Easy Ontology, Application Conditions and Infinite Regress

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Abstract: In a number of recent publications Thomasson has defended a deflationary approach to ontological disputes, according to which ontological disputes are relatively easy to settle, by either conceptual analysis, or conceptual analysis in conjunction with empirical investigation. Thomasson's "easy" approach to ontology is intended to derail many prominent ontological disputes. In this paper I present an objection to Thomasson's approach to ontology. Thomasson's approach to existence assertions means that she is committed to the view that application conditions (i.e., conditions which need to be met in order for some existence assertion to be true) associated with any term "K" with non-trivial application conditions must refer to the existence of things other than Ks. Given other components of her meta-ontological scheme, this leads to either an infinite regress or circularity of application conditions, both of which seem objectionable. Accordingly, some part of Thomasson's meta-ontological scheme should be modified or abandoned.

1　Introduction

In a number of recent publications Amie Thomasson has defended a deflationary approach to the ontological questions which typically occupy philosophers' attention (see especially Thomasson 2007, 2015).[1] According to Thomasson, ontology is 'easy' in so far as ontological disputes are either resolvable by mere conceptual analysis, or by conceptual analysis in conjunction with empirical investigation. In this paper I present a problem for Thomasson's meta-ontological project, namely that, given the manner in which Thomasson conceives of application conditions associated with existence claims, a large class of existence claims will turn out to employ sortal terms whose application conditions will involve an objectionable sort of regress or circularity.[2] If I'm right, then one or more components of Thomasson's so-called 'easy' approach to ontology will need to be modified or abandoned.

In §2 I describe Thomasson's meta-ontological framework. In §3 I present my objection. In §4 I consider some potential responses which Thomasson might make to the objection. In §5 I conclude by making a suggestion regarding which part of Thomasson's meta-ontological project should be abandoned

2　Thomasson's 'Easy' Approach to Ontology

A central component of Thomasson's view is her deflationary account of existence (in the spirit of deflationary treatments of truth and reference), the official rendition of which goes like this:

(E): Ks exist iff the application conditions actually associated with 'K' are fulfilled (Thomasson 2015: 86)

Application conditions are 'certain basic rules of use that are among those that are meaning-constituting for [a] term. In the case of sortal terms, these establish certain basic conditions under which the term will succeed or fail in referring: both in its initial grounding, and in subsequent attempts at using it referentially' (Thomasson 2015: 89-90).

Crucially, the application conditions associated with some sortal term 'K' need not appeal to the fact that Ks exist (Thomasson 2015: §2.3). Another way to put this point is that 'we needn't first settle existence questions of

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[1]In this paper I focus on Thomasson 2015, as it is the most complete expression of Thomasson's thought on this subject.

[2]Thomasson briefly makes remarks which may suggest that she is aware of something like the regress/circularity worry, at least in an inchoate form (cf. Thomasson 2015: 99, 103-104), although she does not develop the worry in any great detail.

the form "Do Ks exist?" in order to settle questions about whether the application conditions for "K" are fulfilled' (Thomasson 2015: 97). In fact, Thomasson says, not only *may* we 'determine whether the application conditions for "K" are fulfilled without having to first answer the question "Do Ks exist?"' but we *must* do so:

(4) Application conditions must not take the following form: 'K' applies iff Ks exist. (While this will always be true, it will not count as an application condition, in our terms.) (Thomasson 2015: 96)[3]

The application conditions for a term are, as I mentioned earlier, 'certain basic rules of use that are among those that are meaning-constituting for the term' (Thomasson 2015: 89). To determine whether some application conditions are met, then, one who understands the term need only 'make use of her mastery of the rules of use of the term – combined with her access to any relevant empirical information – to determine whether the application conditions are met, and thus to evaluate whether the corresponding entities exist' (Thomasson 2015: 113). So, Thomasson's approach gives us a relatively straightforward methodology to employ when we're doing ontology: engage in conceptual analysis in order to articulate or discover the application conditions associated with some term, and then (if necessary) engage in empirical investigation in order to discover whether the application conditions are satisfied.

