

DOES SEMANTIC DEFLATIONISM ENTAIL META-ONTOLOGICAL DEFLATIONISM?

BY BENJAMIN MARSCHALL¹ AND THOMAS SCHINDLER²

Deflationary positions have been defended in many areas of philosophy. Most prominent are semantic deflationism about truth and reference, and meta-ontological deflationism, according to which existence has no deep nature and the standard neo-Quinean approach to ontology is misguided. Although both kinds of views have generated much discussion, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the question of how they relate to each other. Are they independent, is it advisable to hold them all at once, or do they even entail each other? One exception is Amie Thomasson, who has argued that semantic deflationism actually entails meta-ontological deflationism. This is unexpected, since semantic deflationism is usually regarded as much less controversial than meta-ontological deflationism. In our paper, we will argue that Thomasson's argument fails though, and that the connection between the views is in fact weaker than she makes them out to be.

Keywords: Semantic Deflationism, Meta-Ontological Deflationism, Easy Ontology, Thomasson, Horwich, Neo-Quineanism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Semantic deflationism about truth and reference has been on the philosophical map for a while and has found many adherents. More recently, a number of deflationary accounts have been proposed in meta-ontology as well (Hirsch 2002; Schiffer 2003; Rayo 2013; Thomasson 2015; Hofweber 2016; Linnebo 2018). Given how frequently the notions of truth and reference are invoked in meta-ontological debates, one may wonder if there is a deeper connection between these deflationisms. Are they independent, is it advisable to hold them all at once, or do they even entail each other?

Amie Thomasson has recently defended a strong entailment thesis: according to her, semantic deflationism about truth and reference (which is popular) entails meta-ontological deflationism (which is controversial), where she defines meta-ontological deflationism to be the view that (a) existence has no

deep nature and that (b) the widely-held neo-Quinean approach to ontology is misguided (Thomasson 2014). This is a surprising thesis, and would have numerous repercussions if true. (Note that a number of leading truth deflationists, such as Horwich and Field, have embraced core tenets of Quine. Indeed, Quine himself—one of the fathers of truth deflationism—is a Quinean.) We will argue, however, that her argument fails, and that there is in fact no entailment of this kind.

II. THREE KINDS OF DEFLATIONISM

This paper focuses on three kinds of deflationism: (i) semantic deflationism about truth and reference, (ii) existence deflationism, and (iii) meta-ontological deflationism. Thomasson argues that (i) entails (ii) and that (ii) entails (iii), and in the following we will criticise both steps. That (ii) is not subsumed under (iii) may seem initially puzzling. However, as we will see in a moment, existence deflationism is a thesis about the property *existence*, whereas meta-ontological deflationism is a thesis about how (not) to resolve ontological debates (i.e., questions about what kinds of things exist).

II.1. *Semantic and existence deflationism*

According to *semantic deflationism*, the properties of truth and reference have no deep nature which can be analysed informatively, and all that can be said about truth and reference is captured by relatively trivial platitudes. Here is how Paul Horwich formulates the view:

TRUTH DEFLATIONISM

The meaning of ‘true’ is captured by the trivial equivalence schema: $\langle p \rangle$ is true iff p (see Horwich 1998: 103)

REFERENCE DEFLATIONISM

The meaning of ‘refer’ is captured by the trivial equivalence schema: $\langle \forall x \rangle$ tokens of $\langle n \rangle$ refer to x iff $n = x$ (see Horwich 1998: 119)

According to semantic deflationism, the notions of truth and reference are mere logico-linguistic tools. For example, the truth predicate enables us to express certain generalisations that would otherwise be very hard or impossible to formulate—i.e., it allows us to say things like ‘Everything that Jamie says about food is true’, without having to assert every single statement that Jamie has made about food. Similarly, the notion of reference allows us to articulate *de re* attributions of content (Horwich 1998: 121–3). For our purposes, the most important consequence of semantic deflationism is the following: there is no *analysis* or *reduction* of truth and reference, for instance in terms of correspondence to facts (in the case of truth), or causal relations (in the case of reference). Consequently, there can be no informative biconditional of the form ‘ x refers

to y iff x stands in relation R to y ' in order to explain reference, and the same holds for truth (Thomasson 2014: 185).

The thesis of *existence deflationism* is analogous to semantic deflationism, although less familiar. Thomasson discusses this position in (2008) (although not under this label), and has recently described it as follows:

On the deflationary view, existence is simply not a property or activity the deeper nature of which one could hope to uncover with a philosophical theory. As a result, all substantive theories of existence, whether they identify existing with having (distinctive) causal powers, being mind-independent, being physical, observable, or trackable, would alike be rejected as wrong-headed, much as the semantic deflationist rejects all of the diverse proposals about what the property of truth or the relation of reference really consists in. (Thomasson 2014: 192)

On other occasions, Thomasson also describes the existence deflationist as denying that there is 'some substantive across-the-board criterion for existence' (Thomasson 2014: 196). So we can sum up the position thus:

EXISTENCE DEFLATIONISM

The property *existence* does not have a deep nature, and there is no substantive criterion of existence.¹

If 'exists' does not pick out a property the nature of which may be investigated, why do we have such a term in our language? According to Thomasson, the concept of (non)existence enables us to call attention to certain kinds of mistakes a listener might be making—e.g. 'we might comfort a child by telling her that monsters don't exist—they are just talked about in stories and movies' (Thomasson 2014: 199). In other words, it enables us to express that 'monsters' doesn't refer, without using the concept of reference—i.e., while remaining in the object language.²

II.2. *Meta-ontological deflationism*

Following Thomasson, we will construe meta-ontological deflationism as a *negative* thesis: namely, as the view that 'something is wrong with many ontological debates' (Thomasson 2014: 205). More specifically, Thomasson identifies two problems with mainstream ontology: (1) Some debates invoke the nature of existence to argue for or against certain entities, and (2) many debates

¹ Thomasson actually seems to go further and suggests that existence is not a property *at all*. We think that it is preferable to construe existence as a lightweight property that is trivially instantiated by all existing objects though, for it makes existence deflationism more closely analogous to semantic deflationism. Nothing essential in this paper will depend on this choice.

