

No “Easy” Answers to Ontological Category Questions

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Abstract

Easy Ontologists, most notably Thomasson (2015), argue that ontological questions are shallow. They think that these questions can either be answered by using our ordinary conceptual competence—of course tables exist!—or are meaningless, or else should be answered through conceptual re-engineering. Ontology thus is “easy”, requiring no distinctively metaphysical investigation. This paper raises a two-stage objection to Easy Ontology. We first argue that questions concerning which entities exist are inextricably bound up with “ontological category questions”, which are questions concerning the identity of and differences between kinds of entities. We then argue that ontological category questions do not have trivial answers, are meaningful, and cannot be answered through conceptual re-engineering. Easy Ontology hence does not constitute a comprehensive ontological methodology. While some of ontology might be easy, category questions form a central part of ontology and are not answered easily.

Easy Ontologists, most notably Amie Thomasson (2015, 2020a, 2021), argue that ontological questions are shallow. They think that these questions can either be answered by using our ordinary conceptual competence—of course tables exist!—or are meaningless, or else should be answered through conceptual re-engineering. They conclude that ontologists should focus on conceptual questions, regarding which concepts we *in fact* use and which concepts we *should* use.

This paper raises a two-stage objection to Easy Ontology. We first argue that questions concerning which entities exist are inextricably bound up with ontological category questions—questions concerning the identity of and differences between kinds of entities.¹ For example, consider two philosophers who both think that there are numbers, but while one thinks that they are fictional

entities, the other thinks that they are sets. They endorse distinct ontologies. To give another example, consider two people who hold that there are events, but while one thinks that events are *sui generis* entities, the other takes them to be property instantiations. They again endorse distinct ontologies. We call questions concerning the identity of and differences between kinds of entities *category questions*. After arguing that category questions are central to ontology, we argue that they are meaningful, do not have trivial answers, and cannot be answered through conceptual re-engineering. Easy Ontology hence does not constitute a comprehensive ontological methodology. Even if *existence* questions are trivial, an important range of ontological questions cannot be answered through the methodology Easy Ontology relies on.²

Our argument creates a dilemma for Easy Ontologists. They can either embrace a narrow conception of ontology according to which ontology concerns only existence questions or accept a broader conception on which—as we argue—ontology includes category questions.³ The first horn of the dilemma turns Easy Ontology into a far less ambitious, and hence far less interesting project. But the second horn conflicts with a certain general ambition of Easy Ontologists. Thomasson presents her view as an alternative to “‘hard’ ontology” (2015). She says that her view “leads to a kind of meta-ontological deflationism, holding that something is wrong with typical ontological disputes about what really exists, and arguments among those who defend competing ‘ontologies’” (2015, p. 22). Thomasson takes “typical” ontological debates to be flawed—for ontology is easy. But if ontology is broadly construed, then typical ontological debates pose a non-trivial set of questions that are not answered via easy arguments.

We start with an exposition of Easy Ontology (§1), argue that ontological category questions form a central part of ontology (§2), and go on to argue that there are no “easy” answers to ontological category questions (§3). We next consider two responses to our argument that appeal to linguistic and conceptual competence (§4 and §5). We argue that neither kind of competence provides answers to category questions. We then consider the view that empirical or pragmatic inquiry can answer category questions, and argue that they cannot (§6). Next we examine what we take to be Thomasson’s likely response: that category questions are unanswerable and should therefore be abandoned and replaced by questions about what conceptual schema we *ought* to use. We argue that this point would be granting our main point, which is that many ontological questions do not have easy answers (§7). Finally, we conclude (§8).

1 | EASY ONTOLOGY

Let’s review the argument for Easy Ontology in more detail. Easy Ontologists draw inspiration from Carnap’s (1956 [1950]) distinction between “internal” and “external” questions. According to a popular interpretation, internal existence questions are phrased by *using* key ontological terms, while external existence questions merely *mention* these terms.⁴ *Internal* existence questions, such as “Are there tables?”, can, according to Easy Ontologists, be answered “easily”, by merely using our conceptual competence (perhaps together with some empirical investigation). But external existence questions are pragmatic questions concerning the use of certain words, such as ‘table’ (Thomasson 2015, p. 40). They include questions such as: “Should we use the word ‘table’?”, and “How should we use the word ‘table’?” This view motivates a disjunction: Internal existence questions are trivial or meaningless; so existence questions in general are either trivial, meaningless, or pragmatic external questions. On this view, ontologists should either try to figure out what concepts such as TABLE in fact mean, or else whether

and how we *should* use these concepts. There is no room left for substantive metaphysical inquiry.

Why should internal existence questions be trivial? Easy Ontologists embrace a certain deflationary conception of existence (see Thomasson 2015, p. 86), according to which:

(E) Ks exist iff the application conditions actually associated with ‘K’ are fulfilled.

The application conditions of a term K are semantic rules of use which speakers master as they acquire a language. As Thomasson puts it:

the very rules for introducing property language [...] license us to infer from an ordinary truth like ‘the house is red’ that ‘the house has the property of being red’ and so to provide an easy affirmative answer to the general question (asked internally) ‘Are there properties?’ (2015, p. 37).

Put another way, Thomasson argues that speakers who have mastered the semantic rules for their terms can use this competence to answer typical ontological questions. To generalize, the Easy Ontology view can be stated as follows:

Easy Ontology: Ontological questions can be answered through “easy arguments”, which derive conclusions from premises that are conceptual or empirical truths, by relying only on speakers’ ordinary linguistic or conceptual competence, or else they can be answered through pragmatic means.