Sometimes conceptual analysis will be *sufficient* to discover that the term we're interested in has a referent, since a sufficient condition for the term in question's having a referent is that certain conceptual truths hold. For example, it's a conceptual truth that 'there are dogs or there are not dogs'. But from that conceptual truth we can infer 'the property of being a dog is or is not instantiated,' and from there we can infer 'the property of being a dog exists' and 'there is a property' (Thomasson 2015: 150-151; cf. Schiffer 2003: 66).

By contrast, some terms have application conditions with more substantive empirical requirements. So, for example, metaphysicians wonder if there are composite objects, such as tables. In this case, Thomasson thinks, conceptual analysis of the rules of use associated with the term 'table' tells us that a sufficient condition for 'table''s having a referent is that there are particles arranged table-wise – that is, that there are particles arranged in the manner in which particles are or would be arranged if they composed a table. Empirical investigation (let's assume, for illustrative purposes) tells us that there *are* particles arranged table-wise. So, there are tables.

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[3]This proposition is labelled (4) because it is the fourth in a series of features of application conditions which Thomasson endorses.

It is this last class of things – those whose terms have application conditions which require more of the world than conceptual truths – which I focus on in this paper, since they don't seem amenable to an 'easy' approach, given other components of Thomasson's view. It will prove useful to have a shorter name for things whose terms have application conditions which require more than conceptual truths. Let's call them 'things whose terms have non-trivial application conditions,' or, when we're speaking of the terms themselves, 'terms with non-trivial application conditions'.

3   Non-Trivial Application Conditions, Regress, and Circularity

The conjunction of (E) and (4) has a fairly straightforward defect. According to (E), Ks[4] exist iff the application conditions actually associated with 'K' are fulfilled. But according to (4), the application conditions for some term 'K' must not take the form '"K" applies iff Ks exist'.

Here's the problem. Consider some sortal term 'K' which has non-trivial application conditions. Per (4), the application conditions for there being Ks cannot be 'Ks exist'. But since 'K' has non-trivial application conditions, the application conditions for 'K' cannot appeal to mere conceptual truths. So, the application conditions for 'K' will have to appeal to the existence of things other than Ks. For example, the application conditions of the 'corporation' sortal term, being non-trivial, will appeal to the existence of paperwork, fees, etc. (Thomasson 2015: 100).

So, for some sortal term 'K' with non-trivial application conditions, the application conditions in question will have to appeal to the existence of things falling under some other sortal $L_1...L_n$. Do the terms associated with sortals $L_1...L_n$ have non-trivial application conditions? Yes, and here's why. If the terms associated with $L_1...L_n$ had trivial application conditions, then, as a matter of fact, 'K' would ultimately have trivial application conditions as well, since the conditions which must be satisfied in order for 'K' to refer would be trivial. But, by hypothesis, "K" does not have trivial application conditions. So, the application conditions for 'K' appeal to the existence of things falling under at least one other sortal L_n, where 'L_n' has non-trivial application conditions. But then, by the same line of thought, 'L_n'"s application conditions will appeal to the existence of things falling under

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[4]Following Thomasson (2015: 83-84), I will restrict my attention to kind terms, rather than singular terms. I'm fairly confident, however, that the sort of objection which I develop would apply if 'K' was thought of as a singular term.

some sortal M, where 'M' has non-trivial application conditions. It looks like we've quickly fallen into either an infinite regress ('X''s application conditions require that Ys exist, and 'Y''s application conditions require that Zs exist, and 'Z''s application conditions require...), or circularity ('X''s application conditions require that Ys exist, and 'Y''s application conditions require ... , which require that Xs exist).

Is this sort of regress or circularity really so bad? Yes, I think so – in fact, it proves fatal to Thomasson's 'easy ontology,' as currently developed.

I'll start with the infinite regress concern. Is it really so bad for there to be an infinite regress of this sort in the application conditions associated with some sortal term 'K'?

