Sakes Exist

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ABSTRACT: Contemporary ontologists, almost unanimously, dismiss the idea that sakes (as in 'I did it for her sake') exist. Likewise with the kibosh, snooks, behalves, dints, and so on. In this essay, I argue that there is no good reason for this near consensus, I begin to make a case that sakes and the like do exist, and I consider what this means more broadly for ontology.

Keywords: ontology, sakes, metaontology.

1. Introduction

It is widely agreed in contemporary ontology that, although there are true statements like 'I did it for Mary's sake', there aren't *sakes*. Sakes don't exist—sakes are not a kind of thing. Similarly, although there are true statements like 'The rain put the kibosh on the soccer match', there's no such thing as the kibosh.

I have come to think that this near consensus is wrong, and that correcting it will help us reach a better overall conception of what kinds of things exist—and at the meta level, a better overall conception of ontology. (I conceive ontology as concerned—to a great extent if not exclusively—with the question *What kinds of things are there?*, which I take to be the same as *What kinds of things exist?*)

I'm going to argue that philosophers who take the dominant line about sakes and the like have not given good reasons—the view that there are no such things seems to be taken for granted, as though the alternative is absurd or silly—and I'm going to make a case for the opposite view: there are such things.

If you believe that numbers don't exist, or that tables don't exist, I'm unlikely to convince you that sakes and the like do. The kind of philosopher I have a shot at convincing thinks that

[1] Many thanks to Kelly Herbison and Howard Sankey for comments on a draft of this paper.

lots of kinds of things exist—not just physical things, not just "metaphysically fundamental" kinds of things, and not just the kinds of things posited in "serious science"—but *of course* we need to draw the line somewhere and *of course* it would be going too far to believe in the existence of *sakes* and the like. If that's your position, I hope you'll change your mind or at least think harder about your rejection of these things.

2. Isolating the Phenomenon

My representative example is sakes, but I'm interested in sakes *and the like*. The purpose of this section is to give a sense of the relevant category, while allowing that there may be unclear cases.

Sakes and the like are often mentioned by philosophers along with a bunch of other quite different kinds of examples, where the unifying theme is that we should refrain from ontological commitment. Let's start by looking at some of these others and making it clear how they are *not* instances of our topic.

'The average man'. It is a commonplace that, while a sentence like 'The average man has 1.6 children' can be true, this does not require the existence of something (or some*one*) denoted by 'The average man'. Rather, we understand this sentence as a claim about the number of children divided by the number of men. This is clearly different from the case of 'I did it for Mary's sake'. A crucial difference emerges when we consider how someone might misunderstand 'The average man'-claims. There is an obvious kind of misunderstanding here, where the interpreter knows well enough what men are, and thinks that this phrase is meant to refer to some particular one with some kind of unique status. Meanwhile, those who understand the locution understand that this is not so. This is very different from the case of 'I did it for Mary's sake'. It's not as if we all have an idea of what sakes are, and then we come upon a construction which may make it look as though there's some particular one with a status we can't understand. On the contrary, if there are sakes at all, 'I did it for Mary's sake' is a paradigm case of talk about them.

'*Mary is looking for unicorns in the garden'*. This could be said truly about a child, and we would understand that its truth doesn't require there to be unicorns. Or consider 'Two medieval philosophers were debating the properties of angels'. We understand that this

sentence can be meant in a way that doesn't require there to be angels for it to be true. In these cases we are dealing with *intentionality*, and the key noun phrases ('unicorns', 'angels') are used to characterise intentional states. We might also say 'This book is about unicorns' to characterise the content of a book, and mean that in a way such that it can be true without there actually being unicorns. This kind of explanation does not suggest itself, and does not seem available, with typical uses of 'sake' and the like.

'*I have 100 dollars in my bank account'.* If we try to treat this along the same lines as a statement like 'I have 100 rocks in my garden', we run into trouble. If I have 100 rocks in my garden and take 50 out, we can ask which 50 I took out. But if I withdraw $50 from my account, it doesn't seem like we can ask—at least, not without some special background for the question—which 50 I withdrew. On the other hand, people do say things like 'That $50 is for Mary's present', and not just when talking about tokens of cash. But that has its limitations, and overall it seems dubious to think of dollars in a bank account as individual things. With this kind of case, the involvement of numbers and different magnitudes is an essential part of what's going on. 'Sake'-talk is not like that.

Some examples that I think *are* examples of my topic are behalves (as in 'I did it on Mary's behalf'), the kibosh (as in 'The rain put the kibosh on the game'), the creeps (as in 'He gives me the creeps'), and snooks (as in 'She cocked a snook at her detractors').

The main hallmarks of the putative kinds of things I am concerned with seem to be *rarity in discourse* and *avoidability in discourse*:

Rarity in discourse: apart from when things are turning philosophical, these putative kinds of things only seem to get mentioned—or at least, only seem to get mentioned *as such*, using the vocabulary in question (e.g. 'sake')—in very specific circumstances, when certain phrases or idioms are used.

