

WHAT DO EASY INFERENCES GET US?

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Abstract: In *Ontology Made Easy* (2015), I defend the idea that there are ‘easy’ inferences that begin from uncontroversial premises and end with answers to disputed ontological questions. But what do easy inferences really get us? Bueno and Cumpa (this journal, 2020) argue that easy inferences don’t tell us about the *natures of properties*—they don’t tell us what properties *are*. Moreover, they argue, by accepting an ontologically neutral quantifier we can also resist the conclusion that properties or numbers *exist*. Here I address these two issues in turn—in ways that help clarify both the scope and results of easy ontology.

First, it is important to see that easy inferences were *never intended* to address modal questions. Modal questions are addressed by a different part of the total deflationary view—modal normativism. So understood, metaphysical modal questions nonetheless *do not* provide a remaining area for serious metaphysical inquiry. Second, I argue that we have reason to resist adopting an ontologically neutral quantifier, if we aim to answer ontological questions (without begging the question). Addressing these issues helps to clarify both what does (and does not) follow from easy inferences, and how they form part of a larger deflationary metametaphysical view.

In *Ontology Made Easy* (2015), I defend the idea that there are trivial or ‘easy’ inferences that begin from uncontroversial premises and end with answers to disputed ontological questions. But what do easy inferences really get us? That is the heart of the question raised by Bueno and Cumpa (2020). Easy inferences may tell us that there *are* certain things, such as properties, but (they argue) they don’t tell us about the *natures of properties*—they don’t tell us what properties *are*. And they may tell us that there *are* properties or numbers, but (if we accept an ontologically neutral quantifier) they don’t tell us that properties or numbers *exist*. I will address these two issues in turn.

1. What do easy inferences tell us about the *natures of objects*?

A common response to the easy approach to ontology is to suggest that the ‘easy’ inferences may tell us that there are numbers, properties, mereological sums, etc., but that they don’t tell us *what these things are*. They don’t (it is said) tell us about *the natures of these things*, and so don’t tell us whether we get the things we ‘wanted’, or help resolve further metaphysical debates (say, between a Platonist view of properties and a trope theorist’s view). As Bueno and Cumpa write, “easy inferences do not provide us with any information about the *nature* of the inferred entities” (2020, 5). Versions of this problem have been raised before by Simon Evnine (2016) (to which I reply in Section 6.3 of *Ontology Made Easy*), and by Katherine Ritchie and Vera Flocke (in progress).

Bueno and Cumpa go beyond this, in taking me to (illegitimately) side with Platonists about the natures of numbers and properties. But this is a misunderstanding. I nowhere make arguments of the form they consider:

(P₁) There is a number between 2 and 4.

(P₂) Numbers are abstract objects.

Therefore, abstract objects exist (Bueno & Cumpa 2020, 3)

So the argument that I am begging the question by assuming (P₂) (Bueno & Cumpa 2020, 4) misses its target. And the passages from *Ontology Made Easy* that they cite (Bueno & Cumpa 2020, 6) in support of reading me as defending Platonism (my 2015, 157-8) are actually places where I am *distinguishing* my view from traditional Platonism, by noting that I do not think of properties as ‘posits’ we need in order to ‘explain’ why, say, the house is red. Shortly I will come back to discuss why I should not be thought of as defending Platonism.

But first let us address the more general question: are easy inferences supposed to settle questions not just about whether various sorts of entities exist, but also about the ‘natures’ or ‘essences’ of the entities in question? The short answer is ‘no’, and (*pace* Bueno & Cumpa) I do not claim that they do. But nor should we think of these questions about essences or natures as deep metaphysical questions that await discovery through serious metaphysical inquiry.

Here is the back story. The work of *Ontology Made Easy* was originally conceived of as a book on deflating metaphysics, covering two broad sorts of metaphysical questions: existence questions and modal questions (including questions about natures, essences, and so on). The book became too long for a single volume, and was split in two: *Ontology Made Easy* deals with the existence questions; *Norms and Necessity* (2020) deals with the modal questions. For this reason I mention modal issues only briefly in *Ontology Made Easy* (p. 11, pp. 325-7, and Section 6.3), with references to my other work to fill in the details.