² One might worry that there is something circular about explaining non-existence in terms of reference failure, given that reference failure seems to require an understanding of non-existence. For discussion see Thomasson 2014: section VII and Burgess 2015.

rely on a neo-Quinean approach to answer existence questions (Thomasson 2014: 202).³

According to neo-Quineans, we come to find out what exists by looking at what the best overall theory of the world is ontologically committed to. This characterisation raises two questions: what is the best theory of the world, and what are the ontological commitments of theories? Concerning the second point, Quine's influential criterion of ontological commitment requires us first to regiment our theory in a first-order language. Then we can say that a theory is committed to those entities its quantifiers need to range over for it to be true. In other words, a theory is committed to the existence of F s if and only if it entails the sentence $\exists x Fx$. The first question is less straightforward, however. Quine himself endorsed a strong form of naturalism according to which *physics* is the arbiter of what is real. Contemporary neo-Quineans usually understand 'best theory' more broadly, and take our best overall theory of the world to also include other sciences and various metaphysical theories.

Quine and the neo-Quineans compare competing theories in terms of their goodness. For this they rely on theoretical virtues such as simplicity, and therefore parsimonious theories with fewer ontological commitments tend to be preferred over more ontologically extravagant theories. Some neo-Quineans will reject the existence of tables, for instance, as they think that our best theory of the world only needs to quantify over fundamental particles.

Meta-ontological deflationists reject the neo-Quinean methodology. Note that their target is usually not Quine's criterion of ontological commitment, which, on the contrary, they often endorse. What is distinctive about meta-ontological deflationism is rather its denial that we need to engage in an elaborate process of theory construction and comparison in order to answer ontological questions. In this sense deflationism is a theory-light approach, as deflationists typically use natural language—or a slightly regimented version of it—as a guide to ontology (see Schiffer 2003; Thomasson 2015; Hofweber 2016). As a consequence, deflationists usually embrace a more promiscuous ontology than neo-Quineans.

It is instructive to consider a particular proposal in some detail. According to Thomasson's *easy* approach to ontology, 'we can answer [...] existence questions by way of simple observations or via trivial inferences from uncontroversial truths (which, given the constitutive rules governing [... a] concept, may guarantee that the concept refers and that things of that kind exist)' (Thomasson 2014: 205f). And it turns out that according to this methodology, most ontological questions which have generated a lot of debate are answered affirmatively—i.e., easy ontology tends to rule in *favour* of the entities in question.

³ Why should this view be called *meta*-ontological instead of just *ontological* deflationism? Thomasson's motivation for this choice is that ontological deflationism suggests that certain entities are 'reduced in ontological standing' (Thomasson 2015: 145), which is a claim she rejects.

Consider the long-standing dispute about whether, in addition to simple particles, there are also composites composed by the particles. Thomasson thinks that in order to answer this question, we don't need to compare metaphysical theories with regard to theoretical virtues, in order to then see whether the best theory quantifies over composites. Rather, according to her the question can be answered by relying only on relatively simple conceptual and empirical considerations, since she takes the following principle to be a conceptual truth governing the meaning of 'table':

(T) If there are particles arranged table-wise then there is a table.

Since the existence of particles arranged table-wise seems to be an uncontroversial empirical truth, we can conclude from (T) that there are tables—and, therefore, that composites exist. Ontology thus becomes easy in the sense that we can eschew metaphysical theory construction and comparison in favour of more tractable conceptual and empirical investigations (Thomasson 2007, 2009, 2015).

II.3. *Connections*

Semantic deflationism and existence deflationism make claims about the properties *truth*, *reference*, and *existence*. Meta-ontological deflationism is a negative thesis about how *not* to approach ontological questions, which can be combined with different positive methodologies instead. Given these three kinds of deflationism, a series of questions arise: What is the relation between the different theses? Are they independent, or does one kind of deflationism entail another? Is it a good idea to embrace all of them together?

There is good reason to think that combining these deflationisms is beneficial. One popular move among defenders of surprising metaphysical theses, such as that there are no tables, is to argue that the world doesn't contain any *truthmakers* that would make claims about tables true. But deflationists about truth and reference usually reject the demand for truthmakers. Thomasson explains this as follows:

Semantic minimalism encourages us to give up the representationalist picture [according to which true statements 'match' features of the world]. For if the notion of truth is simply captured in the equivalence schema, then there is no pressure to look for what states of affairs correspond to our true claims, what facts make them true, or what objects they are about in order to explain what makes them true. (Thomasson 2014: 203)⁴

If this is correct, then taking semantic deflationism on board makes things easier for a meta-ontological deflationist who accepts the existence of many kinds of entities, such as material objects, numbers, and so on. Arguments

⁴ For more on representationalism see Price 2011: chapter 1.

against these entities based on truthmakers can then swiftly be rejected as resting on a mistaken view of the nature of truth and reference. In this sense semantic deflationism can be said to *support* (at least some versions of) meta-ontological deflationism.

Thomasson, however, has recently argued for a much stronger claim. According to her, semantic deflationism actually *entails* existence deflationism, and existence deflationism in turn entails meta-ontological deflationism:

[...] although [...] semantic deflationism has been far more popular than [existence] deflationism, it becomes clear that it is not merely odd but *inconsistent* to accept the first without accepting the second. (Thomasson 2014: 206, emphasis ours)

This also leaves us with a form of meta-ontological deflationism, holding that something is wrong with the vast majority of recent debates about what exists [...]. This is a radical conclusion indeed that [...] *follows from* the widely familiar and accepted deflationisms about truth [...] (Thomasson 2014: 202f, emphasis ours)

This would be a very exciting result. After all, while semantic deflationism is a reasonably popular position, meta-ontological deflationism is usually regarded as a minority view, which, unlike the neo-Quinean orthodoxy, is in need of substantial arguments. Moreover, as we pointed out earlier, many contemporary semantic deflationists have explicitly endorsed core tenets of neo-Quineanism. If Thomasson is correct, these philosophers have adopted an inconsistent position.

