there is only a difference of degree between ontological theories and scientific ones. As Sider puts it "as a general epistemology of metaphysics I prefer the vague, vaguely Quinean, thought that metaphysics is continuous with science," with metaphysics and science employing many of the same criteria for theory choice, though he admits that "metaphysical inquiry is by its nature comparatively speculative and uncertain" (2011, 12). Yet there are crucial differences between rival metaphysical versus scientific theories that should not be ignored. For it is rare for competing scientific theories to be equally empirically adequate; on the other hand, it is rare for rival ontological theories to *differ* in their empirical adequacy or predictions (Paul 2012, 12). Where the theoretic virtues other than empirical adequacy are concerned, it is very much open to doubt that these are truth-conducive (Bricker, forthcoming).⁵

In short, one important consequence of accepting easy ontological arguments is that it helps make it non-mysterious how we can come to have knowledge of certain disputed entities (including numbers, properties and other abstracta, modal facts and properties, etc.), and – more broadly – how we can come to have knowledge in ontology – knowledge of what exists. While easy arguments threaten the neo-Quinean approach, they also give us hope for a less mysterious epistemology for metaphysics.

3 Objections to easy arguments

Easy arguments are intuitively acceptable – even obvious. The moves that take us from the premise to the conclusion, as Schiffer nicely points out, seem intuitively redundant. Given their apparent obviousness and acceptability, why would anyone reject them?

As mentioned at the outset, one reason such arguments are often rejected, or simply assumed to be "out of the question" (Yablo 2000, 278) is that the idea that existence questions could be answered easily conflicts with the dominant neo-Quinean approach to addressing existence

1 questions, which takes these to be “substantial metaphysical questions” (Hofweber 2005a). But
2 despite its popularity, one should not be so quick to assume that the neo-Quinean approach is
3 correct – or one we should embrace. For, as mentioned above, it leads to epistemological
4 mysteries and an apparent rivalry with science (didn’t we think it was the job of the natural
5 sciences to tell us what exists?). Moreover, in practice the approach has led to nothing but an
6 overwhelming and ever-diverging set of opinions about ‘what really exists,’ without the dispu-
7 tants even agreeing on a methodology that would tell us how such debates can be resolved.
8 The move from: ‘Neo-Quinean ontology is right’ to ‘Easy arguments must have gone wrong
9 somewhere’ could only even look acceptable in a context in which the neo-Quinean approach
10 was dominant and unquestioned. But in the new era of metametaphysical debates, that is no
11 longer the case, and the neo-Quinean approach has been subjected to sustained and important
12 lines of criticism in recent years that cannot be merely ignored.⁶ Assessing easy ontological
13 arguments requires more of substance than just noting the conflict with neo-Quinean
14 methodology.

15 Both Yablo and Hofweber take up this challenge, offering targeted assessments of where easy
16 arguments go wrong – and why (despite appearances) they don’t really give us ontological con-
17 clusions that could render neo-Quinean arguments out of place. Yablo’s idea (developed in
18 various ways in his 1998, 2000, 2001), is that the conclusions of easy arguments should not be
19 taken seriously as assertions of existence – for they are implicitly in the scope of a fiction or game
20 of make-believe (or are simulating, metaphorical, or otherwise non-literal). As Yablo puts it
21 “the *a priori* approach to existence questions is undermined by doubts about literality” (2000,
22 276). Childhood games of make-believe (on Kendall Walton’s 1990 influential analysis) often
23 involve props (like pats of mud) and principles to generate make-believe truths (such as: where
24 there is a pat of mud, pretend there is a pie). Fictionalists aim to give a similar analysis of easy
25 arguments. What an easy ontologist treats as a conceptual truth (“if there are *n* Ks, then the
26 number of Ks is *n*”), a fictionalist treats as ~~such~~ a generative principle in a game of make-believe
27 (Yablo 2001, 77). As a result, the fictionalist holds that the conclusions of easy arguments don’t
28 give us genuine ontological claims, but only a *pretense* – and so easy arguments don’t answer
29 ontological questions. Thomasson (2013 and 2015, Chapter 5) replies extensively to the fiction-
30 alist threat. She argues that the fictionalist only begs the question against the deflationist who
31 accepts easy arguments. Moreover, she argues that fictionalists face the daunting challenge of
32 contrasting the allegedly fictional uses of the terms in question (‘number,’ ‘property,’ etc.) with
33 literal uses, and that deflationists can offer a better account of the discourse.