So it is absolutely correct that the easy inferences, taken alone, don’t settle questions about the ‘natures’ of things of various sorts. Nor are they meant to. But that doesn’t mean that we should think of these as remaining topics for serious metaphysical debate.

The key to demystifying metaphysics (at least in my way) is to provide a view on which metaphysical questions that are well-formed and answerable can be answered via nothing more mysterious than conceptual and (sometimes) empirical work. If we aim to answer the question of whether there are Ks, we must understand what Ks are supposed to be. (This is why you cannot answer my question “Are there *hruglaes*?”.) Otherwise put, to address these ontological questions about Ks, you must know the meaning, or rules of use, for ‘K’. Ontological questions typically are asked using sortal terms (Do numbers exist? Do tables exist?) or names (Does Santa Claus exist?). Terms of both of these sorts have various kinds of rules of use. One sort of rule involves *application conditions* (perhaps I should have more neutrally called them ‘introduction rules’). These (as I argue in my 2015) enable us to answer *existence* questions in ways that require nothing more than conceptual and empirical work. But these are not the only kinds of rules of use for our terms. Sortal terms and names also must come associated with *co-application conditions*—rules determining when a term ‘K’ may be reapplied in a way that entitles us to say when *this* is the same K as *that* (see my 2007, and 2015, pp. 222-223). And (I have argued) talk of an entity’s most basic (‘frame-level’) identity conditions is just the object-language reflection of these co-application conditions for the relevant terms. There may be other rules of use beyond application conditions and co-application conditions as well.

Claims about the ‘natures’ of various sorts of thing are metaphysical modal claims—including claims about their identity and persistence conditions, about their dependence relations on things of other sorts, and so on. I argue at length in *Norms and Necessity* (2020) for a ‘normativist’ view of metaphysical modality. On this view, true claims about what is metaphysically necessary are ways of expressing semantic rules and their consequences in the object language (Thomasson 2020, 6). And so (roughly) we can come to know metaphysical modal truths by mastering the relevant semantic rules, learning how to express them explicitly in object-language indicatives, and working out what follows from them (sometimes, as combined with empirical facts).¹ The relevant semantic rules aren’t limited to the application conditions that enable us to answer existence questions, and those easy inferences won’t answer many questions about the ‘natures’ of the disputed objects. Nonetheless, although questions about the ‘natures’ of things of various kinds aren’t answered by easy arguments, such questions *can* be answered through nothing more mysterious than conceptual and empirical work—and so are also deflated.² One just has to see both sides of the deflationary view (from 2015 and 2020) to see how these modal questions are deflated, and how they are answerable in ways that enable us to know *what sort of thing we are talking about* when we come to say that Ks exist.

I do nonetheless accept one claim that the ‘neutralist’ makes: that this approach may leave *certain questions* unanswered (see my 2017 and Section 8.6 of my 2020). For example, even if our ordinary use of property vocabulary pretty clearly entitles us to make inferences from ‘the barn is red’ to ‘the barn has the property of redness’ to ‘there is a property of redness (that the barn has)’, it’s less clear whether our ordinary use of property language entitles us to make the inference from ‘the animal in the barn isn’t a unicorn’ to ‘the animal in the barn doesn’t have the property of being a unicorn’ and to ‘there is a property of being a unicorn (which that animal doesn’t have)’. If ordinary language isn’t determinate regarding whether we are entitled to introduce property talk from predications that are negated, then all that is left to do is to *negotiate* for how such terms *should be used*—do we have good reason to go with an Aristotelian or Platonist way of speaking here? Or consider the modal question: How many words *could be changed* while preserving the same work of literature? Again, if ordinary language isn’t determinate, there may be no precise persistence conditions for literary works to be discovered. So there may be issues on which this approach remains ‘neutral’ with respect to certain metaphysical questions (taken as descriptive), where the rules of use for our terms are simply not clear and determinate enough.³ But that doesn’t mean that there is some deep answer to the question of ‘What are properties really?’ or ‘What changes would really result in destroying a work of literature?’ that may be discovered through metaphysical inquiry. Instead, it leaves us in need of a practical resolution to the question of how we *should* employ the relevant terms.⁴

So in short, the easy inferences alone are not intended to address metaphysical modal questions—and on their own do little to answer questions about the ‘natures’ of entities of various kinds.⁵ But the deflationist *does have* a method of addressing modal questions, and so

¹ For details of the normativist account of modal knowledge, see my (2020, Chapter 7).