In the following we will argue, however, that Thomasson's argument doesn't work: Neither does semantic deflationism entail existence deflationism, nor does existence deflationism entail meta-ontological deflationism. Furthermore, we discuss a third argument according to which the combination of existence deflationism with a use theory of meaning entails easy ontology, and argue that it is a misleading way of presenting the relationship between these views.

One can distinguish two different kinds of arguments Thomasson puts forward. The first kind is supposed to show that semantic deflationism *logically entails* existence deflationism, which in turn logically entails meta-ontological deflationism. Against this we will argue that there is no entailment of this kind, which is significant as the quotes above suggest that Thomasson wants to establish this strong claim.

Some of her arguments have a different structure, however. In one of her arguments from truth to existence deflationism, for instance, she relies on additional premises that are clearly independent of truth deflationism. Even if successful, this argument could thus not establish that truth deflationism *as such* logically entails existence deflationism.

Our conjecture is that Thomasson has a looser sense of entailment and inconsistency in mind. Arguably there are some philosophical positions which are not logically inconsistent, but it is nevertheless hard to see how they could

be fruitfully combined. Suppose you think that we can give a semantics for modal discourse without any reference to Lewis's concrete possible worlds, but still think that these worlds exist—they just don't do the theoretical work Lewis had in mind. This combination is coherent but, pending some background story, has little plausibility.

Some of Thomasson's remarks suggest that she has something analogous in mind: if one accepts semantic deflationism, then all good reasons to reject meta-ontological deflationism fall away. We argue, however, that Thomasson also fails to show that this looser sense of entailment obtains.

In order to properly evaluate Thomasson's arguments, one needs to keep the dialectical situation in mind. Thomasson's goal is to show that the controversial thesis of meta-ontological deflationism is entailed by the much less controversial thesis of semantic deflationism. This means that Thomasson needs to be careful (and indeed she is) when relying on premises she defends in other places, i.e., premises that form part of her easy approach to ontology. Easy ontology, being a particular instance of meta-ontological deflationism, obviously entails meta-ontological deflationism all by itself. Thus relying on it would bereave the argument of the punch it is supposed to have.

III. FROM SEMANTIC DEFLATIONISM TO EXISTENCE DEFLATIONISM

III.1. *The argument from truth deflationism*

Thomasson's argument from truth deflationism to existence deflationism proceeds as follows. First, Thomasson notes that given some simple truth claim, i.e., that $\langle F(t) \rangle$ is true, we can derive the claim that t exists and that F s exist, given only the equivalence schema for truth plus some standards assumptions about how to regiment discourse in a formal language. More precisely, from the claim that $\langle F(t) \rangle$ is true we can infer that t is F , and from that we may infer $\exists x(x = t)$ and $\exists xFx$, and that in turn implies that t exists and that F s exist. Thomasson then continues as follows:

Since we can always derive existence claims (singular and general) from truth claims, there is some substantive across-the-board criterion for existence only if the same is available for truth. But if (as the deflationist holds) there is no general substantive condition required for a proposition to be true, then we may derive different existence claims from the truth of diverse propositions – without any common condition holding, and so without any single substantive criterion for existence being fulfilled across all cases. So, since the deflationist about truth denies that there is any across-the-board condition for a proposition to be true, she is also led to deny that there is any across-the-board criterion for existence. The truth deflationist should thus also embrace deflationism about existence. [...] So if we have a true proposition such as \langle the table is brown \rangle we can

move from there to infer that tables (and brown things) exist; from ⟨five is odd⟩ we can infer that the number five (and an odd thing) exists. (Thomasson 2014: 195f)

One can extract two distinct arguments from truth deflationism to existence deflationism from this quote. The first argument is this:

There is some substantive across-the-board criterion for existence only if the same is available for truth. Since deflationists deny that there is a substantive across-the-board criterion for truth, they have to deny that there is one for existence as well.

The second argument runs as follows:

Deflationists about truth deny that there is a substantive across-the-board criterion for truth. Since we can infer diverse existence claims from diverse truths, there cannot be a substantive across-the-board criterion for existence. For example, since there is no across-the-board criterion for the truth of ⟨the table is brown⟩ and ⟨five is odd⟩, there is no across-the-board criterion for the existence of tables and the number five either.

We will deal with both arguments in turn.

III.1.1. *First argument: logical entailment*

The crucial claim of Thomasson's first argument is that there is a substantive across-the-board criterion for existence *only if* the same is available for truth. In other words, she claims that the following conditional holds:

If (1) there is a substantive criterion for existence, *then* (2) there is a substantive criterion for truth.

Given the implication from (1) to (2), Thomasson's conclusion follows immediately: since the semantic deflationist rejects (2), she must also reject (1)—that is, a deflationist about truth has to endorse deflationism about existence as well. The question therefore is: does the implication from (1) to (2) hold?

Assume there is a substantive across-the-board criterion for existence $\phi(x)$ such that x exists if and only if $\phi(x)$. Does it follow that there is a substantive across-the-board criterion for truth? Instead of looking at arbitrary sentences, let's focus on atomic sentences. For if there is no substantive across-the-board criterion for atomic sentences, there won't be one for all sentences either. So let's consider a true atomic statement of the form $F(t)$. The truth of such a predication involves two aspects. Given the assumption that there is a substantive criterion of existence $\phi(x)$, the truth of $F(t)$ requires, firstly, that t satisfy $\phi(x)$. This will be a necessary condition for the truth of $F(t)$, but it isn't a sufficient one. We have: $\langle F(t) \rangle$ is true $\rightarrow \phi(t)$, but the other direction doesn't hold. For the truth of $F(t)$ requires, secondly, that t satisfy the predicate ' F '.