Avoidability in discourse: whenever we talk about these putative kinds of things in a practical manner (i.e. not discussing ontology), it seems we could easily have achieved our purpose without mentioning them. Instead of 'I did it for his sake' in a particular context, someone might just as well say 'I did it with him in mind', or instead of 'He gives me the creeps', 'He

makes me uncomfortable'. (I don't mean to suggest that these particular alternatives would always serve—that would depend on the case.)

Let's now see how contemporary philosophers have taken it as a matter of course that sakes and the like do not exist.

3. A Matter of Course

An early source is Quine.[2] In the following passage of *Word and Object* we find him using sakes—along with the very different case of unicorns—both in a reductio against the idea that 'if we can speak of a sentence as meaningful, or as having meaning, then there must be a meaning that it has'[3]:

> This is urged without any evident attempt to define synonymy in terms of meaningfulness, nor any notice of the fact that we could as well justify the hypostasis of sakes and unicorns on the basis of the idioms 'for the sake of' and 'is hunting unicorns'.[4]

Later, we find the following:

> We have looked into the benefits of admitting physical objects and classes (§48), though there will be more to say of classes (§55). We considered also the claims and the difficulties of attributes and propositions (§§42–43), and the weakness of the case for sense data (§§1, 48). At the extreme, finally, are the sakes and behalves. No one wants these, but the form of the argument for their exclusion is instructive.[5]

In Section 5 I'll scrutinize the argument Quine mentions at the end of the passage, but for now I merely want to point out the way Quine asserts, without argument or evidence, that *no one* wants (to postulate) sakes. Strong stuff!

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[2] Button (2020), f.n. 5 says that Quine 'seems to be the first philosopher to have offered this example' (the example of sakes).
[3] Quine (1960/2013), p. 189.
[4] Quine (1960/2013), p. 189.
[5] Quine (1960/2013), p. 225.

Here is Daniel Dennett, a famous student of Quine's, stating a strident opinion about 'for my sake':

> The whole idiom functions as one word, and there are really only etymological and aesthetic reasons for dividing the idioms typographically at all. This means that any logical or semantical analysis of 'for my sake' or 'on my behalf' based on the similarities these share with 'for my wife' or 'on my head' would be an error bred of unfamiliarity with the language.[6]

Note the strength of the claim regarding an analysis of 'for my sake' which treats 'my sake' along the same lines as 'my wife'. Dennett doesn't merely express disagreement with such an analysis; he claims that such an analysis, if produced at all, would be produced due to a lack of familiarity with English. The idea that a philosopher competent in English might be prepared to endorse such an analysis is not so much as countenanced.

Here is another example. In the below passage, Alan Musgrave is considering a worry about Tarksi's Convention T (i.e. the schema 'The statement "..." is true if and only if …'), namely that it may lead to dubious ontological consequences. Musgrave's main purpose in this passage is to argue that Convention T, all by itself, has no such consequences:

> (1) The statement 'There is a full moon tonight' is true if and only if there is a full moon tonight.
> (2) The statement 'Electrons are negatively charged' is true if and only if electrons are negatively charged.
> (3) The statement 'Two plus two equals four' is true if and only if two plus two equals four.
> (4) The statement 'Eating people is wrong' is true if and only if eating people is wrong.
> (5) The statement 'Ronald Reagan gives me the creeps' is true if and only if Ronald Reagan gives me the creeps.

[6] Dennett (1968), p. 5.

> The worry is this. Suppose that (1) yields common-sense realism about the moon, and (2) yields scientific realism about electrons. Then will not (3) yield platonic realism about natural numbers, (4) moral realism about wrongness and rightness, and (5) realism regarding a mysterious entity (the creeps) which Ronald Reagan gives to me (and simultaneously, no doubt, to others too)? Since creeps-realism is absurd, and moral realism and platonism philosophically suspect, so is the Tarskian theory which yields them. This worry is quite groundless. Tarski's Convention T [...] by itself yields none of these realisms. We all avoid creeps-realism by saying that 'Ronald Reagan gives me the creeps', though true (which it is), is an idiom which is not to be taken at face value for logico-philosophical purposes. We replace it with a non-idiom (say, 'Ronald Reagan makes me nervous') and avoid ontological commitment to the creeps.[7]

Note how Musgrave baldly asserts that 'creeps-realism is absurd' and that '[w]e all avoid creeps-realism', as though no professional philosopher would do otherwise.

For my final example I turn to Amie Thomasson. Thomasson has recently developed a 'deflationary' approach to ontology called *easy ontology*. For all Thomasson's willingness to accept the existence of various disputed kinds of things, her work nonetheless exhibits the same reflexive hostility to sakes and the like as we saw in Quine, Dennett and Musgrave above. Context: in this passage, 'conditionals (a)-(e) above' concern properties, births, propositions, fictional characters and marriages—all things that Thomasson is happy to accept the existence of:

> It might be thought that if conditionals (a)-(e) above are in good standing, then the following conditional should be, too:
>
> > If he did it for her sake, then there is a sake for which he did it (and so there are sakes).
>
> But this would [land] us with a silly ontology of sakes and like 'entities'.[8]

[7] Musgrave (1989). p. 388.
[8] Thomasson (2014), p. 265. The text has no word where I put 'land', which must be a typo. If we insert 'land' or 'saddle' I think we get the intended meaning.