While there may be existence questions that require hard empirical work (e.g., ‘what is the bacteria count in this petri dish?’) or complicated mathematical reasoning (e.g., ‘is there a largest prime number?’), according to Easy Ontology, there is no room left for hard ontology. That is, there are no questions that require, as Sider puts it, “epistemically metaphysical” methods of inquiry—methods that are neither directly empirical nor merely conceptual (2011, 187).

Easy Ontologists hold that we can establish the existence of events by arguments such as the following:

P1. May was born on a Monday.

P2. May’s birth occurred on Monday.

C. There is an event (namely of May’s birth).⁵

The argument starts from an undisputed empirical truth. The conclusion C can then be derived from P2 using our competence with the concept of existence (which involves an instance of principle (E) above). Easy Ontologists offer arguments structurally analogous to the one above for the existence of properties, numbers, propositions, and so on.⁶

In what follows, we will grant that many existence questions have “easy answers”. We will argue, however, that existence questions are inextricably bound up with ontological category questions, which do not have “easy” answers. To clarify, in some of her more recent work (Thomasson 2017a, 2017b, 2017c), Thomasson allows that perhaps some internal existence

questions are neither meaningless nor trivial. She argues that, in that case, their epistemology is mysterious, leading her again to the conclusion that the “legitimate” work of ontologists concerns (descriptive and/or normative) conceptual work. We take this point up in §7.

2 | CATEGORY QUESTIONS

We think that ontology concerns more than just existence questions. Existence questions are deeply connected with questions concerning the identity of and differences between kinds of entities. Specifically, *category questions* form a central part of ontology. *Categories* are kinds of things (broadly construed), and a *category system* (in the sense intended here) is a complete system of kinds of things that includes relations between the various categories. A complete category system should be exhaustive—covering the full range of categories. The categories on a given level should also be mutually exclusive. Category questions are questions concerning category systems, including the question of which categories there are and how they relate.

The view that ontology aims to answer category questions has been prominent since Aristotle. Recent discussions of the purpose of ontology show that categories continue to be prominent. For example, Peter van Inwagen argues that “it is the business of ontology to provide answers to the ontological question in terms of a specification of the ontological categories” (2014, p. 185). Bob Hale argues that a general way of phrasing the main question of ontology is “as asking what basic or fundamental categories or types of entity we should recognize—where candidates include objects, individuals, particulars, substances, properties, relations, universals, events, processes, states of affairs, facts, etc.” (2010, p. 401). Laurie Paul states that “a central project of contemporary metaphysics is to understand the nature of the world as a whole. The traditional way to approach this project is to develop an account of the metaphysically basic kinds, that is, of the fundamental ontological categories of the world” (2013, p. 89). Kit Fine states that the focus of his preferred “Realist” metaphysics is on “the fundamentally real—and our interest in other categories of reality will derive from their connection with this more fundamental category” (2001, p. 28). Even Thomasson herself argues that categories feature in ontology (1999, 2019). For example, she states that:

Ontology is a two-part venture. The first task is to lay out categories in which things might be claimed to exist, without commitment to whether or not such categories are occupied. The second task is that of assessing what there really is (1999, p. 115).

Many others have also adopted the view that category systems are a central part of ontology.⁷

We will call questions concerning which categories there are *category existence questions*. They include questions like the following: Is there a category of properties? Is there a category of objects? Is there a category of states of affairs? But that’s not all. Category systems are meant to lay out a hierarchy of categories that are mutually exclusive on every level. So, constructing a category system additionally requires answering questions about the relations between categories. We will call these questions *category identity questions*. They include questions like the following: How many categories are there?⁸ Is there a fundamental category?⁹ Are events the same kind of thing as property instantiations? Are events the same kind of thing as times? Are numbers particulars? Are numbers sets? Category identity questions concern the identity of and differences between categories, and whether given kinds of things are in the same or distinct categories.

Why should category questions be central to ontology? Providing a *systematic* ontology is easier given a categorical approach. Thomasson (1999) provides three main arguments to this effect. First, a non-categorical approach would be slow and time-consuming. Second, a piecemeal approach risks being arbitrary. One might include some entities, but not include some other very similar entities. Third, such an approach risks being inconsistent. One might accept some kind of entity, *F*, but reject the entities on which *F*s depend. To save time, while avoiding arbitrariness and the threat of inconsistency, Thomasson argues, one should accept that there are ontological categories. We add to this list by arguing that ontological categories also allow one to avoid being gratuitous in giving an ontology of the world. For example, suppose that one is listing the categories of things they take to exist. One includes dogs, atoms, people and then one adds philosophers and dachshunds to the list. There is something gratuitous about listing both people and philosophers, both dogs and dachshunds. Once people have been added to the list, philosophers are covered.

Now, a categorical approach by itself does not rule out arbitrariness or gratuity, since one's categories could be arbitrary and gratuitous. However, once one has established a category system composed of mutually exclusive, exhaustive, consistent, and non-arbitrary categories, one can use it as a basis for a systematic ontology.