I have two concerns here. First, Thomasson is clear that the application conditions associated with a term 'K' in some sense derive from, or are constitutive of, the meaning or rules of use of 'K' (see, e.g., Thomasson 2015: 89-90, 153, 191, 215-216, 250). But it is difficult to see how we could come to grasp the meaning or rules of use associated with a term, if that would require that we grasp the infinite sequence of application conditions associated with that term. It seems implausible that we could learn an infinite sequence of sortals, and their terms' associated application conditions. Unless, in learning some term with non-trivial application conditions, we learn the entire infinite sequence of application conditions, somewhere down the line we will reach a sortal whose term has application conditions we have never learned, which will in turn leave our grasp of the first term 'K' on shaky or nonexistent foundations. All of this is true even for terms which are 'semantically basic,' that is 'terms that cannot be learned just by way of learning definitions stated in other terms' (Thomasson 2015: 92). Thomasson suggests that such terms might be learned ostensively, or application conditions associated with those terms may be innate (Thomasson 2015: 92-93).[5] But it seems implausible that an infinite sequence of application conditions could be (or

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[5]Thomasson makes this suggestion in order to address the concern that we can only learn the application conditions associated with a term by introducing some other terms which describe those application conditions. The infinite regress/circularity discussed in this paper is not, I should emphasise, an infinite regress or circle of this sort, where we must introduce new terms to describe application conditions, and then yet more terms to describe the application conditions associated with those terms, *ad infinitum*. Rather, the regress/circularity I press in this paper is a regress/circularity of *application conditions* associated with sortals or kinds, in which for some application conditions to be satisfied these *other* application conditions must be satisfied, which in turn require these *other* application conditions to be satisfied, and so on *ad infinitum*. We can have an infinite regress of this sort even if we don't have an infinite stock of *terms* in our language to describe each step of the regress.

would be, for finite beings us) innate, or learnable via ostension.

Aside from the difficulty in learning, or having innate knowledge of, the infinite sequence of application conditions associated with a term with non-trivial application conditions, it is also unclear how we could ever be sure that some such infinite sequence of application conditions has been *met*. Ensuring that all of those application conditions are met seems like an impossibly tall order, and takes us far afield of the 'easy' ontology Thomasson promised us.

I'll now address the circularity concern. If K has circular application conditions – for example, of the form 'Ks exist iff Ls exist, and Ls exist iff Ks exist' – then in order to determine whether there are Ks we would have to determine whether there are Ls, and in order to determine whether there are Ls we would have to determine whether there are Ks. This sort of circularity violates the constraint that application conditions for a sortal term K must be such that we need not discover whether Ks exist in order to determine whether the application conditions for 'K' are satisfied. This constraint is an important, perhaps the *most* important, component of Thomasson's 'easy' approach to ontology. It is what allows us to discover that there are, e.g., tables, simply on the basis of the uncontroversial existence of things falling under some other sortal (there being 'particles arranged table-wise,' for example).

Another problem for circular application conditions is that sortal terms with such application conditions make no substantive requirements on the world for their satisfaction. For this sort of reason, Thomasson seems to reject sortals whose associated terms have application conditions which are circular. For example, Thomasson (2015: 260) considers the following application conditions, associated with the newly introduced sortal terms 'xheart' and 'xliver' (inspired by Eklund 2006: 112):

If there is a heart and there are no xlivers, then there is an xheart.

If there is a liver and there are no xhearts, then there is an xliver.

The sortal terms 'xheart' and 'xliver' are objectionable in so far as 'we do not seem to gain any clear grasp of the application conditions for the introduced terms whatsoever given the circular way in which they are introduced. Thus we are not licensed to infer that the application conditions for "xheart" are guaranteed to be fulfilled given the truth of the antecedent, for we do not know what it takes for there to be xlivers' (Thomasson 2015: 262). This point generalises to other sortal terms with circular application conditions: sortal terms with circular application conditions are objectionable in so far as they do not make any substantive requirements on the world. We have

no 'clear grasp' (as Thomasson puts it) of what it would take for such sortal terms to refer, precisely because there is nothing to grasp.[6]

4   Attempts to Avoid the Regress

Perhaps Thomasson can avoid the sort of regress or circularity I'm pressing by maintaining that there can be sortal terms with non-trivial application conditions, which nevertheless are such that those application conditions do not appeal to the existence of anything for their satisfaction. Thomasson makes at least two suggestions which might be amenable to a view of this sort. In both cases Thomasson aims to specify sufficient application conditions for there being objects which fall under some sortal K, which are such that the sufficient application conditions in question do not appeal to there being objects of any sort (Thomasson 2015: 99).