Thomasson offers an account for separating the conditionals (and corresponding arguments) which are in good standing from those which aren't. We will consider the part of this account that is supposed to rule out sakes and the like in Section 6. One can say that it is on the basis of this account that Thomasson rejects sakes and the like. But note that here she appears to be using the supposed *silliness* of an ontology of sakes and the like, where this silliness is simply assumed without argument, to motivate the idea that a good account of which conditionals are in good standing would have the result that the one about sakes is not.

There is a fascinating twist to this case study; Thomasson, under pressure from Simon Evnine in a personal communication, concedes in a footnote that perhaps there are sakes after all. She never reconsiders the idea that an ontology of sakes is silly, however. Instead, she quotes Evnine saying to her that 'silliness is hardly a reason for being against something'. (My own view, by contrast, is that it's not silly to think there are sakes. Thinking it is silly is a philosophical mistake, a symptom of not having the right overall view of ontology.) I will cover the details of this twist in Section 6 once we have the relevant part of Thomasson's account on the table.

4. The Nonsense Charge

Some philosophers have bolstered their rejection of sakes and the like with the idea that positing their existence leads to nonsensical questions; I call this *the nonsense charge*. In this section I rebut the charge. I'll look at two examples of the nonsense charge, from Daniel Dennett and, more recently, Tim Button. Then I'll show that the charge is wrong by engaging with the supposedly nonsensical questions in a way that wouldn't be possible if they didn't make sense.

In the following passage, Dennett is considering a very permissive approach to ontology, summarised as 'something for every noun (and noun phrase, etc.)'. This is not my approach; for example, I don't think there are unicorns. But Dennett uses the example of sakes as an objection to that approach, and his attitude toward that example is what matters here:

> This most relaxed course cheerfully admits the existence of dints and sakes, and treats the whole question of ontology with what some may hold to be deserved disrespect. But consider the following exchange:

> 'How old is Smith's sake?'
> 'Sakes don't exist in time.'
> 'But they do exist, don't they?'
> 'Why not?'
> 'Then if Smith's sake is timeless we'll be able to do things for it after he's dead.'
> 'No; although a sake is timeless, it can no longer receive benefits after the death of its owner.'
> 'Then I might only think I was doing something for Smith's sake, if all along he was dead without my knowing it?'
> 'No, you'd be doing it *for* Smith's sake, only his sake would no longer have any *use* for whatever you were doing.'
>
> This sort of nonsense should be blocked one way or another.[9]

Dennett's impatience fairly jumps off the page here. Perhaps it is partly feigned. It's almost as though Dennett is scoring points with hardheaded scientific readers by distancing himself from hypothetical philosophers who might be so silly as to inquire seriously into the nature of sakes. I don't know if that's fair, but part of why I suspect it is that one of the overarching aims of the book this is from—Dennett's first book, *Content and Consciousness*—is to bring science and philosophy closer together in the study of the mind.

Note that Dennett here, without giving any reason, calls this kind of discourse nonsense. Secondly, he claims that it needs to be blocked one way or another. The first point is the most directly relevant for documenting the nonsense charge, but the second point is also worth dwelling upon. The more I think about this claim, the more I become convinced that it's profoundly wrong. The obvious alternative position is that no, this sort of philosophical talk about sakes doesn't have to be blocked at all—even granting for the sake of argument that it's unfruitful. There are innumerable subjects one can talk about, questions one can ask. Thankfully, people often have interesting and fruitful discussions of various questions. Sometimes they're rewarded for it, in one way or another. This does not depend on us

[9] Dennett (1968), p. 10-11.

somehow blocking unfruitful talk. (Incidentally, one of the ideas in this passage—that it might be possible to do something for someone's sake after their death—is reminiscent of an idea famously considered by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Bk I, Chs 10 & 11), namely that someone's happiness might be affected after their death by events and actions outside their control. Should Aristotle perhaps have been 'blocked one way or another' when writing about that?)

The second example of the nonsense charge is taken from a recent paper by Tim Button that I'll draw further upon later. This is an excellent paper, representing the state of the art regarding my topic, but it's noteworthy how baldly the nonsense charge is made in it:

> What are kiboshes like? When are two kiboshes the same? When the same storm stops two adjacent cricket matches, do we have two overlapping kiboshes? When is one kibosh larger than another? And so on. These are all obviously nonsense questions, and with good reason. Our language *only* assigns a meaning to the two-place predicate '*x* put the kibosh on *y*', and *not* to the meaning of the word 'kibosh' as a noun in its own right.[10]

In order to make the case that these are not only not *obviously* nonsense questions, but in fact aren't nonsense questions at all, I'll make a preliminary attempt to answer them. But in fact, we can already see trouble for the nonsense charge if we think carefully about Dennett's imagined dialogue above. It would be one thing if Dennett's imaginary dialogue ran aground, leading to an impasse, or went around in circles (not to say that would show the dialogue to be nonsense). But in fact, it looks like some progress is being made, albeit on what may be an unimportant issue. The responder in the dialogue (the one who speaks second) seems to me more-or-less on the right track about sakes (although the talk about Smith's sake having 'use' for what someone is doing is clumsy—and that can be put down to Dennett trying to make the dialogue sound silly).