In order for there to be a substantive across-the-board criterion of truth there needs to be a *substantive* binary relation $\psi(x, y)$ such that for all objects x and all (atomic) predicates y , x satisfies y if and only if $\psi(x, y)$. But the mere assumption that all objects x satisfy some common criterion of existence $\phi(x)$

does not *entail* that there is a substantive relation $\psi(x, y)$ between objects and predicates. After all, ‘ x exists’ is a unary predicate, whereas ‘ x satisfies y ’ is a binary predicate. A substantive criterion of existence will place a restriction on what values the variable ‘ x ’ in ‘ x satisfies y ’ can take; it can also place a restriction on what values ‘ y ’ can take. But this doesn’t tell us what *pairs* x, y stand in the satisfaction relation. In other words, we may have: x satisfies $y \rightarrow \phi(x) \wedge \phi(y)$. But clearly, we do not have: $\phi(x) \wedge \phi(y) \rightarrow x$ satisfies y , because this would entail that every object satisfies every predicate whatsoever. What is needed is a further formula $\chi(x, y)$ such that $\phi(x) \wedge \phi(y) \wedge \chi(x, y) \rightarrow x$ satisfies y . And the semantic deflationist can either deny that *there is* an appropriate formula $\chi(x, y)$ or, assuming there is one, deny that it expresses a *substantive* relation. For example, the semantic deflationist may admit that such a formula $\chi(x, y)$ exists for purely mathematical reasons. For instance, it is well-known that if the use of infinite disjunctions is accepted, one can simply define ‘ x satisfies y ’ as $(y = \langle F_1 \rangle \wedge F_1(x)) \vee (y = \langle F_2 \rangle \wedge F_2(x)) \vee \dots$. But surely, this does not show that the satisfaction relation is ‘substantive’ in the way a semantic inflationist takes it to be.

Indeed, when it comes to the relation between objects and predicates, the semantic deflationist will simply endorse all instances of the schema

$$t \text{ satisfies } \langle F \rangle \text{ if and only if } F(t),$$

(which is not a definition of ‘ x satisfies y ’)⁵ and deny that there is a more informative and uniform story to tell about why an object satisfies a predicate. Thus, even if there is a substantive criterion of existence, this merely places a restriction on what singular terms can appear in true predications—viz. those terms that pick out an object satisfying the existence criterion. But it does not in any way restrict the kinds of claims we can make about those objects (descriptive, aesthetic, moral, etc.) and it doesn’t entail that there is a substantive across-the-board criterion for the truth of such claims.⁶

⁵ It may be an ‘implicit definition’ in the sense of Hilbert, i.e., a set of axioms constraining the interpretation of ‘ x satisfies y ’. But it is not a definition in the usual textbook-of-logic sense, i.e., something having the form ‘ x satisfies $y \leftrightarrow \psi(x, y)$ ’.

⁶ Perhaps it will be objected that it is enough for Thomasson’s argument to go through that there is a substantial across-the-board criterion for all *existential* sentences. For surely, if there is a substantive criterion for existence $\phi(x)$, a statement of the form $\exists x (x = t)$ is true if and only if $\phi(t)$. Thus, a substantive criterion for existence implies a substantive criterion for the truth of existence claims. That much is uncontroversial, and a deflationist about truth who endorses a substantive criterion of existence will not deny that. But this doesn’t mean that such a deflationist has adopted an incoherent or inconsistent position. Deflationism about truth is not a local thesis about declarative sentences of a particular form (i.e., existence claims), it is a thesis about *all* truth-apt sentences. The deflationist can very well admit that there is a substantive criterion of truth for some truth-apt sentences while denying that there is one for all truth-apt sentences—and indeed, Thomasson herself entertains the possibility that there might be substantial criteria for certain kinds of statements, for instance those that are part of science (Thomasson 2014: 202–24).

III.1.2. *Second argument: compatibility*

The general idea behind Thomasson's second argument is this: once we take a broad range of truths into account—truths such as 'the table is brown' and 'five is odd'—it becomes unviable to accept truth deflationism without existence deflationism. For truths about tables and numbers entail the existence of tables and numbers, and it is hard to see which substantial criterion for existence might account both for the existence of tables and numbers.

The first thing to note is that the existence of different kinds of things doesn't really rule out the possibility of a substantive across-the-board criterion for existence. Maybe the substantial criterion these things share is that they are all created by God, or that they are mind-independent. Moreover, it may also be the case that all existing things share some disjunctive existence property, such as *being a concrete or an abstract object*. But for the sake of the argument, we are willing to grant that numbers and tables don't share a non-disjunctive criterion of existence, and that the sharing of a disjunctive criterion of existence doesn't qualify as a substantive criterion.

The second thing to note is that the argument relies on some additional premises—namely, that various claims such as 'the table is brown' and 'five is odd' are *true*. Clearly, these premises are logically independent of truth deflationism. As mentioned before, we therefore assume that at this stage Thomasson wants to argue for something weaker than logical entailment: truth deflationism leads to existence deflationism given only some additional premises that a truth deflationist has little reason to deny.

Let us therefore have a closer look at these additional premises. They will seem unproblematic to many, but remember the dialectical situation: among the ontologists Thomasson is up against, doubting that such statements are true is commonplace precisely because they are taken to imply the existence of tables and numbers (see for instance Merricks 2001; Field 1980). Mereological nihilists reject the existence of tables, and nominalists reject the existence of numbers, however. In this context, assuming that statements about tables and numbers are true thus begs the question.

In other work, Thomasson has of course argued that we should disregard such revisionary ontologists and accept 'the table is brown' and 'five is odd' as straightforwardly true (Thomasson 2007, 2015). But as we pointed out earlier, Thomasson cannot just rely on these results at this point, since then the argument becomes uninteresting by relying on the position it was designed to support. Instead Thomasson should offer an independent argument why truth deflationists ought to accept these additional premises. This is exactly what she is attempting to do:

[...] the only way to doubt the existence claim is if one also doubts the truth of the original propositions (<the table is brown> or <five is odd>). The original propositions certainly seem true, however. It seems that doubts about their truth are only raised (except by

the mathematically or perceptually incompetent) for *metaphysical* reasons: doubts, for example, about what the truthmakers for the relevant claims could be or whether we should countenance the alleged truthmakers [...]. But those worries are out of place if we accept a deflationary theory of truth, which rejects across-the-board demands such as the requirement that truths have truthmakers. (Thomasson 2014: 196f)

According to Thomasson, the only way for a truth deflationist to reject existence deflationism is to deny the truth of propositions such as <the table is brown> and <five is odd>. But this can only be done for metaphysical reasons, and these fall away once we reject an inflationary account of truth.

