A problem for easy ontology

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§1. Introduction

THOMASSON'S EASY ONTOLOGY APPROACH (2015) aims at deflating existence questions through a revival of Carnap's (1950) distinction between internal and external questions. Importantly, her account depends on an analysis of the ordinary meaning of 'exist(s)' as a second-order predicate. I do two things in this paper. First, I show that Thomasson's analysis fails to do justice to the complexity of the English predicate 'exist(s)'. Against Thomasson, I argue that there are cases in which 'exist(s)' functions as a first-order predicate. Because these cases were first noted by P.F. Strawson (1967), I will call them 'Strawson-cases'. Secondly, I argue that these counterexamples give some support to (i) more substantive theories about existence as well as (ii) accounts that treat 'exist(s)' as varying in meaning.

§2. Easy Ontology

Thomasson's easy ontology approach centres around Carnap's distinction between internal and external questions, which she elucidates in terms of a *use/ mention* distinction (Thomasson 2015: 36-45; see Price 2009 as well). Internal questions are questions where the relevant term (for example 'proposition', 'number', 'electron' in questions such as 'Do propositions exist?', 'Do numbers exist?' or 'Do electrons exist'?) is *used*, which means that the term is governed by the standard rules of use that make them part of the linguistic framework in which these terms are introduced in the first place. An external question is a question where the term is not governed by its standard rules of use but only *mentioned*. An external question in which the term is *not* governed by its standard rules of use is either (1) meaningless, or (2) must be (more charitably) interpreted as a proposal to adopt a new set of rules. Because internal questions can be answered by straightforward conceptual or empirical means, the metaphysician (who does not treat these existence questions as settled in such a

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straightforward manner) must be asking the question ('Do propositions exist?', 'Do numbers exist?', 'Do electrons exist?') in a different (external) sense. According to Thomasson's Carnapian framework, such questions should be regarded as meaningless, or as revisionary proposals to change the rules of use of the relevant term.

What are the rules of use that govern the terms that appear in existence questions? Thomasson characterizes them as 'application conditions' (or 'conditions of application'). These amount to the semantic rules that govern our terms and are implicitly mastered by competent speakers of a language. Thomasson takes these rules to be constitutive of the meaning of linguistic expressions.[1] These application conditions can be fulfilled either (i) when certain empirical conditions obtain or (ii) when a particular statement analytically entails the introduction of the relevant term. Thomasson proposes the following equivalence schema that explicitly states the rule of use for the English 'exist(s)' (Thomasson 2015: 86):

> [E] Ks exist iff the application conditions actually associated with 'K' are fulfilled.

While this equivalence schema might seem trivial, Thomasson (2015: 116) is aware that her endorsement of [E] excludes theories that defend more substantive criteria for 'exist(s)', such as Armstrong's 'Eleatic criterion' (which holds that what exists must make a causal difference; see Armstrong 1997: 41) or accounts that take mind-independence to be a criterion for existence.[2] Following a tradition which includes philosophers such as Gassendi, Hume, Kant and Frege, Thomasson's equivalence schema gives a purely *formal* criterion for existence. On this account, the grammatical predicate 'exist(s)' does not 'add' anything to the subject to which it is predicated (and therefore does not function as a 'real', a 'logical' or a 'first-order' predicate). In Thomasson's terminology, this amounts to saying that 'exist(s)' does not come with its own application conditions, but rather has the function of affirming that the application conditions associated with the subject-expression ('K') are instantiated. Therefore, the deflationist can

[1] Not only application conditions are constitutive of the meaning of a term, however. Thomasson (2015: 89-90n4, 223) also includes co-application conditions and exit rules (consequences of application) among the rules that constitute meaning.

[2] Similarly, deflationary accounts of truth adhere to the equivalence schema '<p> is true if and only if *p*' and argue that this is all that can be said about the meaning of '… is true'. By doing so, they exclude more substantive theories of truth such as correspondence, coherence, and pragmatist theories of truth.

accept that there are differences between saying that 'Horses exist' and saying that 'Numbers exist'. The difference between those claims does not derive from an ambiguity of 'exist(s)' but from the difference between the term 'horses' (which has spatio-temporal connotations) and the term 'numbers' (which does not have spatio-temporal connotations). Despite Thomasson's opposition to neo-Quinean hard metaphysicians, Thomasson is in good company in this regard, as Quine made exactly the same point in his classic essay 'On What There Is':[3]

> If Pegasus existed he would indeed be in space and time, but only because the word 'Pegasus' has spatio-temporal connotations, and not because 'exist' has spatio-temporal connotations. If spatio-temporal reference is lacking when we affirm the existence of the cube root of 27, this is simply because a cube root is not a spatio-temporal kind of thing, and not because we are being ambiguous in our use of 'exist'. (Quine 1948: 23)

Thomasson is not only aware that [E] excludes more substantive theories about existence. She also states that her account differs from another prominent deflationary approach in the literature. Contrary to Hirsch's (2011) quantifier variance view (which draws inspiration from Putnam), Thomasson's easy ontology does not hold that 'exist(s)' varies in meaning when uttered by different speakers. This is an important difference. Before Thomasson's easy ontology approach, neo-Carnapian deflationism and quantifier variance were practically treated as amounting to the same thing. One of the merits of Thomasson's easy ontology approach is exactly to show how one can be a meta-ontological deflationist and still endorse the idea that 'exist(s)' is a univocal, formal term.