I'll begin by taking Button's first two questions together, engaging initially with the second.

What are kiboshes like? When are two kiboshes the same?

[10] Button (2020), p. 38.

There may be just one, in which case the answer to the second question is that two kiboshes are always the same. The phrase, after all, is 'put *the* kibosh on …'. I'll call this the *monist* view. Against this, it may be thought that there are multiple kiboshes and the 'the' just means the *salient* one. I don't see any reason to posit multiple kiboshes, so on grounds of parsimony I tentatively favour the view that there's just one. A natural non-monist view which might be viable is that whenever something has "the" kibosh put on it, there's a particular kibosh for that thing.

As for what the kibosh is like (or what kiboshes are like—I'll omit this qualification henceforth): it seems overwhelmingly plausible that, if there is such a thing, it's an abstract object rather than any kind of physical object. How could we try to say more? The method of theoretical identification may be applicable here—we could make a proposal about what the kibosh *is*. If we could get a correct identification, that would be informative, but even if we don't—or if we stay in doubt—the exercise could shed light on the kibosh (compare the way we get a better understanding of what knowledge is by considering and rejecting some natural proposals, e.g. that it's justified true belief). Pursuing the method of theoretical identification, it seems plausible to me that the kibosh is the property of being stopped, and that to put the kibosh on something is to make it have that property. I'm not sure that's correct, but it seems to me that the kinds of reasons that might emerge to threaten it would point in the direction of the kibosh being distinct from the property of being stopped, rather than there not being such a thing as the kibosh. And even if the kibosh isn't *identical* with the property of being stopped, perhaps it's *like* that property in important ways.

When the same storm stops two adjacent cricket matches, do we have two overlapping kiboshes?

On the monist view I tentatively favour, obviously not. On the non-monist view outlined above—whenever something has the kibosh put on it, it gets its own one—then we do have two kiboshes, but it doesn't seem right to say that they're overlapping, since the cricket matches are separate. (Might there be other cases where, on this kind of view, we should say that we have two overlapping kiboshes? Perhaps if two things which themselves overlap each have the (really *a*) kibosh put on them, then those kiboshes should be said to overlap.)

When is one kibosh larger than another?

On the monist view the answer must be never, because there's just one. But the more fundamental reason that the answer is never, a reason also available to the non-monist, is that kiboshes don't have sizes and can't be larger than each other. We have relatively clear notions of size for physical things, and for some abstract objects like numbers and sets. We have more rough-and-ready notions of size for some other kinds of things like ideas. But for lots of kinds of thing—e.g. shades of colour, methods of accounting—one can't be larger than another because they just don't have sizes.

That's one natural kind of answer to the question of when one kibosh is larger than another. And I think it's the correct thing to say given the tentative views about the kibosh we are developing, if we treat the question in a literal frame of mind. But an interesting alternative line of thought is as follows. Perhaps non-monism is the way to go, and perhaps we could develop a notion of size for kiboshes along the following lines: when two things have the kibosh put on them, i.e. get stopped, we could make size distinctions among the kiboshes based on how hard it would have been for the thing to happen anyway. For example, if someone puts the kibosh on your lifting a basket by putting an 80kg weight in it, perhaps that's a smaller kibosh than would have been put on if they had but a 120kg weight in it. In the latter scenario, you are intuitively *further from* being able to lift the basket.

I'll leave my attempt there, preliminary as it is. I don't claim to have definitively answered Button's questions, I don't claim to have used the best methodology, and I don't claim that it's important to get better answers. All I claim is that my good faith preliminary effort to answer the questions is not nonsense, and therefore they aren't nonsense either. With genuine nonsense questions, you can't make this kind of attempt to answer them.

The nonsense charge may seem initially plausible due to the possibility of confusing a question being *unimportant* or *unfruitful*—which these questions may certainly seem to be, and may in fact be for all I'm arguing—with it not making sense. And unlike with the metaphysics bearing the brunt of a lot of nonsense charges in the twentieth century, there hasn't been a community invested in inquiring into things like sakes and the kibosh. The philosopher making the nonsense charge regarding such things will be less likely to envisage pushback, and therefore less likely to think critically about what they are proposing.