The last step is too fast, however. It is of course true that the alleged truths about tables or numbers are usually only denied for metaphysical reasons. It is not true, however, that such reasons always presuppose an inflationary conception of truth. For example, consider a philosopher who rejects the existence of composite objects because she fears that accepting them into her ontology will lead to *causal overdetermination* (Thomasson 2007: 15ff). If, for instance, there are stones in addition to particles arranged stone-wise, it might seem that the shattering of a window would be caused by the window being hit by a stone *and* by it being hit by particles arranged stone-wise.⁷ Assuming that widespread causal overdetermination is to be avoided, these considerations provide a reason to reject composites, and hence to deny that statements referring to stones (or tables) are true. We are not saying that this is a *good* reason to deny that there are composite objects. But it is *a* reason that has been taken seriously by philosophers, and, importantly, one which is compatible with truth deflationism, since it relies on the wish to avoid causal overdetermination, not on some uniform criterion of truth. It is therefore not the case that truth deflationists *have* to accept that there are true statements referring to stones (or tables).⁸

Truth deflationism entails that there is no *general* criterion of truth, but that doesn't imply that there can be no disagreement about whether *particular* statements are true or not, what speaks in favour or against their truth, etc. Philosophy is full of arguments against taking statements that *seem* true to *be* true (or even truth-apt), and if Thomasson really thinks that these can all be answered merely by adopting truth deflationism this would need to be argued for in more detail.

⁷ One way to respond to this worry would be to deny that the stone is a distinct object from the particles, by accepting the view that *composition is identity* (Cotnoir 2014). Thomasson herself accepts the more standard view that composites are distinct from their parts however (Thomasson 2007: chapter 4).

⁸ Here are two further examples. First, one may deny the existence of certain objects as the result of an application of Ockham's razor. For instance, one may eschew numbers in favour of sets. Second, one may disavow the existence of certain objects (e.g. events, clouds, and properties) because they lack a criterion of identity. None of these reasons seem to rely specifically on an inflationary conception of truth.

We therefore see no reason to think that a truth deflationist *has* to accept that statements like ‘the table is brown’ and ‘five is odd’ are true. Since Thomasson needs these additional premises, her second argument that truth deflationism entails existence deflationism seems to fail as well.

III.2. *The argument from reference deflationism*

We have seen that while there is indeed a conceptual link between truth and existence, in so far as we can derive existence claims from truth claims, this connection doesn’t suffice to establish Thomasson’s conclusion: it doesn’t imply that there is a substantive across-the-board criterion for existence only if there is one for truth. In this section, we will consider whether existence deflationism can instead be derived from the conceptual link between the notions of existence and *reference*, which according to Thomasson is even ‘more fundamental’ (2014) than the one between existence and truth.

According to the semantic deflationist, there is no substantive relation R such that y refers to x if and only if $R(y, x)$. Rather, the notion of reference is captured by the following trivial schema:

$$\forall x (\langle n \rangle \text{ refers to } x \text{ iff } n = x)$$

This schema, it should be noted, doesn’t amount to a definition of the relation ‘ y refers to x ’ (cf. footnote 5). For example, the schema doesn’t tell us how to eliminate an occurrence of ‘ y refers to x ’ in a given statement.

Now, says Thomasson, ‘we may define the monadic notion of being a referring concept’ as follows:⁹

$$\langle n \rangle \text{ refers iff } \exists z (z = n)$$

Given the interdefinability of the existential quantifier and ‘existence’, we therefore get:

$$E: \langle n \rangle \text{ refers iff } n \text{ exists. (Thomasson 2014: 198)}$$

Thomasson takes this conceptual connection (together with the earlier connection between truth and existence) to have substantial implications:

[...] on this view the concepts of truth, reference, truth-of, and existence are all interlinked by trivial rules, and deflationisms about any of these notions stand or fall together. (Thomasson 2014: 198)

Why exactly do deflationism about reference and deflationism about existence ‘stand or fall together’? Unfortunately, Thomasson is not very explicit on this point. It seems likely that the argument she has in mind is analogous

⁹ Note again that this is not a definition in the textbook-of-logic sense. A definition must have the form ‘ y refers iff ...y...’

to the previous one regarding truth and existence: since (E) shows us how to ‘define’ reference in terms of existence, there is a substantive across-the-board criterion for existence *only if* there is one for reference as well. Since there is no criterion for reference, according to semantic deflationism, there is none for existence either. Hence deflationism about reference entails deflationism about existence.

Whatever the argument is supposed to be, it is hard to see why a reference deflationist needs to be an existence deflationist as well. Reference deflationism is a claim about the binary relation ‘ y refers to x ’—it denies that there is a substantive across-the-board criterion for this relation. Now even if there is a substantive criterion of existence $\phi(x)$, this in no way implies that there is a substantive relation $R(y, x)$ between singular terms and objects. Analogously to the case of truth, we do get the following entailment: $\langle n \rangle$ refers $\rightarrow \phi(n)$. However, nothing follows about whether a substantive relation $R(y, x)$ holds between $\langle n \rangle$ and n , just as a substantive criterion of existence doesn’t imply that there is a substantive relation $\psi(x, y)$ between objects and predicates. Again, this is so for the very simple reason that ‘ x exists’ is a unary predicate whereas ‘ y refers to x ’ is a binary predicate. This means that existence deflationism is logically independent of reference deflationism, and therefore one can be a reference deflationist with or without being an existence deflationist.

III.3. *A general remark*

Ultimately, the failure of the arguments from semantic deflationism to existence deflationism should not come as a big surprise. As we mentioned earlier, according to deflationists like Horwich the truth predicate is merely a device of generalisation, enabling us to express things such as ‘Everything that Jamie says about food is true’ or ‘Everything Einstein said about relativity is true’. In order for the truth predicate to serve this purpose, it is sufficient and necessary for it to be governed by the trivial equivalence schema—no further analysis of the notion of truth is required. And it is clear that the truth predicate has its rightful place in our language even if we merely countenance a particular domain of discourse—say, spatiotemporal objects. In other words: even if all the things we ever talked about were of the same kind, and shared a common criterion for their existence, it would still be useful to have a truth predicate governed by the trivial equivalence schema at hand. The same holds for the notion of reference, since it is desirable to be able to express the de re attributions Horwich uses to motivate reference deflationism regardless of one’s ontological persuasions. Given this, the compatibility of semantic deflationism with different views about the nature of existence is just what one would expect.