First, we might make use of the following suggestion: '... one could perhaps ... express the application conditions [for some sortal] in what Hawthorne and Cortens (1995) call a "feature-placing language", and hold that if it is cupping around here, then there is a cup. If so, we could state the application conditions for "cup" without appealing to the existence of a cup *or indeed of any object at all*' (Thomasson 2015: 107).

I don't have a knockdown argument against this suggestion, but I suspect it does not help us avoid a regress of application conditions. The sentence 'it is cupping around here' does not wear its meaning on its sleeve. There are, however, at least two ways to cash out what one is saying when one says 'it is cupping around here'. On one way of understanding this sort of feature-placing language, 'it is cupping around here' does not entail that there are cups, and in fact 'it is cupping around here' may have no ontological implications of any sort. This is how Hawthorne and Cortens understand sentences such as 'it is cupping around here,' but it can't be what Thomasson has in mind. For Thomasson, these sorts of sentences must have ontological implications if they are to express application conditions for ontological sentences of the form 'there is a cup around here,' since, per (E), application conditions, if satisfied, entail that the things of which they are application conditions exist.

So, according to the second interpretation of feature-placing sentences

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[6]More carefully: we cannot grasp what it would take for *all* components of the term's circular application conditions to be satisfied, even if we can form some grasp of what it would take for some individual *component* of those application conditions to be satisfied. After all, we do *partially* grasp the application conditions associated with, say, 'xheart,' assuming we grasp the application conditions associated with there being a 'heart'.

such as 'it is cupping around here,' such sentences carry ontological implications, and in particular the sentence 'it is cupping around here' will entail that there are cups. This is, as we've seen, how Thomasson interprets these sentences. But now Thomasson faces the following challenge: if 'it is cupping around here' entails that there are cups, then we might worry that 'it is cupping around here' is just another way of saying there is at least one cup around here. Needless to say, if 'it is cupping around here' and 'there is at least one cup around here' are different ways of saying the same thing, then the former sentence cannot express application conditions for the latter sentence without contravening (4).

One natural thought here is that the sentence 'it is cupping around here' is not just another way of saying there is at least one cup around here, but is rather just another way of saying something like: there are particles arranged cup-wise around here, or there is stuff arranged cup-wise around here, or there is a (sufficiently large) cup shaped simple around here, or... We can charitably assume that if any of these disjuncts is true then there are cups (so, for example, if there are particles arranged cup-wise then there are cups). But now the problem is not that this sort of disjunctive specification of application conditions runs afoul of (4), but rather the problem is that any of the disjuncts in question will presumably involve application conditions which, for the sorts of reasons discussed above, will involve an objectionable regress or circularity. So, once again, feature-placing sentences such as 'it is cupping around here' won't obviously help Thomasson avoid this sort of regress or circularity.

Aside from the feature-placing strategy, another way to potentially get out of the regress or circularity concern is by suggesting that the application conditions associated with some of our conceptually basic object concepts are associated with certain perceptual inputs – if we have such-and-such sense experiences, then so-and-so object exists. Thomasson seems to endorse this suggestion. She writes, for example, that 'The sense of "thing" or "object" that plausibly *is* conceptually basic is the sortal sense of "object" studied by cognitive psychologists' (Thomasson 2015: 109).[7] Cognitive psychologists

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[7]Thomasson contrasts this sense of 'thing' or 'object' with what she calls the 'covering' use of such terms. On this way of using these terms, '"object" or "thing" serves as a dummy sortal that may be replaced with any normal first-order sortal, and the rules of use for which entitle us to infer "there is some thing" ... from "there is some S", where "S" is any first-order sortal' (Thomasson 2015: 109). Unfortunately this use of 'object' or 'thing' does not provide any helpful insight regarding strategies whereby we might avoid a regress or circularity of application conditions. This is because Thomasson contends that we can only know that this 'covering' use of 'object' or 'thing' is satisfied (that is, we can only know that there are 'objects' or 'things,' on this way of understanding those terms)

have identified application conditions associated with our 'conceptually basic' object concept, including whether our sense experience presents us with objects which exhibit 'spatiotemporal continuity, boundedness, and cohesiveness' (Thomasson 2015: 110). Thomasson goes on to write that