5. Quine's Argument

In Section 3 we saw Quine blithely saying that '[n]o one wants' sakes (or behalves), then adding 'but the form of the argument for their exclusion is instructive'. Let's consider that argument now:

> It is that 'sake' and 'behalf' have their uses only in the clichés 'for the sake of' and 'in behalf of' and their variants; hence these clichés can be left unanalyzed as simple prepositions.[11]

The premise, at least at the present time of writing, isn't strictly true; as we have seen, some philosophers have used the word 'sake' *not* in the phrase 'for the sake of' or a variant. Indeed, Quine himself does it—he seems to be a pioneer in this regard—just before giving the above argument, when he writes that '[a]t the extreme, finally, are the sakes and behalves', and subsequent philosophers have followed suit. But of course Quine is getting at a truth here. *Ordinarily*, 'sake' is only used in 'for the sake of' and variants.

But does it follow—either from this premise restricted to ordinary talk, or from the unrestricted version—that 'these clichés can be left unanalyzed'? And does it follow from *that* that sakes don't exist?

What does Quine mean by 'these clichés can be left unanalyzed'? In some sense, any part of an intelligible sentence *can* be left unanalyzed, along with the sentence as a whole. It's not as if we have to analyze sentences in order to use them. We get closer to what I think Quine really means if we imagine ourselves tasked with translating sentences like 'I did it for Mary's sake' into a language more austere and regimented than full-blown English. Quine's point seems to amount to something like: in that kind of situation, we could just use a simple symbol corresponding to an idiom like 'for the sake of …', where this symbol isn't a noun.

There's undoubtedly something to this. We could do that, *for practical purposes*. (It's a bit funny imagining using an austere, regimented language for the kinds of purposes people have when they make ordinary use of the word 'sake'—but we can imagine it.) *That* doesn't mean

[11] Quine (1960/2013), p. 225.

there aren't sakes. *It could just be that we don't need to mention sakes in order to achieve the kind of practical purposes we achieve when we ordinarily use the word 'sake'.*

There could be a kind of thing that we only ever talk about when we use a particular phrase, and that we don't need to talk about at all in order to achieve our practical purposes. But also, sakes may be better known under a different name. We might talk about them more extensively in other connections but where we don't use the word 'sake' to do it. Quine's argument rules out neither of these possibilities, hence it fails to establish that sakes don't exist.

I could be getting Quine's intent wrong here. He may just be arguing that we should exclude sakes from the list of kinds of things that we believe exist, which is subtly different from arguing that we should believe they don't exist. Perhaps it's closer to the mark to say that Quine wants to banish all talk of sakes, at least when doing "serious science". I'll come back to this kind of difference at the end of the essay where I try to say something about the nature and philosophical interest of ontology. In any case: as an argument that sakes and the like don't exist, Quine's argument fails.

6. Thomasson's Criterion

Thomasson discusses what she calls 'existence-entailing conditionals', like 'If a concrete object x is P, then x has the property of being P (and so there is a property)' and 'If x was born at t, then x's birth occurred at t (and so there is a birth)'. As mentioned in Section 3, Thomasson has an account to separate conditionals like these from ones that she does not want to lead to ontological commitments. These include those which would lead to commitment to sakes and the like, such as 'If he did it for her sake, then there is a sake for which he did it (and so there are sakes)'. Let's examine the part of Thomasson's account which is supposed to rule these out.

This part of Thomasson's account says that, for such conditionals to be in good standing, the key terms (e.g. 'table', 'number', 'sake') must be associated with what Thomasson calls *coapplication conditions*, 'determining when the term may be reapplied in a way that will entitle us to say it's applied "to one and the same S"—thus establishing identity conditions

for Ss (if any there be)'[12]. Thomasson regards coapplication conditions as linguistic rules, i.e. rules of language use. She does not think linguistic rules need to be statable. She notes explicitly that what she calls *application conditions* need not be statable[13]—but these are different from her *co*application conditions, playing a different role. (I haven't found Thomasson saying that *co*application conditions in particular *do* need to be statable, but nor have I found her saying that they don't. This issue won't be crucial in my argument.) Thomasson allows that coapplication conditions may involve vagueness.[14]

Thomasson states that this requirement 'rules out silly inferences like these, since the term "sake" is not associated with coapplication conditions that enable speakers to make judgments of identity and distinctness of sakes'[15].

One might have general worries about Thomasson's conception of linguistic rules and of how pervasive they are. It's relatively clear what explicit linguistic rules are, and it's clear that much of our language use isn't governed by *those*, even though some such use can be criticised as linguistically incorrect. When language is used incorrectly, must it be *rules*—perhaps non-explicit ones—that are being violated? I won't press this worry, however. While I do think this kind of talk of rules may be misleading, I allow that if one is careful and keeps in mind Thomasson's disavowal that the rules need to be statable (let alone stated), it can be used. Further, it seems to me that Thomasson could move away from talking of *rules*—instead talking of norms, for instance—and still put forward something like her requirement of coapplication conditions (and this may come to the same thing as talking of rules but being careful to allow that they can be implicit and non-statable); for terms like 'sake' to play the starring role in existence-entailing conditionals, there need to be linguistic norms about when the term may be reapplied in a way that will entitle us to say it's applied "to one and the same S".

My main objection to Thomasson is that the term 'sake' *can* be associated with a coapplication condition. Thomasson considers a closely related objection in the following footnote:

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[12] Thomasson (2014), p. 223.
[13] Thomasson (2014), p. 91.
[14] Thomasson (2014), p. 264
[15] Thomasson (2014), p. 265.