We have argued that there is no entailment from semantic deflationism about truth and reference to existence deflationism. The second step of Thomasson’s argument—the argument from existence deflationism to

meta-ontological deflationism—is still worth looking at though. Since on the face of it existence deflationism looks compatible with all kinds of views in meta-ontology, it would be an interesting result if, as Thomasson claims, it really entails meta-ontological deflationism.

IV. FROM EXISTENCE DEFLATIONISM TO META-ONTOLOGICAL DEFLATIONISM

IV.1. *Logical entailment*

Let us recall the main tenets of meta-ontological deflationism:

META-ONTOLOGICAL DEFLATIONISM

When we answer ontological questions we should ...

- (a) ... *not* invoke the nature of existence.
- (b) ... *not* use a neo-Quinean methodology.

For existence deflationism to entail meta-ontological deflationism, Thomasson needs to show that it entails both (a) and (b). We will first argue that existence deflationism doesn't *logically* entail meta-ontological deflationism. After that, we will look at Thomasson's own argument, which involves an additional premise.

According to existence deflationism, existence has no deep nature. It is then clear that it makes no sense to invoke the nature of existence in ontological debates, since there is no such thing. Accepting existence deflationism without also accepting (a) doesn't seem to be a coherent position, so this part of Thomasson's argument is successful.

We do not think that existence deflationism entails (b), however. Remember that according to the neo-Quinean methodology, we determine what exists by looking at the ontological commitments of the best overall theory of the world, instead of closely following natural language. How could the claim that existence has no deep nature possibly entail that one must reject this methodology? As far as we can see there is only one possibility: if the neo-Quinean methodology implied that there is a substantive criterion of existence, then (b) would entail (a), and the above argument applies.

It is notable that if one follows the neo-Quinean approach, then everything that exists will have some properties in common. A trivial example is that every object has the property of being a value of a variable in the best overall theory. Another example is that everything that exists is self-identical. More interestingly, the criteria of theory choice neo-Quineans endorse will lead to the result that every entity quantified over in our best theory does some explanatory work, for explanatory danglers would be excluded as unparsimonious.

In light of this it is tempting to suspect that the neo-Quinean methodology commits us to a substantial criterion after all, according which to exist is to play an explanatory role.¹⁰ This temptation must be resisted, however. The argument seems to rely on the following kind of inference, which is clearly invalid:

All existing things are *F*, therefore to exist is to be *F*.

On a related point, Nathan Salmon argues that being the value of a variable provides no analysis of existence:

[I]t cannot be seriously maintained that *being*, in the sense of ‘existence’, simply is the state or condition of *being the value of a variable, under some assignment of values to variables*. [...] If there were no variables, would there be nothing? The dinosaurs had existence, but they didn’t have variables. Perhaps there were no variables at the time of the dinosaurs for them to be the values of. To be sure, the geometric shapes and patterns that form the lower case italic ‘x’, ‘y’, and ‘z’ existed even then, but were they *variables*, and were functions from them to objects *assignments of values to variables*? (Salmon 1987: 51)

Similarly, it would seem that playing an explanatory role cannot be considered as a substantial criterion of existence. For surely an object could have existed even if there never were any theories, and therefore it could have existed without playing an explanatory role.

The claim that playing an explanatory role shouldn’t be considered a substantive criterion of existence can also be supported by reflecting on the nature of the neo-Quinean methodology more generally. Neo-Quineans think that developing theories which exhibit theoretical virtues is truth-conducive, and guides us towards the true ontology. Consequently, they must presuppose that the world is *actually* simple, for otherwise there is no reason to think that simpler theories are more likely to be true than complex ones. But neo-Quineans are also realists who hold that the world and our theories about the world are in principle independent. There is therefore the possibility of a mismatch: although the theoretical virtue of simplicity makes us prefer theories without explanatory danglers, if we are unlucky the world might nevertheless contain objects which play no explanatory role.¹¹ The neo-Quineans should therefore not claim that everything that exists is *by its nature* explanatory.

Neo-Quineanism is a thesis about the *epistemology* of metaphysics—it gives us a method of finding out what exists. Existence deflationism, on the other hand, is a (negative) claim about the *property of existence*, and hence a metaphysical thesis. As realists, neo-Quineans will refuse to infer metaphysical conclusions

¹⁰ We thank an anonymous referee for pressing this objection.

¹¹ Indeed, such scenarios are discussed by Lewis. Although he relies on the virtue of simplicity himself, he accepts that there are many possible worlds in which this methodology is not truth-conducive. A modal realist thus needs to rebut skeptical worries (see Lewis 1986: section 2.5).

from epistemological premises. We conclude that existence deflationism does not *logically* entail meta-ontological deflationism.

IV.2. *Compatibility*

Thomasson seems to agree with our assessment, since she presents her argument against the neo-Quinean methodology as distinct from the argument against deep natures. After presenting her argument for existence deflationism, she writes the following:

Moreover, we should even reject the dominant neo-Quinean approach to existence questions: that we should accept the existence only of those entities ineliminably quantified over in our best scientific theories. For some concepts, for example *<hat>*, apparently refer regardless of whether or not we quantify over hats in our best scientific theories. (Thomasson 2014: 202)

As we understand it, this argument is quite straightforward and resembles the second argument from truth deflationism to existence deflationism:

1. *<hat>* refers.
2. Therefore: hats exist.
3. The truth (2) obtains whether or not hats are quantified over in our best scientific theories.
4. According to neo-Quineanism, only those things that are quantified over by our best scientific theories exist.
5. So: Neo-Quineanism is wrong.

Clearly, premise (1) is logically independent from existence deflationism, so the crucial question is whether an existence deflationist *has* to accept premise (1) (or (2)). If not, then Thomasson has not shown that existence deflationism leads to meta-ontological deflationism.