§3. Strawson-cases

Thomasson explicitly acknowledges (2015: 44) that she diverges from Carnap in the sense that Carnap is primarily occupied with formal languages and that she focuses on the ordinary meaning of the English 'exist(s)'. However, Thomasson's analysis fails to do justice to the complexity of 'exist(s)'. As I will now show, there are cases in which 'exist(s)' functions as a first-order predicate.

In his often neglected 1967 paper 'Is Existence Never A Predicate?', P.F. Strawson first gives some support for the idea that 'exist(s)' behaves as a second-order predicate in some ordinary contexts, but then goes on to show that there are ordinary cases in which 'exist(s)' behaves as a first-order predicate. In

[3] This should not come as a surprise, as Thomasson (2015: 45-56) criticizes the historical accuracy of Quine as a champion of traditional metaphysics.

supporting the theory, he uses an example that was developed by G.E. Moore (1936). The example concerns the different behaviour of the sentences

(1) Tame tigers growl; and
(2) Tame tigers exist,

when they are embedded in constructions with quantifying adjectives such as *no, at least one, a few, some, many, most* or *all*. The difference between (1) and (2) is that, whereas (1) can be embedded without any problems in constructions with all such quantifying adjectives, embedding (2) is possible only in constructions with quantifying adjectives such as *no, at least one, a few, some* and *many* but not in constructions with quantifying adjectives such as *most* and *all*. Whereas it makes sense to say that *All tame tigers growl* or that *Most tame tigers growl*, it would be rather peculiar to say that *All tame tigers exist* or *Most tame tigers exist*. Strawson's explanation for this difference between 'growl' and 'exist' is that, while both clearly function as grammatical predicates, the functional or logical role of the two grammatical predicates differ. 'Growl' functions as a *logical* (or first-order) predicate because the role of 'growl' is to make a distinction *within* a presupposed class of tame tigers, between those tame tigers that growl and those that do not growl. 'Exist', on the other hand, does not make a distinction between members that do and members that do not exhibit a particular property *within* a presupposed class of tame tigers. Instead, the use of 'exist' is to assert that the concept of tame tigers is instantiated (or, in Thomasson's words, to state that the application conditions for 'tame tigers' are fulfilled). The quantifying adjectives then do not mark how many members of a presupposed class exhibits a particular property, but rather marks the size of the class of members. Because such a function can only be fulfilled in a construction with quantifying adjectives such as *no, at least one, a few, some* and *many* but not in a construction with quantifying adjectives such as *most* or *all*, the use of 'exist' in constructions with *most* or *all* ('Most tigers exist' and 'All tigers exist') does not seem to make much sense.

This data gives support to Thomasson's analysis of the ordinary behaviour of the English 'exist(s)' as a second-order predicate. But there are counterexamples as well. Consider the following two cases based on Strawson's original cases (1967: 13):

> [SC1] Rebecca is overhearing a conversation a group of people is having. This group of people is talking about a number of characters ('Frances', 'Melissa', 'Bobbi', and 'Nick') Rebecca remembers from a recent novel she read by Sally Rooney. Because she does not

> recognize all characters the speakers are talking about, Rebecca intervenes and says: "I know who Frances, Melissa, Bobbi and Nick are, but what stories do these other characters come in?" And to this she receives the unexpected reply: "They don't come in any stories. *All* the people we're talking about *exist*."
>
> [SC2] Luna is looking at the drawings in a children's book. The book contains a lot of creatures that she has never seen before. Luna's father tells her: "There are a few creatures that are invented by the author, but *most* of them *existed*."