Many typical debates in ontology are already inseparably bound up with category questions. Here are two examples. For one, consider the debate between mereological nihilists and mereological universalists.¹⁰ Mereological nihilists deny the existence of composite objects. Universalists, in contrast, assert that there are composite things, and, moreover, that for any two things *x* and *y* there is a thing *z* such that *x* and *y* compose *z*. However, there is a view which shares the spirit of nihilism but accepts the claim that some things are composite: *Composition as identity* (CAI), the thesis that a whole is identical to its parts.¹¹ According to CAI, composite things are nothing over and above their parts. So, even if we take the existence of composite objects for granted, there still is an important ontological question left open, which concerns whether composition principles are ontologically innocent. Mereological universalists believe that, when composition occurs, new things come into existence. But proponents of CAI deny that composition generates anything additional. So, composition questions are tied to the question whether wholes are *distinct* from their parts, and hence directly related to category identity questions.

Our second example concerns events. Much of the debate about events takes it for granted that events exist, and instead concerns what kind of entity events are (see Casati and Varzi, 2015): Are events objects? Facts? Properties? Times? Many of these questions directly lead to metaphysical questions about related ontological categories. Take, for instance, the exchange between Davidson (1969) and Kim (1976) over whether events are property instantiations. According to Kim, each individual event is composed of a substance, a property, and a time. Events hence are property instantiations. Davidson, in contrast, argues that events are particulars. Kim (1976, p. 314) points out that resolving the disagreement with Davidson will turn on the identity criteria for events that either theory offers, and on whether they are co-extensive. This debate concerns category identity questions: Are property instantiations particulars? Do events belong in the same or in distinct categories from property instantiations? Any ontology of events should answer these questions.

One might argue that what we think of as typical disputes in the metaphysics of events are not *ontological* disputes, on the grounds that they do not concern whether events *exist*. However, we think that how these debates have gone is better taken to demonstrate how typical ontological disputes combine existence questions and category questions. Simons (2000) brings this out clearly in a discussion of objects and events. He asks whether both continuants—roughly things like ordinary objects¹²—and occurrents—generally things like events¹³—are required as a part

of ontology. He argues that both continuants and occurrents exist and that the two categories cannot be identified. Here the category question concerning the right classification of events is formulated as an existential question: *are there* two non-identical categories, one for continuants and one for occurrents? In discussing the ontology of events, category questions are often at issue.¹⁴

We have argued that category questions—concerning both the existence and identity of or difference between categories—have been at the core of ontology since it began and continue to be prominent in the work of contemporary ontologists. “An ontology” really is a theory of what exists that takes the form of a list of categories and sub-categories that are meant to be jointly exhaustive (so that whatever exists has a place on the list) and exclusive (so that there is no overlap between categories on a given level in the hierarchy). Further, we take it that this is not just a historical accident, but as we argued above, there are good reasons, like developing a consistent and systematic theory, that support category questions having a central place in ontological inquiry. Given this discussion, we think that a narrow view of ontology, on which it *only* concerns existence questions is severely limited and does not meet what people have and ought to take ontology to do. If an Easy Ontologist has to adopt this view, their project is much less ambitious and, hence, less interesting.

3 | LIMITATIONS OF EASY ARGUMENTS

We have argued that category questions form a central part of ontology. Next, we argue they do not in general have “easy answers”. Since we have drawn a distinction between category existence and category identity questions, we will address this question for each sort, beginning with category existence questions.

Without further assumptions, the “easy arguments” discussed in §1 do not tell us which categories of things there are. For example, accepting the first-order sentence ‘There are events’ does not tell us whether there is a category of events. So, at least *prima facie*, category existence questions are left open. One might, however, adopt a very liberal conception of categories, in which any sortal concept, e.g., *EVENT*, is a category. The Easy Ontologist could then argue for a plenitudinous view of categories. They might argue that ordinary language already includes a system of categories. Predicates such as ‘event’, ‘chair’, ‘philosopher’, and so on, express sortal concepts which are categories. If we adopted this view of categories, we could answer whether certain categories exist by a straightforward extension of the easy arguments already considered, as follows:

P1. May was born on a Monday.

P2. May’s birth—an event—occurred on Monday.

C. There are events.

C’. There is a category of events.

C’ in this argument is supposed to be inferable from C using only one’s competence with the concept *CATEGORY*. Using a very liberal conception of what categories are, Easy Ontology hence delivers answers to category existence questions.

The catch, however, is this: a plenitudinous category system will not meet the conditions that the categories in a category system ought to be mutually exclusive and non-gratuitous. The view includes categories for dachshunds, dogs, philosophers, metaphysicians, people, events, and on and on. So, while technically an Easy Ontologist might be able to answer category existence questions, the answers arrived at will be redundant and perhaps also arbitrary. This strategy misses out on some of the key advantages claimed for a categorial approach to ontology.