² At least—that goes for those modal questions that are answerable (taken descriptively). I come back to this point shortly. For the full story developing the deflationary approach to metaphysical modality and to modal knowledge, please see my (2020).

³ For more on the ways in which modal questions may be indeterminate, and on distinguishing internal (descriptive from external (practical) ways of addressing metaphysical modal questions, please see my (2020, Chapter 8).

⁴ And this may vary for different purposes.

⁵ That of course is not to deny that they may enable us to address some, such as: under what conditions *would there be Ks*?

needn't remain fully neutral on all modal questions. On some modal questions, the normativist approach (combined with plausible interpretations of the rules actually governing our shared terms) *will* give us answers—answers which sometimes seem to side with the Platonist. So, for example, suppose we ask whether two objects (the barn and the stable) can have *the same* property (say, the property of being red). This is to be answered by addressing the conceptual question: Under what conditions we are entitled to say this object has *the same color as* that one? (Or, expressed in the metalanguage: What are the co-application conditions for 'color'?). Here, our ordinary ways of talking about colors clearly permit us to say that if two objects are indistinguishable with respect to their coloration, then they are *the same color*; if two people both have a height of N millimeters, then they are *the same height*, and so on. This enables us to determine *what we are talking about* using ordinary property vocabulary, and tells us that as we normally speak of 'properties', two or more objects can have *the same property*.⁶

Similarly, suppose we ask whether it is metaphysically possible that there be numbers without thought or language. To answer this, we need to look at the introduction rules for number vocabulary. Those rules apparently entitle us to make the inference from 'There are eight planets' to 'The number of planets is eight' and so to 'There is a number'. Given the truth of the first,⁷ we are entitled to conclude that the second is true. But the truth conditions for 'There are eight planets' nowhere appeal to mind or language (by contrast, the truth conditions for 'There is a book on the table' or 'I have five dollars in my pocket' do). It is that aspect of the rules of use for nominative number talk that entitle us to say that numbers (as we normally speak and think of them) are independent of mind and language. But this is not a question-begging *assumption* that numbers are abstracta in the Platonist's sense. Instead, it follows from an extensive argument about how modal questions are to be understood and answered, combined with observations about how our number terms function.

In these cases the easy inferences, combined with the deflationary normativist approach to modality, do give results that echo some things the Platonist wants to say: for example, that there are properties, and that two different objects can have the same property at the same time. Perhaps that is why Bueno and Cumpa think I am defending Platonism. But this superficial agreement with certain claims of the Platonist doesn't mean that my approach vindicates (or is meant to vindicate) traditional Platonism as a metaphysical view over its rivals. First, while it does tell us that *there are properties (as we normally think of them)*⁸ it doesn't tell us that there *aren't* tropes. (We can presumably get easy arguments for tropes as well, given the rules by which trope talk is characteristically introduced, though those aren't typically what *we are talking about* when, in ordinary English, we speak of properties). Second, it doesn't support Platonism as a metaphysical view about what entities we *must posit* in order to *explain* certain 'features of reality'. Instead, it simply tells us that, given the introduction rules for property

⁶ This should come as no surprise to anyone—not even the trope theorist, who typically acknowledges that we *do* speak of properties this way, but thinks that we *shouldn't*. We must, of course, then examine the reasons they give for thinking that we shouldn't talk this way—and assess whether they are compelling, or based in category mistakes and misguided expectations.

⁷ Or, plausibly, even if it is false, since we can also make the inference from 'there aren't eight planets' to 'the number of planets is not eight'. The ability to make the inference to the existence of numbers from either a statement or its negation captures the sense in which we think of numbers as independent from any empirical facts. See my (2020, 115-117) for a fuller discussion of this point.

⁸ So a nominalist view that denies that there are properties would be rejected, or reinterpreted as a pragmatic suggestion that we do away with property vocabulary (a suggestion I think we would also do well to reject).

discourse, we are entitled to conclude (on the basis of uncontroversial observations such as that the barn is red) that there are properties.