34 Another attempt to diagnose where easy arguments ‘go wrong’ is developed by Thomas
35 Hofweber (2005a, 2005b, 2007). Hofweber appeals to work in linguistics to argue the new
36 noun terms introduced in easy arguments (e.g., ‘number’) are merely introduced to bring in a
37 ‘focus effect.’ That is, when we shift from saying ‘There are two bagels on the table’ to ‘The
38 number of bagels is two,’ this focuses our attention on *quantity* (how many bagels) rather than
39 on other aspects of content (such as: what’s on the table). As a result, Hofweber argues, such
40 terms do not ‘have the function of referring,’ and the quantifier used in the conclusion cannot
41 be an ontologically committing one. Hofweber thus distinguishes two uses of the quantifier: an
42 ‘internal’ or ‘inferential role’ use (which he claims is at work in the conclusions of easy argu-
43 ments), and an ‘external’ or ‘domain conditions’ use, which is existentially committing. This
44 enables him to diagnose the ‘puzzle’ of ontology by holding that easy arguments only give us
45 conclusions that use the *internal* quantifier, whereas genuine existence questions must be
46 answered using the *external* quantifier. For further discussion of and response to these arguments,
47 see Brogaard (2007), Moltmann (2013), Balcerak Jackson (2013), Felka (2014), and Thomasson
48 (2015, Chapter 9).

Beyond these targeted attempts to show where easy arguments ‘go wrong,’ there are more global sources of resistance. One of the most venerable sources of resistance to easy ontological arguments is the idea that the (supposed) implicit definitions or conceptual truths used in easy arguments may keep ‘bad company’ with principles that are clearly problematic. This form of argument was first raised against neo-Fregean arguments in the philosophy of mathematics, and has generated a large literature.⁷ The original idea was that, while neo-Fregean arguments for numbers rely on Hume’s Principle, other principles with a similar form notoriously lead to trouble.⁸ More generally, the problem for easy ontological arguments is that existence-entailing conditionals that superficially look like the conceptual truths in easy arguments can lead to outright contradictions or conflicts with known facts. Completely general principles for introducing properties, for example, may lead to contradiction. If we accept a principle that says: “If there is a description, then there is a property corresponding to that description,” then we run into trouble with the description ‘being a property that doesn’t apply to itself.’ Or (as Schiffer argues (2003, 53), suppose we introduce an implicit definition for a new term ‘wishdate’ as follows: “If x wishes for a date, then x gets a wishdate,” where a ‘wishdate’ is understood as “a person whose existence supervenes on someone’s wishing for a date, every such wish bringing into existence a person to date” (Schiffer 2003, 53). This implicit definition then seems to entail, falsely, that whenever someone wishes for a date, a person pops into existence.

To reply to bad company arguments, defenders of easy arguments must find a way to draw the line between (purported) conceptual truths that are acceptable and can be used in non-problematic something-from-nothing inferences, and those that are unacceptable – and to do so without being ad hoc. One prominent strategy (carefully developed in Schiffer 2003, Chapter 2) is to require that the concepts introduced be ‘conservative extensions’ of the prior theory, roughly in the sense that they do “nothing to disturb the pre-existing causal order,” as described by the prior theory (Schiffer 2003, 55). Introducing proposition talk by allowing that, if Lassie is a dog, then the proposition that Lassie is a dog is true, does nothing to alter our take on the causal order. By contrast, it does alter our take on the causal order if we introduce ‘wishdate’ talk by allowing that, if Joanne wishes for a date, then some person pops into existence. Thomasson (2015, Chapter 8) develops a strategy for replying to bad company arguments that involves thinking about what it would take to (just) extend a language. She motivates requirements along these lines, requiring that legitimate existence-entailing conditionals can be seen as “object-language reflections of rules of use that could successfully and minimally introduce new terms or concepts to a (previously) more restricted language” (2015, 260) – that is, introduce them in ways that are learnable, and that ensure they don’t add any new empirical commitments, only an enriched language (including sufficient coapplication conditions to enable us to make judgments of identity and distinctness for things of the kind).