What's more, regardless of one's take on the status of the Easy Ontologist's method for answering category existence questions, easy arguments do not answer category identity questions. Recall that one category identity question is 'How many categories are there?' Accepting, for example, the sentence 'There are events' is consistent with a one-category ontology, a two-category ontology, a three-category ontology, . . . , and an n-category ontology. In a one-category ontology, there might not be a distinct category of events; rather, events might be a species of property instantiations. In a two-category ontology, events might be taken to be their own category alongside property instantiations. So, the claim that there are events does not tell us which system of ontological categories is correct. How many categories of things there are, and how they are ordered hierarchically and relate to one another, is not answered by any of the received "easy arguments" to the effect that certain things exist. It is as if Easy Ontology gives us a huge bucket of LEGOs, but does not give us any way to organize them into categories. But part of the job of ontologists, as we argued in the last section, is to organize entities into categories. To extend the LEGO metaphor, the bricks should be organized into categories so that we can figure out what it will be possible to build.¹⁵

The Easy Ontologist could argue that category identity questions are *meaningless*. All *meaningful* ontological questions, the response goes, including questions about the identity or distinctness of categories, can be answered by means of easy arguments. And this is what Easy Ontologists argued for all along. But, we submit, category identity questions are meaningful, even by the lights of Easy Ontologists. The question of whether events are property instantiations is framed using only terms whose meanings are rooted in ordinary English and that Easy Ontologists, typically regard as meaningful: 'property', 'instantiation', 'is', and 'event'. We do not attribute any non-standard interpretation to these terms, and simply ask—using the terms' or concepts' ordinary interpretations — are events property instantiations?

We have argued that Easy Ontologist's received method for answering existence questions does not help to answer category identity questions, even though these questions are meaningful. But Easy Ontologists might of course expand their repertoire and develop additional methods for answering category identity questions. We will look at several candidates informed by recent work by Thomasson (2020a, 2021). In line with the general deflationary methodological constraints imposed by Easy Ontology (see §1), there are three approaches Easy Ontologists might take to answer category identity questions. They might argue that category existence questions can be answered through conceptual competence, empirical investigations, or pragmatic choices (or some combination of the three). We discuss each of the three options in turn.

4 | NO "EASY" ANSWERS THROUGH CONCEPTUAL COMPETENCE

Can we answer category identity questions by making use of our conceptual competencies as ordinary English speakers? Two kinds of conceptual competence might be deemed relevant: competence with concepts such as PROPERTY INSTANTIATION or EVENT, and competence with the concept IDENTITY. Let's consider each of these responses. First, does competence with the con-

cepts PROPERTY INSTANTIATION and EVENT allow us to answer whether events are property instantiations?

Undoubtedly, there are cases in which the application conditions of two concepts C_1 and C_2 guarantee that the things falling under C_1 are identical to the things falling under C_2 . For example, the application conditions of VIXEN and FEMALE FOX plausibly guarantee that, necessarily, every vixen is identical to a female fox. However, even if this works for concepts like these, we argue that it does not work in general and, to return to our current case study, it does not work for concepts like PROPERTY INSTANTIATION and EVENT.

The first problem with this as a general strategy is that application conditions can be *incomplete*. According to Easy Ontologists, terms like 'event', 'property', 'table' and so on have "public", "standard English" uses (Thomasson 2015, p. 240). The use of a concept and its linguistic correlate in a speech community is then supposed to fix the application conditions for concepts, which we acquire as we gain mastery of linguistic and conceptual rules. But there is no guarantee that the "public" and "standard" use of language settles whether events are property instantiations, or facts, or neither. The application conditions could just be silent on this matter. Thomasson admits as much, by stating that application conditions "are typically vague, and often highly incomplete" (2009, p. 451). To frame this in normative terms, speakers might not be entitled to infer that events are (or are not) property instantiations, given the application conditions of 'event' and 'property instantiation' (Thomasson 2015, p. 239–240). That means that we may not be able to answer category identity questions through conceptual competence.

The second problem is that application conditions can be *inconsistent*. Since Easy Ontologists think that use fixes application conditions and usage patterns can be inconsistent, the application conditions for some concepts could be inconsistent. For example, Scharp (2013, 2020) argues that many of our concepts are inconsistent. His list includes "truth, knowledge, nature, meaning, virtue, explanation, essence, causation, validity, rationality, freedom, necessity, person, beauty, belief, goodness, space, time, and justice" (2020, p. 397). He argues that they might be inconsistent due to paradoxes (e.g., truth and the liar paradox) or "in more subtle ways" that involve inconsistency in the principles that are constitutive of the concept or in ways that concepts "interact with one another" (*ibid.*). To offer one example, Scharp (2013, Ch. 2) points out, the use of 'mass' in Newtonian mechanics, and so plausibly also the ordinary use of this term before the 20th century, is inconsistent. In Newtonian mechanics, 'mass' is governed by two constitutive principles: (1) the mass of an object is its momentum divided by its velocity, and (2) the mass of an object is the same in all reference frames. Relativistic mechanics, however, distinguishes between two different kinds of mass: mass proper and relativistic mass. Mass proper is the same in all reference frames, but is not identical to momentum/velocity. Relativistic mass, on the other hand, is identical to momentum/velocity, but not the same in all reference frames. There is nothing that satisfies both principles (1) and (2). Since we live in a relativistic universe, the use of 'mass' in Newtonian mechanics and hence the ordinary use of this term before the 20th century is inconsistent. Our concepts for EVENT or TIME or PERSON or ... could similarly have inconsistent application conditions (or constitutive principles that make up its application conditions).

The general lesson is this: it is possible that the ordinary use of a concept F can fix its application conditions in such a way that the truth of 'x is an F' entails both that x is a G and that x is not a G. We should however not be licensed to infer that both x is and is not a G. Hence, the ordinary use of a concept F does not in general license conclusions about the differences between Fs and entities of (potentially) other kinds, such as Gs. With regard to our example, how speakers use the concepts EVENT and PROPERTY INSTANTIATION (and the corresponding linguistic items 'event' and 'property') do not guarantee answers to category identity questions.¹⁶ We next turn to

discussing the second response strategy open to an Easy Ontologist—that mastery of the concept IDENTITY allows us to settle whether events are property instantiations.

