**Why we Should Still take it Easy**

In an earlier paper in this journal (2013) I argued that deflationism is preferable to fictionalism as an alternative to both traditional realism and eliminativism. Gabriele Contessa (this issue) questions this conclusion, denying that fictionalist arguments beg the question against easy ontological arguments, presenting a new argument against easy ontology, and suggesting a response to the challenge I raise for fictionalists. Below I respond to these points in turn. In so doing, I hope to clarify the broader theoretic orientation of easy ontology—in particular, its rejection of a Quinean criterion of ontological commitment and its commitment to a form of functional pluralism about language.

**1. Easy Ontology and the Challenge from Fictionalism**

The easy ontologist holds that trivial arguments from uncontroversial premises entitle us to draw conclusions about the existence of contested entities. For example, in the case of numbers, we can argue as follows:

1. There are exactly three apples on the table
2. The number of apples on the table is three
3. There is a number that is the number of apples on the table

The argument looks acceptable, even obvious, in ordinary English. In fact, as Stephen Schiffer (2003) has pointed out, given (a), it even sounds redundant to utter (b). The reason it sounds redundant, according to the easy ontologist, is that—given the rules of use that introduce noun terms for numbers[[1]](#footnote-1)—it is a conceptual truth that if there are n xs, then the number of xs is n. Given this conceptual truth, (a) analytically entails (b), licensing the easy inference and explaining the feeling of redundancy.

Stephen Yablo claimed that ‘the a priori approach to ontological questions is undermined by doubts about literality’ (2000, p. 42?). The standard fictionalist case against easy arguments (one we easy ontologists hear a lot in conversation) is to deny that the conclusion (c) follows from the premises. For, they argue, (b) is implicitly within the context of a pretense operator (or simulation, or… ). So those who utter (b) can be committed to its real content (that there are three apples on the table) without being committed to its literal content (that the number of apples is three)—and so without being committed to the existence of numbers.

I argued (2013) that if we attempt to take this as a criticism of the deflationist’s argument, it can only be question begging. Contessa denies this. Let me begin by clarifying the dialectic.

If, as the easy ontologist has it, (b) is analytically entailed by (a), then one cannot be committed to the real content (a) and yet merely *pretend* to be committed to (b)—for one is already so committed. So one can take seriously the fictionalist’s thought that (b) might be something we are merely pretending only if one *already rejects* the easy ontologist’s core claim that (given the rules of use that introduce number terms to our discourse) (a) analytically entails (b). That is why I said that the fictionalist doesn’t give any non-question-begging criticism of the deflationist’s argument. (Those who think that when the easy ontologist says that (a) analytically entails (b) and the fictionalist says ‘no it doesn’t’, the fictionalist is giving an *argument against* easy ontology might be sent back to the Argument Clinic).

Looking back, it is not even clear that (whatever the intentions of later fictionalists) Yablo himself meant to present a non-question-begging argument against easy ontology. Instead, at the start of his (2000) he explicitly *presupposes* that easy arguments are unacceptable. As he writes:

One option is of course to… admit that the proof of numbers and the rest is easier than anyone had imagined. I am going to assume without argument that such a course 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, p. 3?).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Nonetheless, the fictionalist can and should be seen as presenting an *alternative* interpretation of the argument from (a) to (c). Contessa says that the easy ontologist is obliged to ‘show that her interpretation of (b) and (c) is the only acceptable interpretation of those sentences’ (p. 3). But this is clearly too high a standard. The easy ontologist points out that from premises everyone finds acceptable and inferences native speakers find unimpeachable—even to the point of their sounding redundant—one can conclude that there are numbers. In making an argument from obvious premises, via inferences clearly permitted in ordinary language, one is not required to also show that these are the only acceptable interpretations of the sentences in question. (Indeed where in philosophy can one find an argument completed by its defender systematically showing that no other interpretation of its sentences is acceptable?)

Arguments like these are, however, open to *challenge* by someone who thinks the defender of the argument has *misinterpreted* one or more of the sentences. We can see the fictionalist as issuing that kind of challenge—and it is one we should meet. But to meet this challenge, the easy ontologist is only obliged to show that her interpretation is *more plausible than* the proposed alternative. I aimed to do this at length earlier (2013, Sect. 6), and will return to a comparative evaluation in section 4 below.