More recently, some have objected to easy arguments by suggesting that even if such inferences look obvious, they may be subject to ‘defeaters’ (Eklund 2017; Korman 2019), so that serious metaphysical debate may be as relevant as ever in defeating the entitlements or assessing putative defeaters. Such claims raise interesting questions about whether (if the easy arguments are based on conceptual truths) they are really subject to ‘defeat’ in ways that empirical claims are (for discussion see Thomasson 2019). Other questions include whether (some or all of) the principles that the easy ontologist takes to be conceptual truths express *correctness rules* or mere ‘*rules of evidence*’ (Yablo 2014, 495–6) that can be over-ridden (for discussion and response see Thomasson 2014).

Perhaps the most general source of resistance to easy arguments comes from resistance to the idea that there are the needed conceptual or analytic truths to take us from the uncontroversial truth to the ontological conclusion. For, given Quine’s influential arguments in “Two Dogmas

1 of Empiricism” (1951/1953), it has become commonplace to reject the idea that there are any
2 analytic truths. Timothy Williamson (2007) has more recently raised other arguments against
3 the idea that there are any analytic truths. Those who accept easy inferences then have two
4 options. They may (with Jonathan Schaffer 2009, 360) take the easy claims of existence to be
5 just ‘obvious’ or ‘compelling,’ or even to have a kind of Moorean certainty that trumps any
6 philosophical claims to the contrary – without taking them to be inferences based on an analytic
7 or conceptual truth. Or they may defend the idea that there are (something like) analytic or
8 conceptual truths in the sense in which they are needed to make the easy arguments. Thom-
9 son takes the latter route, responding to Quinean arguments against analyticity (in her 2007) and
10 to Williamson’s arguments (in her 2015). On Thomasson’s view, all one needs to legitimate the
11 easy arguments is a view on which “*mastery* of relevant linguistic/conceptual rules governing the
12 terms/concepts employed in the inference, plus knowledge of an undisputed truth, *licenses or*
13 *entitles* one to make the relevant inference using those terms, without the need for any further
14 investigation” (2015, 233). And that, she argues, is not undermined by Williamson’s
15 arguments.⁹

16 One increasingly common line of response to easy arguments is to suggest that, even if easy
17 arguments, as stated in English, are sound, there are deeper questions about existence suitable
18 for debate by ontologists. We have already seen one version of this, in Hofweber’s claim that
19 there are two senses of the quantifier at work: a merely internal use in the conclusions of easy
20 arguments, and an external use which could be used in properly answering questions about what
21 ‘exists in reality.’ Cian Dorr (2007) suggests a similar idea that, in the conclusions of easy argu-
22 ments for numbers and properties which say ‘there are numbers/properties,’ ‘there are’ is being
23 used in a ‘superficial’ sense. On Dorr’s view, this contrasts with a ‘fundamental’ sense of ‘there
24 are’ we can use in asking ‘substantive ontological questions’ about whether there really are
25 numbers or properties. Ross Cameron (2008) suggests that we distinguish questions about what
26 *exists* (which may well be answered as the neo-Fregean suggests) from questions about what
27 *really* exists, which “can only be settled (if it can be) by doing metaphysics” (2008, 13). The
28 fullest development of an idea along these lines has come in the work of Theodore Sider, who
29 allows that even those who are committed to the idea that ontological debates are ‘deep’ and
30 ‘substantive’ and to be pursued (roughly) by neo-Quinean methods may allow that, “when
31 applied to *English* quantification, the easy ontology picture might well be correct” (2011,
32 196–7). Yet deep ontological debates, he argues, might nonetheless remain sensible, since we
33 could conduct them in a new language of Ontologese – a language “in which the quantifiers are
34 stipulated to carve at the joints” (2011, 197). Thus, debates about the relevance of easy onto-
35 logical arguments to the prospects for serious ontological debates (done in neo-Quinean fashion)
36 also involve us in debates about whether or not one can make sense of a ‘fundamental,’ or
37 ‘Ontologese’ quantifier and reconstruct debates about existence in those terms.