5 | NO “EASY” ANSWERS THROUGH CRITERIA OF IDENTITY

Does mastery of the concept IDENTITY allow us to settle category identity questions? There are reasons for doubt. Notice that identity is a relation between entities of the same type, and not a second-order property. This points to a principled reason why answering category identity question is harder for Easy Ontologists than answering category existence questions. The reason is, in short, that quantifiers, like the existential quantifier, can be understood as expressing second-order properties, but that the same is not true of the identity predicate.¹⁷ In more detail, the key motivation for thinking that existence questions can be answered on conceptual grounds is given by Thomasson’s principle (E), repeated below (see Thomasson 2015, p. 86):

(E) Ks exist iff the application conditions actually associated with ‘K’ are fulfilled.

Given this principle, the Easy Ontologist argues we can infer from the fact that the application conditions associated with ‘event’ are fulfilled that there are events by merely executing our competence with the concept of existence.

Principle (E) is plausible given a certain Fregean conception of existence (see Thomasson 2015, p. 85). According to this conception, ‘Something is K’ ascribes to the property of being K the second-order property of having at least one instance (see Barwise and Cooper, 1981). If this is true, then we can indeed infer the existence of certain things—Ks—on conceptual grounds. The key idea is that we can learn based on empirical and/or conceptual grounds whether the application conditions of ‘K’ are fulfilled, and then infer the existence of Ks using principle E. But, identity cannot be construed as a second-order property; to determine whether events are property instantiations, it is not sufficient to look at whether the application conditions of a concept are fulfilled. Rather, we must consider the objects that satisfy the predicate ‘is an event’ and the objects that satisfy the predicate ‘is a property instantiation’ and find out whether they are the same. Given that identity, unlike existence, cannot be construed as a second-order property, it is not in general possible to determine whether identities hold on purely conceptual grounds.

To argue that category identity questions can be answered on conceptual grounds, Easy Ontologists need to reject this view of identity, and take on a non-standard conception. Here is a potential strategy. Some philosophers, notably neo-Fregeans like Hale and Wright (2001), believe that sortal concepts are associated with two different sets of conditions: application conditions and criteria of identity. The application conditions are the conditions under which the concept is applied correctly. The criteria of identity are the conditions under which things that fall under the concept count as the same or distinct. For instance, the criterion of identity for *person* could be psychological continuity: person A is identical with person B iff A and B are psychologically continuous. And, according to Hume’s Principle, the number of Fs is (identical to) the number of Gs iff there is a one-one correspondence between the Fs and the Gs. Perhaps something like criteria of identity could be used to answer category identity questions.

Thomasson subscribes to something very much like criteria of identity. Her complete theory includes not only application conditions but also *co-application* conditions (see 2007, Ch. 3 and 2015, p. 223–226; 2020a, p. 64–65, 96–97, 117).¹⁸ The co-application conditions of a term determine when a second application of a term counts as an application to something that is identical to

the thing it was first applied to. Thomasson (2007, p. 56) illustrates the idea using proper names. Suppose 'Flam' is the name of a cat, and suppose 'Flam' applies on an occasion, t_1 , to an object o . 'Flam's co-application conditions determine whether an application of 'Flam' on another occasion, t_2 , counts as an application of the name to the same object. Suppose that it does. We can conclude that 'Flam' refers to the same cat at t_1 and at t_2 .

This view generalizes to identities between objects referred to by different names (see Thomasson 2007, p. 56). On Thomasson's view, 'Flam is Sham' is true iff 'Flam' applies to an object that satisfies the co-application conditions associated with 'Sham'. For example, if 'Sham' applies to some object o_1 and may be reapplied to object o_2 in a way that counts as an application to the same object only if o_2 is an animal and spatio-temporally continuous with o_1 , then 'Flam is Sham' is true iff Flam is an animal and spatiotemporally continuous with o_1 .

One might think that co-application conditions could be used to answer category identity questions. But this idea comes with difficulties. To begin with, virtually every discussion of co-application conditions by Thomasson appears in the context of discussing persistence through time. Co-application conditions, on her view, are the linguistic correlates of persistence conditions (see, e.g., Thomasson 2007, p. 58). But answering questions about the persistence of some thing through time is not the same as answering whether categories are numerically identical. It is therefore not obvious how to use co-application conditions to answer category identity questions. Put differently, if we accept Thomasson's account, co-application conditions determine whether *this* cat (Flam) is identical to *that* cat (Sham). Nonetheless, they do not (or anyway do not in any obvious way) determine whether each F is identical to some G.

Let's consider a specific proposal. Building off Thomasson's principle (E) and what she says about co-application conditions, we can formulate the following principle:

(I) Every K is identical to some L iff, whenever 'K' applies in a situation, 'L' also applies in that situation, and 'K' and 'L' have the same co-application conditions.

Principle (I) makes use of the notion that a predicate 'K' applies "in a situation". Two predicates, 'K' and 'L', may both "apply in a situation" while it is left open whether the object(s) they apply to are identical or distinct. The second condition, that 'K' and 'L' have the same co-application conditions, settles whether the objects applied to are the same. For instance, 'statue' and 'lump' may both apply in a given situation, but the statue is not identical to the lump of clay of which it is made since the co-application of 'statue' and of 'lump' are not identical. A lump may survive squashing, a statue does not (Thomasson, 2007, p. 84). So, according to (I) statues are not identical to lumps, even if whenever 'statue' applies in a situation, 'lump' applies too.