> Simon Evnine has suggested to me that perhaps 'sake' *is* associated with coapplication conditions: if x is a sake and y is a sake, then x = y just in case the person whose sake x is and the person whose sake y is are the same person. He also suggests that given that the term is associated with such conditions, I should accept the existence of sakes. For, he says, given my other views, "silliness is hardly a reason for being against something" (personal communication). Fair enough, I concede: if 'sake' is sufficiently associated with coapplication conditions, one may accept the existence of sakes. In any case, condition (3) may rule out other unwanted cases.[16]

Evnine's proposed condition strikes me as a good one when it comes to people and their sakes. As a *general* condition it faces the problem that we also talk about the sakes of non-people. You might do something for your cat's sake. Not only that; you might also do something for the sake of having a good time. So I propose replacing the 'person' bit of Evnine's proposal with 'thing' (understood broadly so that people count as things).

There is a second modification I would make to Evnine's suggestion, and this raises a theme which will occupy us throughout the rest of the essay. It might sound dubious to say that 'sake' *is* associated, by ordinary speakers of English in the present day, with this coapplication condition (i.e. the generalised version of Evnine's proposal). It's certainly not common to talk explicitly about sake identity. Allowing coapplication conditions to be implicit and perhaps non-statable goes some way to allaying this worry, but I think not all the way. That's why my objection is that 'sake' *can* be associated with a coapplication condition.

If a coapplication condition can be provided in a way which is continuous with existing practice and not highly arbitrary, that is enough, I suggest, for sakes to escape rejection on the basis of a lack of coapplication conditions. That can be done in the case of sakes; Evnine's proposal and the generalization of it I propose are natural suggestions that fit well with the rather meagre established practice of using 'sake'. Hence, sakes are not to be rejected on the basis of a lack of coapplication conditions. On the contrary, the possibility of providing a coapplication condition should push us toward the view that sakes *do* exist. I will begin to

[16] Thomasson (2014), p. 265, f.n. 8. Note by the way how far this footnote, admirable in itself, is in tension with the attitude on display in Thomasson's main text. One of my guiding ideas in this essay is that, while a concession like this may be wrung from a writer on ontology such as Thomasson, there remains a need to dwell on the point and incorporate it thoroughly into our thinking about ontology.

develop this idea in a broader way—i.e. not focussing just on coapplication conditions—throughout the remainder of the essay.

7. Button's Criterion

Button (2020) discusses Thomasson's problem of sorting good ontological inferences from bad. His discussion is framed in terms of arguments rather than conditionals as above in Thomasson (2014) (elsewhere in the book Thomasson also frames things in terms of arguments). Button offers a criterion for sorting the good arguments from the bad which is different from Thomasson's. Button's criterion takes the form of a 'Context Principle'. As a response to Thomasson, Button can be seen as pushing back on some of the deflationary aspects of Thomasson's approach, and on the idea that if we take that approach ontology becomes easy—Button emphasizes that ordinary language is complicated and that when assessing the kinds of ontological inferences Thomasson is interested in, we will often need to take a wider look around and proceed carefully. I am broadly sympathetic with Button's aim here, but my purpose is not primarily to adjudicate between him and Thomasson. Rather, it is to consider Button's own criterion, which he thinks shows that inferring that sakes exist from ordinary 'sake'-involving truths is a bad move, thus allowing philosophers to persist in denying the existence of sakes and the like.

I'll quote from Button as he works up to his Context Principle, making some comments along the way. Button writes:

> Thomasson is well aware that the easy-argument template is not generally valid. To see this, consider a bad easy-argument:
>
> (1k) rain stopped the cricket match
> (2k) rain put the kibosh on the cricket match
> (3k) there are kiboshes [footnote omitted]
>
> In my ordinary vernacular, (2k) is a literal and legitimate inference to draw from (1k). But the move to (3k) is wholly *illegitimate*.[17]

[17] Button (2020), p. 35.

Before proceeding, I want to note that, to my mind, there is something odd and suspicious about Button's talk about inferences being legitimate or illegitimate in some vernacular. The vernacular you speak does not by itself determine which inferences are legitimate and which aren't. Different people can speak perfectly well the same dialect of English and disagree about something like that. Whether an inference is legitimate is something that may need to be considered and discussed, and the considerations involved won't in general be purely linguistic in any natural sense. I want to protest: it's not *in your vernacular* that this inference is wholly illegitimate, it's *in your opinion*!

Button continues the above passage by saying that 'ordinary English supplies us with a brickload of bad easy-arguments', and the next example is one about sakes. I also find it odd the way Button says that these arguments are supplied by ordinary English. The basic idea of such arguments came from philosophers thinking in creative and unusual ways, and now we can draw upon ordinary English and its idioms to come up with plenty of examples. Button can be read charitably here as presupposing the creative contribution in the background, and saying that once you have the basic idea of (supposedly) bad easy-arguments, ordinary English supplies a lot of material for coming up with examples. But I do think it is important to emphasise that ordinary English itself does not involve a canon of arguments, much less a set of verdicts about which ones are legitimate.