To the extent that both Platonism and nominalism are presented as answers to a deep metaphysical question about what entities we *must posit to explain* certain features of the world, *both* arise from a misguided metaontological conception. The central goal of the deflationary approach defended in *Ontology Made Easy* and *Norms and Necessity* is not to take one side of the metaphysical debate over the other, but rather to expose the (meta-ontological) mistakes that lie behind the debate itself (and behind *both* of the rival views), and to develop instead a non-mysterious approach to answering those questions about existence and natures that are answerable. The core point, as I aim to make clear in Chapter 3 (of my 2015) is to develop and defend a deflationary *metaontological* view.

I hope that helps clarify why it is a misunderstanding to think of me as defending Platonism (still less as question-beggingly assuming it). I hope it also makes clear why I don't say much about modal questions in *Ontology Made Easy*. Most importantly, I hope that begins to show how metaphysical modal questions *are* to be addressed on this deflationary view, and how they *can* be resolved straightforwardly and without resorting to epistemologically mysterious forms of metaphysics.⁹

2. Do easy inferences tell us that the relevant objects *exist*?

Bueno and Cumpa claim that I overstep not only in taking easy inferences to establish the natures of entities of various sorts, but also in taking easy inferences to entail that the contested entities *exist*. For one could instead adopt an 'ontologically neutral' interpretation of the (so-called) existential quantifier and treat 'exists' as a predicate that need not apply to what we quantify over. "And in this case, no implication regarding the existence of the objects in question would result" (Bueno & Cumpa 2020, 3).

As they acknowledge, this is not a place where, *by my own lights*, I overstep: for I do not adopt an ontologically neutral interpretation of the quantifier. Instead, I defend the idea—prominent in historical work by Hume, Kant, Frege, Carnap, and Austin, among others—that we should take 'exists' as a formal term rather than as a (first-order) predicate (see my 2015, pp. 63-70, p. 74, pp. 82-84, and pp. 308-317).

Nonetheless, Bueno and Cumpa present a *proposal* for an alternative approach that others could use to resist the conclusion that (say) numbers or properties exist. For if we adopt only the ontologically neutral quantifier, and treat 'exist' as a predicate, then we can conclude only that 'there are' numbers or properties, not that they *exist*.

The quantifier, of course, is a philosophical term of art. There is no deep fact to be 'discovered' about whether " $\exists x(Px)$ " *really* means "there is some x that is P " or "there exists some x that is P ". As a philosophical term of art, traditionally (and in the work of Frege, Carnap, and Quine alike) these three formulations have been used interchangeably, reading ' $\exists x$ ' as 'there is' or 'there exists' some x .¹⁰ This is one bit of philosophical orthodoxy I did not aim to challenge in the book—instead, I simply follow the ways they are used in the tradition I am responding to (2015, p. 84n.2). So I take over from the tradition that:

⁹ For the fuller story and a defense of the normativist view, see my (2020).

¹⁰ For a brief version of the historical story see my (2015, Section 1.4).

1. $\exists x(Px)$ iff There is some x such that Px
2. There is some x such that Px iff there exists some x such that Px

And what I add is the claim that:

3. $\exists x(Px)$ iff the application conditions actually associated with ‘P’ are fulfilled. (2015, 86)

The first (1) is just the standard English translation of the quantifier. The second (2) is the traditional view that Bueno and Cumpa, following Azzouni (2004), object to. The third (3) is what I aim to contribute in Chapter 2 of *Ontology Made Easy*.

Should we accept (2)? That would of course require a lengthier discussion. There are good reasons (given by Hume and Kant) for thinking that ‘exists’ does not function like a normal first-order predicate, to name a property or describe an object in ways that enable us to make distinctions among objects (as we distinguish between those that are red versus green, tall versus short...). There are also important inferential links Frege identified between the concept of existence and the use of number terms (to say that Ks exist is to deny that the number of Ks is zero). This, he argued, should lead us to see ‘exists’ not as a first-order predicate but as a second-order formal predicate, signaling that a given concept is instantiated.¹¹