We believe that Principle (I) constitutes the most promising proposal for using co-application conditions to answer category identity questions. Assuming, we acquire mastery of co-application conditions as we acquire mastery of application conditions, through the normal process of learning a language, the execution of ordinary conceptual skills may then deliver answers to category identity questions. Thus one may conclude that category identity questions have "easy" answers. But this proposal comes with problems.

For one, as we argued in the last section about application conditions, the claim that terms like 'event' and 'property instantiation' have precise co-application conditions is doubtful. If they fail to have precise co-application conditions, category identity questions will be left without definitive answers. Establishing that they do have precise co-application conditions would be a nontrivial matter and require detailed conceptual and linguistic investigation. Moreover, the long-standing debates philosophers have had about concepts like PERSON, MIND, and FREE WILL

would be surprising if all terms and concepts had precise co-application conditions, since in that case competent users of English should be in agreement.¹⁹

Furthermore, given that a term's co-application conditions depend on its *actual* use, there is reason to think that co-application conditions often fail to answer category identity questions. For one, as we argued with regard to application conditions above, ordinary speakers' use of a term or concept may be *incomplete*, leaving it open whether Fs are Gs. Furthermore, ordinary use may also deliver *inconsistent* co-application conditions, thus entailing both that every F is identical to some G and that no G is identical to some F. For example, suppose there are two (possibly identical) entities o_1 and o_2 , which are both events and property instantiations (given the application conditions of 'event' and 'property instantiation'). Suppose further that the co-application conditions for 'event' are such that two applications of 'event' to o_1 and o_2 count as applications of this term to the same event; but the co-application conditions of 'property instantiation' are such that two applications of 'property instantiation' to o_1 and o_2 count as applications to distinct property instantiations. In this scenario, the co-application conditions of 'event' entail that o_1 and o_2 are identical, but the co-application conditions of 'property instantiation' entail that o_1 and o_2 are distinct. Again, an inconsistency.

There are ways for Easy Ontologists to resolve the inconsistency. For example, they could say that identity is relative to a sortal, so that relative to the sortal 'event' o_1 and o_2 are identical but relative to the sortal 'property instantiation' they are distinct. Or they could buy into a metaphysics of *qua* objects, and argue that o_1 and o_2 are identical *qua* event but distinct *qua* property instantiation. Strategies like these, however, do not allow the Easy Ontologist to avoid non-deflationary metaphysics. Rather, adopting strategies like these would require one with a goal of making ontology easy to develop detailed and controversial metaphysical theories of identity.

6 | ARE THERE EMPIRICAL OR PRAGMATIC ANSWERS?

We have argued that Identity Questions cannot be answered through linguistic and conceptual competence with sortal concepts (e.g., EVENT) or the concept IDENTITY as analyzed through co-application conditions. Easy Ontologists might still argue that empirical or pragmatic considerations answer category identity questions. Here we argue against both strategies in turn.

Could identity questions be settled on empirical grounds? It is not clear how empirical evidence could bear on these sorts of questions, at least when they are regarding things like events, property instantiations, and numbers. For instance, what empirical evidence could tell in favor or against events being property instantiations? Or numbers being sets? So, it seems that it is a non-starter to take the sorts of questions we have been concerned with as empirically answerable.

Could category identity questions be settled on pragmatic grounds? The answer to this question will take more argumentation, but again, we think the answer is 'no'. We have discussed two main cases of unanswered identity questions: cases in which the co-application conditions of F and of G do not settle whether Fs are Gs, and cases in which they are contradictory, entailing both that Fs are Gs and that Fs are not Gs. We could of course introduce a new rule of use for one of the concepts (F, say), which then settles that Fs are Gs. But assuming that the identity of the concept F depends on its application and co-application conditions, this conceptual re-engineering changes the question. We are now asking, using some new concept F*, whether F*s

are Gs. This pragmatic strategy does not answer our original category identity question: Are Fs Gs?

The challenge for Easy Ontologists here is analogous to the so-called "Strawsonian challenge" for conceptual engineering (see Cappelen, 2018, Part III; Sundell, 2020). Conceptual engineering is the purposeful change of concepts with the goal of making them better fit for certain purposes. For example, Haslanger (2000) argues that we should change the concept of a WOMAN so that it includes in its extension all and only people who, based on being perceived or imagined to be female, occupy subordinate positions in society. The rationale for this proposal is that the revised concept will be useful for feminist political projects. However, according to the "Strawsonian challenge", it is in effect impossible to re-engineer a concept. When we change the intension of the word 'woman', we do not change the concept of WOMAN, but rather change the topic. We then no longer talk about women, but about some other group of people, women*.