The sample good argument Button uses when explaining his Context Principle is:

> (1n) there are four bagels
> (2n) the number of bagels is four
> (3n) there are numbers[18]

To set the stage for his criterion, Button writes:

> If there are bad easy-arguments, then we must ask what separates the good from the bad.[19]

He then argues that

[18] Button (2020), p. 34.
[19] Button (2020), p. 36.

> if we want to embrace (1n)–(3n) as good whilst rejecting (1k)–(3k) as bad, then we face a compulsory question: *Why does 'the number of bagels' behave as a genuine term in (2n), whereas 'the kibosh' does not so behave in (2k)?*[20]

Now comes the illustration and formulation of the Context Principle:

> If we consider (2n) and (2k) as isolated sentences, there is really nothing to tell between them. So, *if* we are to answer our compulsory question without appealing to anything beyond ordinary usage, then we must examine the wider practice within which we say things like (2n). With that in mind, here are some further claims from that wider practice:
>
> (*i*n) the number of bagels, i.e. four, is the same as the number of people who ate brunch, and twice the number of packets of lox they consumed
> (*ii*n) there are infinitely many even numbers, and four is one of them
> (*iii*n) there are exactly four prime numbers between 0 and 10
>
> If anything makes it legitimate to treat numerical terms like 'four' as (purportedly) referring expressions in ordinary language, then it is the panoply of such claims. That is why we should admit that 'four' genuinely behave as a term in (2n). By contrast, there are no similar claims concerning 'kiboshes', and that is why we should deny that 'the kibosh' genuinely behaves as a term in (2k). I shall say more about this in the next subsection. But first, it is worth summarising the above point in terms of a general Context Principle. *When asking for the meaning of a phrase, we should neither consider it in isolation, nor merely in the context of an individual sentence; rather, we must consider it in the context of an entire practice.*[21]

Applying this criterion to 'sake', the idea is that we can reject inferring that sakes exist from a truth like 'I did it for Mary's sake' by denying that 'sake' behaves as a genuine term in that

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[20] Button (2020), p. 37.
[21] Button (2020), p. 37 (his emphasis). In a footnote at this point in the text, Button quotes forerunners of his Context Principle in Frege (1884, p. xxii) and Wittgenstein (1953, p. 49), noting that his formulation is 'perhaps more Wittgensteinian than Fregean', and quotes a passage from Davidson (1967, p. 308), which links the Fregean and Wittgensteinian versions.

sentence, and the reason for denying genuine termhood is that, unlike with a word like ‘four’, there are not sufficiently various claims concerning ‘sakes’.

At this point an interpretative issue arises, leading to a dilemma for Button. Is the idea supposed to be that, as a matter of fact, it is not the case that a sufficient variety of claims concerning ‘sakes’ have actually been made by people? Or is the idea that no sufficient variety of claims *can* be made?

Taking the first option, there is a case to be made that Button’s criterion applied, when he wrote his paper, as he thought it did to the examples in question (i.e. delivering the verdict that ‘sake’ and ‘kibosh’ do not behave as genuine terms). But now, two objections:

Objection 1. This seems like too unstable a situation for Button’s purposes. I have begun making various claims involving ‘sake’ in this paper, where that word isn’t used as part of an idiom. I’ve also begun speaking to some colleagues about this project, and in these discussions the word ‘sake’ has appeared in claims coming out of their mouths.

One response that might suggest itself here is to exclude *philosophers’* utterances from consideration as somehow not counting. But this is not well-motivated. Why couldn’t it happen that an ordinary idiom involves a general term like ‘sake’, where there really are things that fall under that term, but it is very uncommon for people to talk about them using that term *except* when using the idiom? And why couldn’t it happen that some philosophers then use the term *not* in the idiom, to make various claims? In my view that *is* the situation with ‘sake’, and Button’s arguments do nothing to show that it isn’t.

Objection 2. It’s possible to introduce a new genuine term, use it to make just one claim, and then never use it again. (The introduction of the term may take the form of a definition separate from the claim. Or one may introduce the term by just making the claim, if the term’s meaning can be gathered easily from the context.) If Button’s criterion for genuine termhood (interpreted in this way, as being about claims actually made) were correct, this would not be possible. Hence the criterion (so interpreted) isn’t correct.

That leaves the second interpretation: Button thinks ‘sake’ is not a genuine term because it’s not possible to make various claims using it. The problem now is glaring: this just isn’t true. I

claim that there are sakes. I also claim that mine is distinct from yours and that both are distinct from my cat's. I claim that sakes aren't physical objects. And I claim that the number of distinct sakes is far greater than 100. (I promise I'm being sincere.) Note that my argument here doesn't require that any of these claims be true, as I happen to think they are. It just requires that the claims can be made.