**2. A New Objection to Easy Arguments**

In any case, Contessa raises a new objection against easy arguments. (He claims that I have misrepresented the fictionalist’s argument (p. 3), but I have been unable to find it in this form in the literature. There also doesn’t seem anything particularly fictionalist about the objection Contessa raises. Nonetheless, his argument certainly deserves a response.) Contessa’s objection takes the form of a dilemma: either the inference from (a) to (b) is ‘ampliative’ (in the sense that b contains new information, not present in (a)) or it is not.[[3]](#footnote-3) If it is, then the inference is not trivial. If it is not, then (b) doesn’t contain any new information not in (a), so it can’t contain any new information about the existence of numbers, so it can’t settle the ontological debate (p. 3). But what is the relevant sense of ‘information’ at work here? Contessa leaves this unspecified.

The key question is: is the ‘information’ about the existence of numbers apparently expressed in (b) ‘new information’ above whatever information is carried by (a)? First, it is worth noting that, where (*y*) is analytically entailed by (*x*), we generally do not think of (*y*) as containing ‘new information’. Imagine the following news report: In the morning, a report is given that a hippo has escaped from the zoo. Then, they interrupt your afternoon cartoons with the report ‘This just in. We have new information for you about that dramatic zoo escape. An *animal* has escaped from the zoo’. Viewers might be understandably perturbed. Lest one think that only holds where analytic entailments do not introduce new objectual terms, consider these news updates. Morning news: ‘Four people were shot by a lone gunman today’. Update—‘We have new information for you about that shooting: the number of people shot by the gunman is four’. Or reports of a scientific discovery that cigarettes cause cancer, followed by the update—‘We have new information on cigarettes: they have the property of being carcinogenic’. In each of these cases, although a new noun term is introduced (‘number’, ‘property’) it sounds absurd to count the latter, analytic entailment, as ‘new information’ in anything like the ordinary sense of ‘information’.

So it seems preferable to accept the second horn of Contessa’s dilemma: that (b) (and (c)) do notcontain any new ‘information’ beyond what’s in (a); easy inferences are not (informationally) ampliative in the sense at issue.[[4]](#footnote-4) ‘But then’, Contessa might ask, ‘are you saying that the information that numbers exist is *not* in (b) or that it is *already* (perhaps implicitly) in (a)?’ While I think it is misleading to speak of this as ‘information’, clearly the easy ontologist must accept that (b) tells us that numbers exist, effectively rejecting the first option.

But against the idea that the existence of numbers is already an implicit commitment of (a), Contessa offers the following. We could express (a) in logical form, just quantifying over four distinct objects (the apples and the table) as (a\*):

(a\*) ∃*x*∃*y*∃*z* (*x*≠*y* & *x*≠*z* & *y*≠*z* & A*x* & A*y* & A*z* &O*x*t & O*y*t & O*z*t & (∀)*w* ((w≠*x* & w≠*y* & w≠*z*) 🡪 ¬(A*w* & O*w*t)))

Contessa argues that we cannot think that (a) has an implicit commitment to numbers without thinking that (a\*) does likewise. But, he writes:

I am not sure what to make of the claim that (a\*) carries an implicit commitment to the number three even if it neither explicitly refers to nor quantifies over any number. In particular, it is not clear why, *in order for (a\*)* *to be true, there would have to be a fifth object* (i.e. the number three) in addition to the four objects that are referred to or existentially quantified over. (p. 4, italics mine)

But it is highly misleading to characterize the easy ontologist as holding that *in order for* (a\*) *to be true, there* *would have to be a fifth object.* As I have argued extensively elsewhere (2007, pp. 110-25; 2009), ‘object’ may be used as a sortal (for a medium-sized, independently moveable, trackable, lump of stuff) or as a covering term, guaranteed to apply if another sortal does. The sortal use is clearly inappropriate here: no one thinks that there must be a fifth trackable medium sized lump of stuff (analogous to the apples and table) for (a\*)—or even for (b) or (c)—to be true. But the critic trades on this sortal use of ‘object’ in making the claim seem ridiculous.