In response to this challenge, Thomasson (2020b) argues that concepts are individuated not by application and co-application conditions, but by *functions*. For example, the function of the concept MARRIAGE is "to mark a range of close relationships that we would help protect by affording a special legal and social status (tied up with some 3,000 relevant legal obligations and entitlements in the U.S.)" (Thomasson 2020b, p. 443). On this view, we can change the application and co-application conditions of a concept without changing the topic. In particular, we can answer the question of whether events are property instantiations by changing the co-application conditions of the concept PROPERTY INSTANTIATION so that, after the change, the co-application conditions of PROPERTY INSTANTIATION and EVENT are identical, all the while preserving the original topic of whether events are property instantiations.²⁰

We think that there are problems with this response. Whether we can change the application and co-application conditions of a concept and still stay on the topic of a conversation depends on what the topic of conversation is. For example, the main issue at stake when ameliorating gender concepts is how to aide socially progressive political movements that strive for gender equality. We can stay on *this* topic even when we change the intension and extension of the concept WOMAN. But the main issue at stake in the case of Easy Ontology is whether events are property instantiations. We cannot stay on *this* topic and decide to henceforth use EVENT so that it falls out of the (co-)application conditions of this concept that events are property instantiations. Put differently, if a question is the set of its eligible answers, and if the (co-)application conditions of EVENT do not, but those of EVENT* do entail that events are property instantiations, then the following two questions are distinct:

1. Are events property instantiations?
2. Are events* property instantiations?

Competent English speakers can rationally answer the first of these questions in two ways (yes or no), but competent English speakers who know how EVENT* has been defined (and here we take 'event*' as the linguistic analog to the concept) can rationally answer the second in only one way (yes).

We have argued that re-engineering the concept EVENT (or PROPERTY INSTANTIATION) does not help to answer the original question of whether events are property instantiation. To be clear, we are not denying the possibility of pragmatically amending the concept EVENT or PROPERTY INSTANTIATION, and we do not deny that sometimes pragmatic reasons may speak for amending these concepts one way rather than another. We are denying, however, that amending these concepts allows us to answer the original question of whether events are property

instantiations. We argued above that these questions are meaningful, by the Easy Ontologist's own lights. A pragmatic strategy leaves some ontological questions unanswered. The methodology does not give us answers to all the questions we asked when considering ontology to be the broader, systematic, and more interesting project that involves answering category questions.

7 | NORMATIVE RESPONSES AND THE PROJECT OF ONTOLOGY

Easy Ontologists could grant the point that their methodology does not answer category questions, and argue that we should not be asking these kinds of questions.²¹ Instead, we should be asking questions about how or whether we *should* use certain concepts. We think it likely that this is the response Thomasson will offer. In some of her most recent work, Thomasson alludes to what she calls “a kind of metaphysical normativism” or what we might call *ontological normativism* (2020, p. 204). This view takes “some of the most important work in metaphysics as involved in a normative project of working out what conceptual scheme we *should* be working with” (*ibid.*, emphasis original). While Easy Ontology aimed to give descriptive answers to ontological questions via easy arguments the larger deflationary project that Thomasson develops could involve the claim that *only some* ontological questions are answered via easy arguments involving conceptual competence or through empirical or pragmatic methods. The Easy Ontologist could then argue that questions unanswerable by these methods ought to be rejected and be replaced by distinct but related questions about what conceptual schema we ought to use.

However, notice that a response that involves saying that ontological category questions are unanswerable concedes our main point: there is an important range of ontological questions that are left unanswered by the methods of Easy Ontology. Granting this point constitutes a significant shift from the original Easy Ontologist position. The original Easy Ontologist's position was that all ontological questions are shallow; but this has now turned into the view that ontological questions are *either* trivial *or* should not be asked. That is an important change.

What's more, it is not just baroque questions about, say, the amount of change a novel can persist through that will be unanswered. Rather, a wide range of questions relating to ontological category systems will be left open. As we argued in §2, these questions have been and ought to be central to ontology. They are well-formed, meaningful, and important for a broad and interesting notion of ontological inquiry. These are questions that should be answered, not abandoned as unanswerable.

8 | CONCLUSION

Looking at the contemporary metaontological landscape, it may seem as though one has a choice between either accepting heavy-duty metaphysical concepts or holding that ontology is trivial. However, this impression depends on thinking of typical ontological debates as *either* merely concerning existence questions *or* as involving concepts like fundamentality or grounding. We have argued that this oversimplifies matters considerably. Questions about categories and identity, we showed, have been central to ontology since its beginning and are still a significant focus today. However, the “easy” approach to ontology cannot be used to answer these questions. That is, we have argued that there are not easy answers to category questions. Since ontology as construed in

a broad, systematic, and interesting fashion includes these questions, Easy Ontology does not give use answers to an important range of ontological questions. Our arguments began by taking the Easy Ontologist's arguments seriously and by granting a number of assumptions and points. We did not offer objections to their arguments delivering that there are tables, numbers, or events. We did not question the connection between application conditions and existence.²² We did not question whether there are conceptual truths²³ or whether the claim that "object" in an unrestricted sense is meaningless.²⁴ Instead, we began from the position of the Easy Ontologist and argued that even if their existence claims and methodology to answer existence questions is accepted, ontology is not finished. Category questions are a central part of ontology and are not answered by the means available to Easy Ontologists.²⁵