One could imagine a similar situation in which the answer would be that *Some of the people we're talking about exist* or that *All of the creatures in the book existed*. Importantly, [SC1] and [SC2] describe ordinary cases in which 'exist(s)' *is* properly used in a construction involving the quantifying adjectives *most* and *all*. But unlike the other quantifying adjectives, *most* and *all* only appear in contexts in which the speaker marks how many members of a presupposed class exhibit a particular property. To use one of Strawson's own metaphors, constructions with these two quantifying adjectives are used to fill strokes *within* a circle (a metaphor for what one is doing when using a first-order predicate), but cannot be used to draw a big or small circle (a metaphor for what one is doing when using a second-order predicate). And, indeed, in [SC1] and [SC2] the speaker informatively ascribes some substantial property to (i) a set of characters being talked about (in the case of [SC1]), and (ii) a set of creatures that feature in the book (in the case of [SC2]). In [SC1], the assertion that *All of the people we're talking about exist* informs us that *the people talked about* can be encountered in real life, which has as its consequence that we can shake their hands, have a drink with them, call them on their phones etc. Similarly, in [SC2], the assertion that *Most of the creatures in the book existed* informs us that there was a time in which we could encounter these creatures in real life, i.e. a time in which we could have perceived, touched them, or could have run from them in more dangerous situations. The use of 'exist(s)' here is exactly to describe these beings as spatio-temporally locatable entities that can be touched and perceived, which distinguishes them from merely fictional characters whose hands we cannot shake, whom we cannot call on the phone etc. In these cases, to ascribe existence is a difference that *makes* a difference. The use of 'exist(s)' is here exactly to state that the people discussed (in [SC1]) or the creatures described (in [SC2]) are not just fictional characters or mythological creatures, but rather actual people or things we might encounter in real life.

§4. Consequences

These counterexamples show two important things, each with its own implications. First, that Thomasson fails to exclude more substantive theories

about existence on the basis of the ordinary meaning of 'exist(s)'. Such substantive theories defend criteria for 'exist(s)' such as mind-independence or the making of a causal difference. While 'mind-independence' and 'the making of a causal difference' are definitely in need of further explications, the Strawson-cases show that the intuition behind such theories is not simply a departure from the ordinary behaviour of 'exist(s)' in certain contexts, but is actually rooted in it. In [SC1] and [SC2], it is plausible that something akin to these (more substantive) criteria indeed govern the use of 'exist(s)'. Of course, to make this point is not to deny that there are many contexts in which 'exists(s)' *is* most plausibly understood as a second-order predicate which does not 'add' anything to the subject. The point is simply that, if the more substantive theorist cares about the actual behaviour of 'exist(s)' at all, there is *some* data that her more substantive theory has roots in the actual behaviour of 'exist(s)'.

Secondly, the Strawson-cases could be used to give some support for the idea that 'exist(s)' varies in meaning in different contexts. Given Thomasson's own characterization of the rules of use of English terms as constitutive for the meaning of these terms, it could be argued that 'exist(s)' is governed by different rules of use in different contexts, and therefore that it varies in meaning in these different contexts. As is shown by the difference between the behaviour of 'Tame tigers growl' and 'Tame tigers exist' in constructions with quantifying adjectives, there is clear data showing that 'exist(s)' indeed functions as a second-order predicate in many cases. In such contexts, Thomasson's equivalence schema perfectly captures the rule of use for 'exist(s)'. But, as the Strawson-cases show, the data is not as unified as Thomasson's equivalence schema would imply. In such cases, a more substantive rule governs our use of 'exist(s)'. If one endorses Thomasson's claim that the rules of use are constitutive of the meaning of 'exist(s)', one should conclude that the ordinary English 'exist(s)' varies in meaning as well. As always, the behaviour of our everyday expressions is multifaceted and quite rich. As opposed to formal languages, "ordinary language has no exact logic." (Strawson 1950: 344)

§5. Conclusion

Thomasson's easy ontology approach depends on an analysis of the ordinary meaning of the English 'exist(s)' as a second-order predicate. In this paper, I have argued that the so-called 'Strawson-cases' show that Thomasson's analysis fails to do justice to the complexity of the ordinary behaviour of 'exist(s)'. I also argued that these counterexamples give some support to (i) more substantive

theories about existence as well as (ii) accounts that treat 'exist(s)' as varying in meaning. As Strawson put it:

> Must we suppose that at least and at most one model will fit each case? I am inclined to think that we take our models too seriously, if we suppose this, and have too little regard for the pleasant fluidities of thinking. (Strawson 1967: 15).

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Keywords: Ontology · Existence · Carnap · Strawson.

Un problema para la ontología fácil

El enfoque de ontología fácil de Thomasson (2015) tiene como objetivo desinflar las preguntas de la existencia a través de un resurgimiento de la distinción de Carnap (1950) entre preguntas internas y externas. Es importante destacar que su explicación depende de un análisis del significado ordinario de "existen(n)" como un predicado de segundo orden. Hago dos cosas en este papel. Primero, muestro que el análisis de Thomasson no hace justicia a la complejidad del predicado en inglés "existe(n)". Contra Thomasson, sostengo que hay casos en los que "existe (s)" funciona como un predicado de primer orden. Debido a que estos casos fueron notados por primera vez por P.F. Strawson (1967), los llamaré "casos de Strawson". En segundo lugar,

sostengo que estos contraejemplos dan cierto apoyo a (i) teorías más sustantivas sobre la existencia, así como a (ii) explicaciones que tratan "existe(n)" como de significado variable.
Palabras Clave: Ontología · Existencia · Carnap · Strawson.

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