4 Conclusion

41 Twenty years ago, it was common to assume that easy arguments raised only the puzzle of how
42 to pinpoint where they had gone wrong, given their apparent conflict with the dominant neo-
43 Quinean approach to ontology. This assumption has changed. Now, an increasing number of
44 metaphysicians accept that easy arguments, at least as expressed in English, should be accepted.
45 In fact, growing acceptance of the idea that existence questions can be answered easily has led
46 several non-deflationary metaphysicians to suggest that metaphysics should turn away from
47 questions about existence to focus on some other project (Fine 2009, 158; Schaffer 2009, 357;
48 Cameron 2010). The question of whether we should accept easy arguments for the existence of

disputed entities raises deep questions not only about the acceptability of a neo-Quinean approach to existence questions, but also about what we should be doing in metaphysics. For if existence questions are so easily resolved, it is hard to see them as the appropriate subject for serious and deep inquiries. Discussions of easy ontology thus bring to center stage questions about what we legitimately can and should be doing in metaphysics, and what role answering existence questions should play in our work.

Notes

- 1 And so, immediately after introducing easy arguments like those above, Stephen Schiffer memorably quips, “Maybe you feel like reading Kant to me” (2003, 52). He goes on to say what distinguishes these arguments from traditional ontological arguments for the existence of God – namely that adding reference to such things as numbers and properties may *conservatively extend* a theory whereas adding reference to God does not (2003, 52–61).
- 2 While the approach is standardly labeled as ‘neo-Quinean,’ it is not at all clear that it is true to the historical Quine, who (in his own words), was “no champion of traditional metaphysics” (1951, 66). For discussion see Price (2009).
- 3 This language is developed by Peter van Inwagen (1990, Chapters 10 and 11) to paraphrase talk about tables and other composite inanimate material objects. For arguments for elimination of ordinary objects such as tables and chairs, see his (1990) and Trenton Merricks’ (2001).
- 4 For further discussion of the neo-Fregean approach, see Eklund (2006) and Hawley (2007).
- 5 For doubts about whether theoretic virtues are truth-conducive for metaphysical debates, see Shalkowski (2010), Saatsi (2016), and Thomasson (2017).
- 6 For criticisms of the approach (from various different directions), see Eli Hirsch (2002a, 2002b, 2011), Karen Bennett (2009), Uriah Kriegel (2013), David Chalmers (2009), Yablo (2009), and Thomasson (2015, 2017).
- 7 The bad company problem was originally developed in Boolos (1990) and Heck (1992). For further discussions of it see Linnebo (2009a) and the other contributions to Linnebo (2009b).
- 8 That is to say: certain other abstraction principles that involve a bi-conditional connecting an identity statement to an equivalence relation lead to trouble. The classic case in point is Frege’s own Basic Law V, introducing talk of extensions of sets as follows: that the extension of (set) F equals the extension of set G iff, for all x, Fx iff Gx . As Russell showed, this abstraction principle leads to contradiction if we combine it with Frege’s comprehension principle (that there is a concept corresponding to every expressible condition on objects) and the principle that every concept has an extension.
- 9 Scharp (2013, 48–9) similarly argues that those who possess a concept are ‘quasi-entitled’ to the constitutive principles governing that concept, where that is to say that they would be entitled if there were no countervailing evidence. He does not do so, however, in defense of easy arguments, and it is not clear that quasi-entitlement would be strong enough for the needed defense of easy arguments.

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