Suppose that we drop the term ‘object’ and just have Contessa say (using a sortal) that it is unclear why the easy ontologist holds that, *in order for* (a\*) to be true, there *would have to be a number*. Characterizing the easy ontologist’s view in this way is also problematic. For it makes it sound as if the easy ontologist thinks that the existence of numbers is a *presupposition* of claims like (a) and (a\*). But it is not supposed to be a presupposition of (a) (and (a\*)) that there are numbers.[[5]](#footnote-5) Instead, the idea is that, when new terms are introduced as part of a new conceptual scheme, (a) (or (a\*)) may analytically entail that there are numbers.

Contessa expresses incredulity at the idea that (a\*) could contain an ‘implicit commitment’ to numbers, given that it doesn’t quantify over numbers. This incredulity, however, arises from assuming a Quinean approach to ontological commitment. It seems that Contessa may have overlooked a core part of easy ontology. For I have argued at length against the Quinean idea that all of our existential commitments are carried by our explicit quantificational commitments. Indeed the core, anti-Quinean point of easy ontology is that a sentence that doesn’t quantify over certain sorts of things may nonetheless analytically entail their existence (see my 2007, pp. 151-75 and my 2015, pp. 129-32).

In fact, it seems like only those steeped in the neo-Quinean approach to ontology would see sentences like ‘the number of people shot was four’ or ‘cigarettes have the property of being carcinogenic’ as containing new ‘information’ beyond what was in the original report. And that, in turn, may spring from thinking of all terms on analogy with terms that function to track new material objects (or ‘objects’ in the sortal sense), where it would take an empirical discovery—and added information—to recognize these ‘new objects’.

Another core element of easy ontology is accepting a kind of functional pluralism—acknowledging that terms may be introduced for many purposes.[[6]](#footnote-6) Some terms, like those for new kinds of fish or newly discovered planets, may serve an empirical tracking or positing function. Others, such as moral, mathematical, or modal terms, may be introduced with very different functions. Yablo’s own insights on mathematical discourse (2005, pp. 94-5) give us reason to think terms for numbers are introduced to serve as ‘representational aids’. For example, he argues, introducing number terms enables us to express in finite form scientific laws that could otherwise be expressed only in uncountably many sentences of infinite length (2005, p. 94).

On the easy ontologist’s view, what’s really going on in the move from (a) to (b) is not the introduction of new information, but the introduction of new terms, in a new conceptual scheme, useful for new purposes. Number terms may be introduced not to carry new ‘information’ about the world, but to enable us to express and process the information we have in new, more economical or efficient ways. Seen in this light, what (b) adds is not new ‘information’ but an addition to our conceptual scheme—a new sortal. That new sortal, along with its rules of use, then *entitles* us to infer that there are numbers.

In taking (a) to entail the existence of numbers, Contessa complains that ‘the deflationist has to assume that, for some mysterious reason, (a) says more than it literally says’ (p. 4). But that is not so. The point is a simple one: (a), like the vast majority of our sentences, has analytic entailments. That is not mysterious—no more mysterious than the fact that ‘A hippo has escaped’ entails that ‘An animal has escaped’. When we expand our conceptual scheme—introducing noun terms for things like numbers and properties—the number of analytic entailments we can articulate may also increase. Some of the analytic entailments may involve explicit existential commitments to entities not mentioned in the original sentence. But there’s nothing mysterious about that, and (*pace* Contessa) it certainly doesn’t require interpreting the original statement non-literally.