> Some might be tempted to object that infants apply the object concept by *seeing that there is an object there*, and that the application conditions for their concept require *that there be an object there*, so that again in this case the application conditions for "object" require saying that "object" applies just in case there is an object there. But I think this is a misunderstanding. ... The more proper way to understand the application conditions for this basic object concept (applied using their perceptual input analyzers) is in terms of the perceptual input that leads them to apply the concept. That does not appeal to prior criteria about whether an *object* exists .... Instead the fulfilment of the application conditions is what leads to conclusions about whether there is an object in a given situation (Thomasson 2015: 111)

The idea is that 'certain sorts of perceptual input' can provide grounds for supposing that an object is present, in so far as those perceptual inputs are included in the sufficient application conditions for the existence of the object. Note that Thomasson is explicit that application conditions for a term are not simply those conditions under which we would be justified in inferring that the term refers, but rather are those conditions under which the term *would* refer (Thomasson 2015: 93-94). Thomasson is saying, then, that if we have such-and-such perceptual inputs, then our conceptually basic object concept applies – she is not making the weaker claim that if we have such-and-such perceptual inputs then we are warranted in believing that our conceptually basic object concept applies. In response I would note that our perceptual faculties are fallible. Thomasson seems committed to the implausible idea that our having certain sorts of perceptual inputs, in particular those perceptual inputs associated with our conceptually basic 'object' concept, is sufficient for there to actually *be* such an object. But, barring some sort of implausible phenomenalism or idealism (which I have no reason to think Thomasson endorses), it seems to be clearly false that our having any sorts of perceptual inputs is a sufficient condition for any sort

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by first discovering whether some first-order sortal refers (Thomasson 2015: 109). But those first-order sortals (assuming they have non-trivial application conditions) are just as liable to land us in the regress or circularity of application conditions as any other sortal (with non-trivial application conditions).

of external object to exist. We can coherently ask, of anyone applying the conceptually basic object concept on the basis of their having the relevant perceptual inputs, whether they are *correct* in supposing that the external object in question exists.

Thomasson anticipates this objection:

> if we understand [infants'] object concept to be governed by the rules elucidated by cognitive psychology, they *are* right to conclude that there is an object in a given situation, that an object has ceased to exist (when it is dispersed into parts), and so on. The objector cannot be coherently suggesting that, given the rules for identifying and individuating objects (that delineate our basic object concept), the infant gets it wrong (Thomasson 2015: 112)

The following claim, I think, is not incoherent: that an infant might have the relevant sorts of perceptual inputs (just what sort of perceptual input we're talking about here is something for the cognitive psychologists to study), to form the belief that such-and-such an object is present, and yet nevertheless be incorrect in this belief. What this shows is not, as Thomasson claims, that I am proposing we replace our ordinary conceptually basic object concept (the one studied by cognitive psychologists) with a new one (Thomasson 2015: 112), but rather that Thomasson is incorrect about the application conditions associated with our conceptually basic object concept, in so far as those application conditions do not include as a sufficient condition that we have any particular sorts of perceptual inputs.

5   Conclusion

So, where does Thomasson's meta-ontological project go wrong? The reader can decide for himself, but I have a suggestion. I suspect that the weakest component of Thomasson's meta-ontological project (or the weakest such component which helps lead to the objectionable regress or circularity of application conditions) is (4), which, recall, states that 'Application conditions must not take the following form: "K" applies iff Ks exist'. This suspicion coheres with Daniel Korman's commentary on Thomasson's easy ontology (Korman forthcoming). Korman thinks we have a concept of 'object' which lacks non-trivial application conditions, and that the concept is none the worse for that. Here Korman's reference to our 'object' concept lacking 'non-trivial' application conditions does not line up with my use of the phrase 'non-trivial application conditions' in this paper. Rather, what I take Korman to mean here is either that 'object' might lack application

conditions entirely, or that the most that can be said of the application conditions associated with 'object' is this: 'object' applies iff objects exist. On the second interpretation of Korman's claim that 'object' 'lacks non-trivial application conditions,' (4) is false. This paper can be seen as further support for Korman's rejection of (4).[8]

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