8. Plenitudinous, Methodolologically Modest Realism

Contemporary hostility to sakes and the like is a contingent result of the way analytic philosophy developed in the twentieth century. *What kinds of things exist?* This is such a good and interesting question, but in a lot of classic analytic philosophy, perhaps most consequentially in Quine's work, it gets run together with a different one—roughly, *What kinds of things must we believe in to get by scientifically?* This running-together leads to a kind of negative bias, where we look to avoid thinking of various kinds of things that they exist. This tendency has been reinforced by a failure to separate questions about what *fundamental* kinds of things exist (perhaps in various senses of that term) from the question of what kinds of things exist. But this is happily being corrected recently, for instance by Schaffer's influential (2009) paper about grounding. (You don't need to buy into grounding in any strong sense to think this is good progress, either—it's enough that grounding type thinking and fundamentality type thinking *has* animated philosophers and fired the philosophical imagination, and that there is, apart from that, still this other question of what kinds of things—fundamental or otherwise—exist.)

So, it's at least time to re-evaluate. But why do I end up thinking that sakes and the like *do* in fact exist? Well, that thesis fits naturally into an overall view of ontology which I think makes sense for more general reasons. One central part of this view is a thoroughgoing kind of realism. Things of various kinds exist—this is a matter of what reality is like, not in general a matter of what we think. Things of various kinds don't just exist in order for us to talk about them. And so there's no reason why there shouldn't be lots of kinds of things that we occasionally mention but don't really need to talk much about, and lots of kinds of things that we never think or talk about at all.

The ontologist asks *What kinds of things exist?*. On my overall view, there's no reason to think that there's any prospect of an exhaustive answer—a list of all the different kinds. The

interest of ontology lies not in the prospect of such a list, but in getting a better sense of the variety of the kinds, learning to distinguish them and avoid confusing them, categorising them in illuminating and useful ways, and so on.

Another core part of my overall view is a kind of methodological modesty, or willingness to improvise—for the time being at least. Contemporary philosophy features fascinating, influential attempts to give very general ontological methods—general criteria for determining whether to believe that a purported kind of thing exists. But we should beware of assuming that, just because we have problems with existing general approaches (e.g. Quine's, Thomasson's), we need to put another in their place. (Philosophy abhors a vacuum!) This is part of what I think Button is saying in response to Thomasson, when he emphasises the complexity of ordinary language and the impossibility of reading ontological commitments off sentences considered in isolation.

I think we ought to be much more ontologically permissive than Quine, because I see no reason to think that the only kinds of things that we should believe to exist are the ones we must quantify over in order to get by scientifically. But I don't think we can just look at bits of language and *read off* our ontology in an easy and uniform way. It wasn't just by looking at sentences that I came to the view that sakes exist—it was by thinking about the issue from various angles and looking at the broader philosophical context in which it arises.

Indeed, I don't even think ontological method should be uniform when it comes to sakes and the like. One way we might come to believe in a particular kind of such things, clearly on display in Section 4 (where I rebutted the nonsense charge by engaging with questions about the kibosh), is roughly as follows: an idiom gives us a clue about a role a kind of thing could play. Then, following the clue, we ask ourselves natural questions about what the role is and what a kind of thing that plays that role could be like, and use the answers to flesh out our view of this kind of thing. But with other examples that belong to the category of sakes and the like, such as the example of snooks, a more historical, etymological route can be taken.[22] If you don't know the literal meaning of 'cocking a snook', that's nothing to be embarrassed

[22] Button (2020) uses the example of snooks and has this to say about it in a footnote:

> The OED defines 'snook' as 'a derisive gesture'. If that definition is correct, it seems to license the inference to 'there are snooks'. However, the only examples of the use of the word 'snook' presented in the OED occur in the context of the phrase 'cocking a snook'; cf. what I say about the Context Principle in Sect. 2.2, and my comments on dictionaries in Sect. 3.4. (Button (2020), p. 36, f.n. 7.)

about, and it doesn't even prevent you from using the phrase in saying meaningful things. (Part of why this can so easily happen is that the phrase can be used in a kind of broad figurative way to talk about people being derisive. Compare and contrast the way we use 'looking down on'—in *that* case the words are all widely known, so we can understand both a literal and a more figurative meaning.) But once you learn the literal meaning, and that a snook is a kind of derisive gesture, then you might as well take it on board and, if the issue comes up, think that snooks exist. I don't see why it would be good philosophy to say—not because of any principled objection to the view that *gestures* exist or anything like that—'No no, that's silly, of course there's no such thing as a *snook*. That word is not a genuine term, it is just part of a phrase that has a unitary meaning.'

Roughly speaking, Quine thought that we should believe only in what we *must* talk about for scientific purposes. Some contemporary ontologists like Button seem to have a different view—something like, we should believe only in what we *do* talk about sufficiently often and in sufficiently various ways. My view is that we should believe in what we *can* talk about.[23]

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[23] I use this formulation to trace an arc of thought succinctly, but it is far from fully articulate. It could easily be misunderstood—all relevant parties agree that unicorns for instance don't exist, even though there's a sense in which you can "talk about them". I also don't mean to suggest that I think that *only* things we can talk about exist.

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