Beyond these arguments for denying that ‘exists’ (as we use it in English) *actually functions* as a (first-order) predicate, given the goals here, we have additional reasons for rejecting the proposal that we *should think of* ‘exists’ as a first-order predicate. For all the common proposals about how to treat existence as a predicate involve accepting some across the board ‘criteria of existence’ that must be fulfilled (by any entity) for the existence *predicate* to apply to it. And yet (as Bueno and Cumpa acknowledge (2020, p. 4)) accepting these criteria as necessary conditions tends to simply beg the question against disputed entities. Of taking, say, location in space and time as a necessary condition for existence, Azzouni himself writes, “Why doesn’t this, in the crassest way imaginable, simply beg the question against the traditional Platonist?” (2004, p. 92).¹² The same can be said for an ‘ontological independence’ criterion such as Azzouni claims applies to ordinary English uses of ‘exist’ (2004, p. 82, p. 113). If we say that a condition for existing is to “be independent of any psychological or linguistic process *whatsoever*—whether ours or someone else’s” (Azzouni 2004, p. 113), then we beg the question against the existence of fictional characters, as well as many other social and cultural entities such as books, money, mortgages, and laws of state—all of which would clearly be mind- or language-dependent.¹³

Nonetheless, some interesting questions remain about whether (in everyday English) ‘there *is* some x ’ always entails ‘there *exists* some x ’, and so about whether (2) holds. Friederike Moltmann presents linguistic evidence that it does not—as she puts it, “In natural language... existential quantifiers and *there is/are* do not convey existence” (2020, 314). Quantifiers in English range over entities of any sort (including past and purely intentional objects) (Moltmann 2020, 315). Not so for ‘exists’, for “existence predicates generally impose type restrictions”

¹¹ For Frege see (1884/1974, sec. 52-55).

¹² I raise related points against accepting any substantive criteria of existence in (2015, Section 2.5).

¹³ And the fact that we do often recognize that books, money, mortgages, and laws of state exist is evidence against the idea that this is a criterion of existence that we ‘collectively accept’ in ordinary life. Instead (as I argue in 2010) our ordinary ways of assessing what there is and what there isn’t are better seen as following rule (3) above, and using different criteria for putative entities of different sorts.

(Moltmann 2020, 319).¹⁴ Though Moltmann goes on to say that ‘exists’ in English does apply to abstracta, there is admittedly some awkwardness in ordinary English in saying that numbers ‘exist’ or that fictional characters ‘exist’—though there is no corresponding awkwardness in saying that *there is* a well-developed female character in this Victorian novel, or that *there is* a rational number which provides the needed solution to an equation. If you share these concerns, I am happy to drop (2) and not speak of what ‘exists’, but instead work just with claims about what ‘there is’. As Quine put it in “On What there Is”, I can give my opponent “the word ‘exist’. I’ll try not to use it again; I still have ‘is’” (1953/2001, 3).

Ontological questions are what I aim to address in *Ontology made Easy*, and these are questions about what *there is*. The sense of ‘there is’ here that is needed to answer these questions is one that enables us to distinguish, in each case, what *there is* from what *there isn’t*. *There are* Komodo dragons, but not fire-breathing dragons; *there is* oxygen but *there is not* phlogiston; *there are* prime numbers greater than one hundred, but *there are not* even primes greater than two; *there is* a black character in the Harry Potter books, but *there is not* a character who is Harry’s little sister (cf. my 2010). In all domains, whether we are speaking of entities in space-time or not, ontologically independent or not, causally efficacious or not, we need to draw contrasts between what *there is* and what *there isn’t*. We need to draw these distinctions in our ordinary life, literary criticism, mathematical work, and so on, and we aim to characterize these in distinguishing those things, of any kind, that *there are*, from those *there aren’t*—whether or not we use the word ‘exist’.

To address these questions, we need to understand ‘there is’ and the quantifier in a way that is not merely ‘ontologically neutral’ in the sense that Bueno and Cumpa, and Azzouni have in mind. (This is not to deny that one can *also* identify certain ontologically neutral uses of the quantifier, where it simply functions to set up anaphoric back-references. It is only to insist that this cannot be the sense we need in order to address ontological questions: questions about what *there is* as contrasted with what *there isn’t*.)