Earlier we already discussed whether a truth deflationist is forced to admit that ‘the table is brown’ is true, and similar lessons apply here. Of course for an existence deflationist *some* reasons to deny the truth of certain existence statements fall away, namely, all those considerations that invoke an alleged nature of existence. But, analogous to what we pointed out in the discussion of truth deflationism, claiming that *all* reasons to deny the truth of statements that *seem* true fall away once existence deflationism is accepted is a much stronger claim that is not supported by Thomasson’s arguments.

To return to our earlier example, consider a neo-Quinean who rejects the existence of composite objects because she fears that accepting them into her ontology will lead to causal overdetermination. Whatever the merits of this argument are, it is one that is arguably compatible with existence deflationism, since it relies on the wish to avoid causal overdetermination, which is not obviously related to a uniform criterion of existence. If Thomasson’s thought

is that, despite initial appearances, *all* such metaphysical reasons ultimately rely on a substantial criterion of existence, this claim needs to be argued for in detail. As it stands we thus see no reason to think that existence deflationists *have* to accept that there are true statements referring to stones (or hats).

Once again, the argument would lose much of its interest if Thomasson relied on her arguments for the existence of hats she gives elsewhere. In the current dialectical situation, the question is whether existence deflationism on its own suffices to entail meta-ontological deflationism. If the argument only worked if we accept that there are hats based on Thomasson's easy approach to ontology this would rob the argument of its force, as pointed out earlier.

In response one might argue that the neo-Quinean strategy is unconvincing, since we have much better evidence for the existence of hats—and hence the truth of premise (2)—than we have for the fruitfulness of the neo-Quinean methodology.¹² Philosophical motivations such as the wish to avoid causal overdetermination, so the thought goes, could never carry enough weight to deny Moorean facts such as that there are hats. We think that this is an interesting strategy to undermine the neo-Quinean methodology, which deserves to be taken seriously.¹³ It is important to note that even if it succeeds, however, the objection is unrelated to the deflationisms which are the focus of this paper, since it challenges the *epistemological* merits of neo-Quineanism. This Moorean move is thus not really a defence of Thomasson's entailment claim, but rather an independent argument.

In a way the result of this section is unsurprising. Just as truth deflationism is compatible with various opinions on which sentences are true, existence deflationism, being a view about the *nature* of existence, is compatible with various views on what particular things exist. Of course an existence deflationist *may* accept more things than are quantified over by our best scientific theories, and hence reject neo-Quineanism—but if so, this will be for independent reasons which are not directly related to existence deflationism.

V. DEFLATIONISM AND EASY ONTOLOGY

We have argued that Thomasson's argument for the interesting part of meta-ontological deflationism—namely, that the popular neo-Quinean approach to ontology is mistaken—fails. Thomasson gives a second argument, however, according to which existence deflationism combined with a use theory of meaning leads to a specific version of meta-ontological deflationism, namely, her easy approach to ontology. The core of this view is the following:

EASY ONTOLOGY

Ontological questions can be answered easily using empirical or conceptual means.

¹² Thanks for an anonymous referee for pressing this objection.

¹³ For discussion see Paul 2016.

We will conclude our paper by criticising this last argument.

According to Thomasson, we can derive easy ontology from existence deflationism if we accept a ‘particular form’ of use theory, which makes certain ‘plausible assumptions’ about what the rules of use are (Thomasson 2014: 205). This time our objection will not be that this entailment fails to hold, but rather that Thomasson’s way of presenting the argument is misleading, since it suggests that existence deflationism plays an essential role. Against this impression we will argue that in fact easy ontology can be derived from the kind of use theory Thomasson proposes on its own, and that it is therefore unhelpful to frame the relationship between existence deflationism and easy ontology in the way she does.

As described earlier, Thomasson regards the following as a conceptual truth:

(T) If there are particles arranged table-wise then there is a table.

This leads to an easy approach to ontology, since the existence of particles arranged table-wise can be regarded as an uncontroversial empirical truth, and together with (T) it entails that there are tables. This case is supposed to generalise. Like the neo-Fregeans, Thomasson also argues for the existence of numbers based on the analyticity of Hume’s Principle:

(HP) The number of F s = The number of G s **iff** There are as many F s as G s.

Use theories of meaning become relevant in *justifying* the claim that principles such as (T) and (HP) are indeed conceptual truths. Thomasson’s thought is that these principles express a regularity or norm which is constitutive for the meaning of the relevant terms:

On a use theory of meaning, the meaning of a term is said to be constituted by its basic use-regularity that explains the acceptance of sentences containing the word (on naturalistic versions [...]) or (on normativist versions) by rules or norms governing its use. (Thomasson 2014: 190)

We agree that postulating the existence of analytic principles governing the meaning of expressions is plausible for use theorists. However, the exact form these principles can take has been controversial, as we will now illustrate by looking at the case of numbers and Hume’s Principle.

It has repeatedly been argued that (HP) cannot possibly be analytic—at least on traditional accounts of analyticity—because it implies the existence of infinitely many objects (Field 1989; Boolos 1998; Horwich 1998; chapter 6, see also Bennett 2009: 56). This leads to the suggestion that if there is a rule capturing the meaning of ‘number’, it needs to have this form:

(HP*) If there are numbers, then: The number of F s = The number of G s **iff** There are as many F s as G s.

And (HP*) doesn't lead to easy ontology, since nothing interesting can be derived from it unless one has established that there are numbers in the first place, which is the kind of substantial metaphysical question an easy ontologist wants to avoid.

Given this, it makes sense to distinguish between a strong and a weak use theory of meaning:

STRONG USE THEORY

The rules that capture the use of terms look like (HP).

WEAK USE THEORY

The rules that capture the use of terms look like (HP*).

It is clear that only a strong use theory can support easy ontology, and we take it that Thomasson would agree with this. Our complaint is now as follows: according to Thomasson it is a strong use theory *combined with* existence deflationism that entails easy ontology. But this is a misleading way of putting things, since existence deflationism really does no work in deriving the existence of entities in an easy manner at all. For example, once the strong use theory has given us (HP), we can derive the existence of numbers *by logic alone*.¹⁴ Contra Thomasson's presentation, it is thus much more perspicuous to say that easy ontology follows from a strong use theory on its own.