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ENDNOTES

- ¹We are using 'thing' here in a very general sense, according to which absolutely anything—including stuff—is a thing.
- ²Bueno and Cumpa (2021) argue for a similar conclusion: "Easy inferences [...] fail to answer questions about the nature of things, such as: 'Is the property of being red platonic or nominalistic?'" As Thomasson notes in response to Bueno and Cumpa on her broader view "questions about the 'natures' of things of various kinds can be answered through nothing more mysterious than conceptual and empirical work—and so are also deflated" (2021: 738). We argue that the questions we focus on are not answered by any of the means available to the Easy Ontologist. While we concede (see §7) that Thomasson can argue that *related* questions should be posed and answered through normative means, the response does not answer the questions we argue play a central role in ontology.
- ³Of course, *metaphysics* includes more than existence questions, and Thomasson grants as much (e.g., see Thomasson 2015, p. 11). The question here is whether *ontology* includes more than existence questions.
- ⁴Yablo 1998, p. 234, Price 2009, p. 324, and Thomasson 2015, Ch. 1, all endorse this interpretation.
- ⁵Schiffer (2003), another Easy Ontologist, argues that the argument needs another premise, namely: If A was born on D, then A's birth occurred on D. Schiffer calls these "conceptual or concept-based in the sense that no one could fully understand these claims without believing that they are true" (2003, 249).
- ⁶We will not argue against the view that "easy arguments" settle whether there are properties, events, tables, numbers, and other entities. See Balaguer (2021, Ch. 2), Button (2016), Contessa (2016), and Yablo (2014) for critical discussions of "easy arguments".
- ⁷For example, Armstrong (2010), Fine (2009), Koslicki (2008), Lowe (2006), Rea (2011), and Sider (2011).
- ⁸Lowe (2006) argues for a four-category ontology. Paul (2017) argues for a one-category ontology.
- ⁹Fine (2001, 2009) argues for a fundamental category of the metaphysically real.
- ¹⁰This case is especially apt since Thomasson is explicit about how the "easy" approach to ontology applies to this case.
- ¹¹See for a defense Wallace (2014).
- ¹²More precisely, continuants are objects that exist through time without temporal parts.
- ¹³More precisely, things that exist through time with temporal parts.
- ¹⁴A further example is due to Fine (2006). He argues that the debate between three- and four-dimensionalists is not usefully understood as merely concerning whether there are temporal parts. One reason is that even a three-dimensionalist could affirm the existence of temporal parts on the grounds that everything merely exists for an instant (see Fine 2006, p. 700). Fine suggests that the more fundamental disagreement between three- and four-dimensionalists concerns whether there is a difference between an object's *existence* in time and its *extensions* in space. As Fine (p. 700) puts the point: "the 3D-er, in my opinion, is better regarded as endorsing two *radically different* forms of presence—one relating to how an object exists and the other relating to how it is, or 'disposes of itself', once it exists." If one accepts these points, then the debate between three- and four-dimensionalists really

concerns whether an object's temporal presence is of a different kind as compared to its spatial presence. The debate over the existence of temporal parts, so conceived, is connected to a category identity questions concerning the categories in which spatial and temporal presence fall.

¹⁵ A warehouse metaphor is also useful here. To run your business, you need an inventory of what is in the warehouse, but it is not a good inventory if it does not organize what you have in the warehouse into categories. "We have items 1-1,000,000 in the warehouse" is not terribly helpful to the person running the business. Thanks to Ned Markosian for the apt metaphors.

¹⁶ See Button (2016) for a more detailed argument to the effect that ordinary language often points in different directions and hence does not support univocal answers to many metaphysical questions. Spicer (2008, section VII) similarly argues that the ordinary use of 'to know' is inconsistent.

¹⁷ Note that we say that quantifiers *can* rather than that they *should* or *must* be interpreted this way. See Quine (1953/1948) and Braun (1993) for views in which the truth conditions of quantified sentences relate to objects rather than to properties of properties. We allow that 'exist' may sometimes ascribe a first-order property as in the sentence 'Zane exists' ($\exists x(x = zane)$). However, the conclusions of "easy argument" ("numbers exist", "properties exist") ascribe second-order properties ($\exists x(Nx)$), given the standard interpretation of generalized quantifiers (Barwise and Cooper 1981).

¹⁸ In earlier work, Thomasson uses 'coapplication' and in later work she uses 'co-application'. Here we use the hyphenated form.

¹⁹ Horgan (2008) poses two other worries related to concepts and ordinary language in his review of Thomasson (2008)—one based on a regress, one based on the implausibility of ordinary discourse and thought delivering successively more general categories.

²⁰ Cappelen (2018, Part III) similarly argues that topics are individuated more coarsely than intensions, so that at least in some cases it is possible to change the intension of a term while staying on-topic.

²¹ Relatedly, Thomasson allows that it might be indeterminate how many words could be changed in a literary work while it persists (a question she relates to co-application conditions). In such cases the Easy Ontologist approach "remains 'neutral' with respect to certain metaphysical questions (taken as descriptive)" (2021, p. 738). That is to say, it leaves them to be unanswered by the descriptive methods the Easy Ontologist offers.

²² See Evinne (2016) for arguments against application conditions proving the existence of entities with other properties (e.g., having parts).

²³ See Williamson (2006, 2007) for objections to the existence of conceptual truths.

²⁴ Korman (2019).

²⁵ We presented previous versions of this paper at the Society for Exact Philosophy, Columbia University Seminar on Metametaphysics, and the 2nd Workshop on The Epistemology of Metaphysics at the University of Helsinki. We thank the audiences for their valuable feedback. We would also like to thank Mark Balaguer, David Chalmers, Rebecca Chan, Nina Emery, David Friedell, Kirk Ludwig, Ned Markosian, Michaela McSweeney, Jack Spencer, Amie Thomasson, Jenn Wang, and anonymous referees for their feedback on the project and previous drafts of the paper.

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