But how can we understand the truth-conditions for quantified claims in a way that enables us to preserve these contrasts, and to answer questions about what *there is*, using terms of a wide variety of different categories (without begging the question by presupposing some across-the-board criterion of existence)? We can do so by adopting (3) above—the idea that *there are* entities of a contested sort P if and only if the actual application conditions for ‘P’ are fulfilled.

It is by understanding the application conditions (or more broadly: introduction rules) for terms of the relevant sort, and seeing whether they are fulfilled, that we may answer questions about what *there is*, and what *there isn’t*. This enables us to accept that there are different conditions required for *there to be* things of different kinds. And that is important because it enables us to distinguish the fictional characters, numbers, laws, etc. that *there are* from those that *there aren’t* (regardless of whether or not we want to apply the word ‘exists’ to any of them). At the same time, it enables us to avoid begging the question against *there being* numbers,

¹⁴ According to Moltmann, in English ‘exists’ is restricted in its application to material and abstract objects, but inapplicable to events (which are instead said to (or not to) occur/happen/take place) and states, situations, etc. (which are instead said to (or not to) obtain/hold) (Moltmann 2020, 318). If it *is* applicable to numbers, then the particular problem here shouldn’t arise. But since there does seem to be some hesitancy to use ‘exist’ for numbers in ordinary English, I won’t rely on it here. And in any case, the inference in ordinary English from ‘there is’ to ‘there exists’ may not hold across the board.

fictional characters, etc. by *not* adopting some across-the-board criterion such as requiring mind-independence, spatio-temporality, causal efficacy, etc. that the contested entities (by anyone's lights) would surely lack, even if there *were* such things.

In short, what is really important to me is not (2), but rather (1) and (3). It is (3) that enables us to (in each case) evaluate whether there *are* Ps by appealing to the rules governing 'P'—and so to make ontological questions (taken as questions about *what there is*) 'easy'. So supposing we have the following inferential rule that introduces nominative number talk: "If there are N xs, then the number of xs is N." Then from 'There are eight planets' we are entitled to infer 'The number of planets is eight'. And from that we can conclude that there *is* a number, and so that there *are* numbers--in the only sense that has been given sense.¹⁵

One could resist the easy arguments by instead adopting an 'ontologically neutral' reading of the quantifier, but only at the cost of being unable to draw distinctions between what there is and what there isn't, and so being unable to answer ontological questions. Unless, of course, we combine the ontologically neutral sense of the quantifier with an existence *predicate*. But this, as I have suggested, would beg the question against the contested entities and again not enable us to distinguish between those numbers, fictional characters, etc., that there *are* and those that there *aren't*. So the proposal that we employ only an ontologically neutral quantifier and an existence predicate is one we have reason to resist.

We have reason to retain (1) and (3) if we aim to answer ontological questions about what there is (and what there isn't), and to do so in a non-question-begging way. If we do so, then the actual easy arguments I have presented remain unassailed. And then we *do* have reason to say¹⁶ that *there are* numbers, properties, and entities of many other sorts that have long been contested in philosophical discussions, and we *can* use easy inferences to answer ontological questions.

3. Conclusion

I have aimed to show that easy arguments, properly understood, *do* entitle us to conclude that *there are* numbers, properties, and entities of many other sorts that have been philosophically contested—they do enable us to answer ontological questions easily. They do *not*, on their own, address many questions about the 'natures' of the contested entities—nor were they meant to. Nonetheless (as I have suggested here, and argued at length elsewhere (2020)), these metaphysical modal questions, too, can be addressed by methods that require nothing more mysterious than extrapolation from our linguistic competence, reasoning, and empirical knowledge. That is the sense in which a great many metaphysical questions become 'easy'—or at least, non-mysterious and tractable. And that is the promise of deflating metaphysics.

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¹⁵ Those who worry, with Bueno and Cumpa, that accepting (3) means that whether certain objects exist or not depend[s] on the 'resources available to describe the objects in question' are referred to my (2015, Chapter 6), where I reply to such criticisms at length.

¹⁶ To say this, using 'there is' in the ordinary sense in which it is used to draw such contrasts, and using terms like 'number', 'property', etc. in accord with their standard introduction rules.

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