So, to come back to the original objection, Contessa argues that if (b) doesn’t contain any ‘new information’, then it can’t contain any new information about the existence of numbers, and so can’t settle the ontological debate (p. 3). But the right response to this is to say: (b) *does* tell us that there are numbers. But that isn’t new ‘information’, though it does involve us in explicitly quantifying over entities that (a) doesn’t mention. We could then express a fundamental point of the easy ontologist as denying that changes in what we are quantifying over must involve changes in our ‘information’.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**3. The challenge for fictionalism**

To merely pretend something, one must be committed to what Yablo calls the ‘real content’ of the claim, without being committed to its literal content. So, for example, those playing a pretend game in which stumps count as bears can pretend that there are five bears in the yard, since they may be committed to the real content (that there are five stumps in the yard) without being committed to the literal content (that there are five bears). However, I argued (2013), it is not clear that this contrast can be upheld in the case of fictionalism about numbers (or properties, etc.). For what more would it take for the ontological claim ‘the number of apples on the table is three’ to be true than for ‘there are three apples on the table’ to be true? The deflationist thinks the answer is: nothing! The first analytically entails the second; the second is redundant with respect to the first. The fictionalist must think the answer is that *something* more is required—but what? I discuss and give reason to reject certain obvious replies (2013, pp. 1039-41), for example that ‘it would require that there really be such *objects’,* or ‘it would require that there be something causally efficacious’…

In response, Contessa suggests a simple strategy. The fictionalist can say that what more it would take for (b) to be true than for (a) to be true is that the heavy-duty realist’s story be true; that is, the fictionalist can ‘simply reply that what more it would take for there to *really* be numbers is simply for there to be numbers—mind-independent, non-spatiotemporally located, causally inert abstract objects that make arithmetical truths true’ (Contessa 6).

The difficulty with this response, as Contessa acknowledges, is that the realist’s story ‘is not sufficiently different from the story the deflationist tells us’ (6).[[8]](#footnote-8) That is, the easy ontologist thinks that, given that (a) is true, it is guaranteed to be true that there are numbers—so ‘that there *really* be numbers’ is not an extra condition; or if it is supposed to be, the challenge falls back to the fictionalist of saying why it would take more for the condition to be met. The same goes for claims that numbers are mind-independent, non-spatio-temporally located, and causally inert—for the easy ontologist thinks these follow trivially from the rules of use for number terms. Given the standard introduction rules for number terms, for example, we are not only entitled to conclude (from (a)) that there are numbers, but also that numbers are mind-independent. For the rules governing number terms entitle us to infer that there is a number just given that there are n apples (or planets, or lumps of rock)—and so permit the introduction of a referring number term regardless of whether minds exist.[[9]](#footnote-9) The rules of use that introduce number terms also mark them as distinct in their governing rules from terms that have the function of tracking spatio-temporal objects or positing causes.

But the attentive reader will have noticed something missing: the claim that mathematical entities ‘make mathematical claims true’. Does the easy ontologist think that mathematical entities make mathematical claims true? I certainly accept that we can make the disquotational move licensed by the T-schema and say ‘the number of apples on the table is three’ is true just in case the number of apples on the table is three; which in turn is true only if there is a number. Does that mean accepting that numbers are truthmakers?[[10]](#footnote-10) If it does, then again there is nothing more for the fictionalist to find wanting.

But it probably isn’t all that is meant. What else might one require for numbers to serve as truthmakers for mathematical claims? The truthmaker literature is so unsettled here as to make progress difficult, but common suggestions are to think of truthmaking in terms of necessitation (following Armstrong 2004) or grounding (Schaffer 2008, pp. 309-12; 2010, pp. 309-11). So one might think that what more it would take for (b) to be literally true is not just for there to be numbers, but for numbers to *necessitate* or *ground* the truth of the claim.[[11]](#footnote-11)

There isn’t space to get into all the options and details here, but remember what the fictionalist is trying to do: to articulate why it is that (b) doesn’t follow trivially from (a); what more it would take *according to the ordinary meanings of the phrases* for (b) to be true—such that ordinary speakers who assert (b) apparently on the basis of (a) may be taken to be just *pretending* that (b) is true. To think that what is required as part of the ordinary use of our number terms is that numbers fulfill the requirements of some contested and substantive metaphysical account of truthmaking seems to artificially inflate the requirements for the truth of (b), not to report them. Once again, the fictionalist—like the heavyweight realist and eliminativist—faces the burden of saying why they think it would take more for (b) to be true than simply for (a) to be true—and what more it would take.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**4. Weighing things up**

As we have seen, Contessa’s paper does three major things. First, he denies that the traditional fictionalist argument against easy ontology is question begging. Second, he provides (what I take to be) a new criticism of easy ontological arguments. Third, he gives fictionalists a new suggestion for how to meet the challenge I presented them with: of saying what more it would take for the ontological claim to be literally true. I have concluded my discussion of the second and third points above, but promised (with those discussions in hand) to return to the first.