One might object that we are being uncharitable here, since what Thomasson plausibly has in mind is the following: Since there are weak and strong use theories, we need to support the strong version in order to make ontology easy. Existence deflationism supports a strong use theory. Hence there is a sense in which existence deflationism and a use theory *jointly* entail easy ontology.

We agree that this would be a good argument, but think that the crucial premise is false. It is not the case that an existence deflationist *has* to be a strong use theorist. Existence deflationism is a negative thesis: there is no substantive across-the-board-criterion of existence. But surely this negative claim provides no positive reason for thinking that some analytic claims are existence-entailing. It provides no positive reason for thinking that numbers exist and that their existence can be established through conceptual means alone. The thesis of existence deflationism is clearly compatible with the traditional view of analyticity.¹⁵

Our conclusion is thus that Thomasson overplays the importance of existence deflationism in her argument for easy ontology. This is not to say that

¹⁴ To be sure, this argument presupposes Quine's criterion of ontological commitment, but that is an assumption that is shared by both parties, i.e., neo-Quineans and (most) meta-ontological deflationists (Thomasson surely accepts it). That is, the inference does not presuppose a deflationary account of existence.

¹⁵ For a criticism of Thomasson's own defence of the analyticity of existence-entailing principles see Marschall 2019.

existence deflationism, as well as semantic deflationism, are of no help whatsoever in defending a strong use theory. As briefly discussed earlier, Thomasson has shown that certain arguments against easy ontology rely on substantial views about reference that are incompatible with reference deflationism. These are matters that require detailed case-by-case investigations, however, and we think that Thomasson's entailment-claim is unhelpful because it makes the situation appear more straightforward than it actually is.

VI. CONCLUSION

Does semantic deflationism entail meta-ontological deflationism? We have argued that the answer is *no*. Deflationism about truth doesn't entail existence deflationism because all things might share a criterion of existence even though there is no substantive relation between predicates and objects, and hence no substantive relation between true sentences and worldly entities. Deflationism about reference doesn't entail existence deflationism either because all things might share a criterion of existence even though there is no substantive reference-relation between singular terms and objects. Furthermore, existence deflationism on its own is compatible with a neo-Quinean methodology, and hence doesn't entail meta-ontological deflationism. Finally, while easy ontology indeed follows from a strong use theory, the acceptance of the latter is not entailed by existence deflationism.

It is important to note that we only targeted claims about *entailment*. We are not saying that either of the views discussed are mistaken. We are also not saying that they don't make an attractive package, and that it is hence a good idea to combine them in the way Thomasson proposes. Quite the opposite, as already suggested in Section II.3, it looks as if semantic deflationism indeed allows one to defuse a common objection to easy ontology—which is in itself an interesting result. We hope that our clarification is a useful addition to the literature, from which both friends and enemies of deflationism will benefit.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Benjamin Marschall was supported by a studentship from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and a scholarship from the Cambridge Commonwealth, European and International Trust. Thomas Schindler received support from the European Research Council under the European Unions Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 792202) within the project *The Logical Function of Property Talk* (LOFUPRO). We thank two anonymous referees for this journal for their helpful and constructive feedback.

REFERENCES

- Bennett, K. (2009) 'Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology', in D. J. Chalmers, D. Manley and R. Wasserman (eds) *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, 38–76. Oxford, New York: OUP.
- Boolos, G. (1998) 'Is Hume's Principle Analytic?', in R. Jeffrey (ed.) *Logic, Logic, and Logic*, 301–14. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Burgess, A. (2015) 'An Inferential Account of Referential Success', in S. Gross, N. Tebben and M. Williams (eds) *Meaning Without Representation*. Oxford: OUP.
- Cotnoir, A. J. (2014) 'Composition as Identity: Framing the Debate', in A. J. Cotnoir and D. L. M. Baxter (eds) *Composition as Identity*, 3–23. Oxford: OUP.
- Field, H. (1980) *Science Without Numbers*. Princeton: PUP.
- (1989) 'Platonism for Cheap? Crispin Wright on Frege's Context Principle', in *Realism, Mathematics and Modality*, 147–70. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hirsch, E. (2002) 'Quantifier Variance and Realism', *Philosophical Issues*, 12: 51–73.
- Hofweber, T. (2016) *Ontology and the Ambitions of Metaphysics*. UK: Oxford University Press.
- Horwich, P. (1998) *Meaning*. Oxford: OUP.
- Lewis, D. K. (1986) *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Linnebo, Ø. (2018) *Thin Objects: An Abstractionist Account*. Oxford: OUP.
- Marschall, B. (2019) 'Easy Ontology, Quantification, and Realism', *Synthese*. doi:10.1007/s11229-019-02463-8.
- Merricks, T. (2001) *Objects and Persons*. Oxford: OUP.
- Paul, L. A. (2016) 'Experience, Metaphysics, and Cognitive Science', in J. Sytsma and W. Buckwalter (eds) *A Companion to Experimental Philosophy*, 417–33. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Price, H. (2011) *Naturalism Without Mirrors*. Oxford, New York: OUP.
- Rayo, A. (2013) *The Construction of Logical Space*. Oxford: OUP.
- Salmon, N. (1987) 'Existence', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 1: 49–108.
- Schiffer, S. R. (2003) *The Things We Mean*. Oxford, New York: OUP.
- Thomasson, A. L. (2007) *Ordinary Objects*. Oxford, New York: OUP.
- (2008) 'Existence Questions', *Philosophical Studies*, 141: 63–78.
- (2009) 'Answerable and Unanswerable Questions', in D. J. Chalmers, D. Manley and R. Wasserman (eds) *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, 444–71. Oxford, New York: OUP.
- (2014) 'Deflationism in Semantics and Metaphysics', in A. Burgess and B. Sherman (eds) *Metasemantics: New Essays on the Foundations of Meaning*, 185–213. Oxford, New York: OUP.
- (2015) *Ontology Made Easy*. Oxford, New York: OUP.

¹Darwin College, University of Cambridge

²University of Bristol