In response to Contessa’s first point, I argued above that fictionalism does not undermine easy ontological arguments. Rather, the two give rival interpretations of the argument from (a) to (c), leaving the easy ontologist with the challenge of showing that her interpretation is preferable. I made a case for its preferableness originally (2013). We can now briefly revisit it and add to it. As I have argued in section 2, the deflationist (unlike the fictionalist, and *pace* Contessa) is able to read both (a) and (b) as literal statements, literally true. The deflationist can then better handle the intuitions that we are not pretending, or speaking figuratively or metaphorically, when we make straightforward arithmetical statements. The deflationist better respects the intuition of redundancy between (a) and (b). As I have argued in section 3, the deflationist does not have to saddle ordinary speakers with a commitment—as part of the literal content of their arithmetical claims—to a contested and substantive theory of truthmaking. Finally, as I argued earlier (2013, pp. 1044-8), the features of mathematical discourse that Yablo presents as evidence of non-literality are accounted for as well or better on the deflationary view.

Even after a second round, deflationism not only remains standing, but shows itself to be the preferable view for those looking for an alternative to traditional realism and eliminativism. The key to seeing the resiliency and attractions of easy ontology is understanding its commitments to accepting functional pluralism and to rejecting a Quinean criterion of ontological commitment.[[13]](#footnote-13)

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1. That is, that introduce terms like ‘the number of xs’, as nouns, rather than just determiner uses of number words to modify other nouns, as in ‘there are n xs’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a reply to the hocus-pocus charge, see my (2015, 215-20). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is worth noting that this use of ‘ampliative’ is crucially different from that used previously in the metaontology literature, e.g. David Chalmers speaks of an inference as ‘ampliative’ if, roughly, ‘the consequent makes an existential claim that is not built into the antecedent’ (2009, 95). Call this ‘ontologically ampliative’, and Contessa’s sense ‘informationally ampliative’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Denying that easy arguments are (informationally) ampliative is also coherent with Swoyer’s (2014) use of ‘ampliative’: easy ontological arguments are clearly not supposed to be anything like inductive arguments, causal arguments, or inferences to the best explanation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a detailed argument against the view that even claims like (b) have such ontological presuppositions, see my (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Following Huw Price (2011). See also my 2015 (pp. 285-6, 308-9, 314-16). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. One way of reading the conclusion of this section, then, is that an inference may be *ontologically* ampliative without being *informationally* ampliative. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Contrary to Contessa’s final suggestion, the point has nothing to do with imaginability. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. You might worry about whether one must assume that apples or planets are mind-independent, but there is no need to worry about this, since the inference to numbers also goes through if n=0. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On an entailment view of truthmaking (e.g. Bigelow 1988, p. 125), even the easy ontologist might accept that numbers can be truthmakers for some mathematical sentences, e.g. ‘four prime numbers exist between 1 and 10’ entails ‘the number of primes between one and ten is four’. But entailment views of truthmaking are widely rejected (MacBride 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Another option would be to think that what more it would take is for numbers to play some sort of *explanatory* role with respect to our number talk. I discuss this option in (2015, pp. 155-8). Those who take this option, however, again might be accused of artificially inflating the truth-conditions for (b) in a way that arises from assuming a kind of functional monism. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. There are other ways one might aim to say what more it would take for the heavyweight realist’s story to be true: e.g. for the existence of numbers to *explain* our number talk; or for the legitimacy of our number talk to *presuppose* rather than merely *entail* the existence of numbers. For discussion of the first option, see my 2015 (pp. 155-8); for discussion of the second see my 2014. In each case I think it remains dubious that these are part of the ordinary requirements for the truth of (b) rather than the result of a philosophical inflationism that might be traced to a mistaken functional monism. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Many thanks to Gabriele Contessa for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)