

Who's Afraid of Conceptual Analysis?

JTM Miller, University of Durham

For *Thomasson on Ontology*, Miguel Garcia (ed.), Palgrave

PRE-PROOF VERSION; PLEASE CITE PUBLISHED VERSION

Abstract: Amie Thomasson's work provides numerous ways to rethink and improve our approach to metaphysics. This chapter is my attempt to begin to sketch why I still think the easy approach leaves room for substantive metaphysical work, and why I do not think that metaphysics need rely on any 'epistemically metaphysical' knowledge. After distinguishing two possible forms of deflationism, I argue that the easy ontologist needs to accept (implicitly or explicitly) that there are worldly constraints on what sorts of entities could exist, and could co-exist. I argue this leaves room for a substantive role for metaphysics if (following the work of E.J. Lowe) we take metaphysics to be concerned with the possible ways that reality could be. I explain how this conception does not need to appeal to any 'epistemically metaphysical' knowledge, and need only make use of conceptual and/or empirical means to arrive at views on what could exist (and co-exist). Thus, the answer I propose to the question posed in the title, at least in my view, is no-one. Or, at least, no-one *should* be afraid of conceptual analysis. Not even metaphysicians.

Amie Thomasson's work provides numerous ways to rethink and improve our approach to metaphysics. Despite being congenitally inclined towards non-deflationary views of metaphysics, I think I have learned a lot about what metaphysics can and should be from Thomasson's work. But, this chapter is my attempt to begin to sketch why I still think there is room for substantive metaphysical work, and why I do not think that metaphysics needs to rely on any 'epistemically metaphysical' knowledge.

After distinguishing two possible forms of deflationism, I outline Thomasson's commitment to simple realism and the role of coapplication conditions in ensuring that the entities that the world contains are of the 'right sort' to be the referents of our terms. I argue that these commitments mean that the easy ontologist needs to accept (implicitly or explicitly) that there are worldly constraints on what sorts of entities could exist, and could co-exist. I argue this leaves room for a substantive role for metaphysics if (following the work of Lowe) we take metaphysics to be concerned with the possible ways that reality could be. I explain how this conception does not need to appeal to any 'epistemically metaphysical' knowledge, and need only make use of conceptual and/or empirical means to arrive at views on what could exist (and co-exist).

I view this as a conciliatory proposal. I argue that (non-deflationary) metaphysicians can accept, along with the easy ontologist, the claim that the primary role for metaphysics is to engage in conceptual analysis and that there is no need for ‘epistemically metaphysical’ knowledge. But can so while holding that there is some substantive work for metaphysicians focused on investigating the ways that the world could be. Thus, the answer I propose to the question posed in the title is no-one. Or, at least, no-one *should* be afraid of conceptual analysis. Not even metaphysicians.¹

I

Debating about the precise meanings of a certain ‘-ism’ is often pretty unimportant. After all, what is important in philosophy (and other domains) is not what gets labelled as a form of ‘x-ism’ or ‘y-ism’, but what the view itself says. What is important is whether the view is true or not, not what we happen to call it.

However, while I agree with this sentiment to a degree, how we categorise views can be significant for the (explicit or implicit) implications and commitments that we take to accompany a particular view. For example, if I tell you that I am an ‘anti-realist’ about some entity, you will likely immediately begin to think certain things about the view that I defend. You might think that I reject the existence of those entities for instance. But my actual view might turn out to be more nuanced. I might think that such entities exist but that they are not mind-independent, and I might hold that mind-independence is important for ‘realism’ about such entities. In this case, the label ‘anti-realism’ might be accurate (at least in one sense), but also might be misleading given the connotations that go along with that label. This suggests that while labels matter, so does having a clear conceptual understanding of the particular nuances of views that might, for other reasons, be perfectly reasonably categorised together.

For this reason, I want to start with a brief comment about what counts as a deflationist approach to metaphysics. I think that the term ‘deflationism’ is often used to describe a number of views that are importantly similar, but also importantly distinct. More specifically, I want to distinguish two distinct ways of being deflationist about metaphysics. These are ways that I think are sometimes combined in our immediate reactions to hearing that some view is ‘deflationist’, but need to be teased apart. For, as will become apparent, it is possible to be deflationist in one sense, but not the other, and vice versa.

The first form of deflationism we can call ‘content deflationism’. Content deflationists deflate metaphysics by arguing that metaphysics cannot arrive at knowledge of the nature of reality.² Rather, if meaningful at all, metaphysical theorising only provides insights into the nature of our concepts, our language, or about how we think or perceive the world. This form of deflationism therefore stands against the ‘traditional’ view of metaphysics wherein the subject matter of metaphysics is the

¹ Hence the chapter title’s hidden subheading: Or, how I learned to stop worrying and love metaphysics.

² I will use the terms ‘reality’ and ‘the world’ interchangeably throughout.

(fundamental) nature of reality. Such ‘substantialist’ or ‘heavyweight’ (as Chalmers [2009] calls them) conceptions of metaphysics hold that (at least some) metaphysical debates are (or could be) debates about the world as it is ‘in-itself’.

Amongst (many) others, content deflationists might be taken to include Strawson’s defence of descriptive metaphysics (Strawson 1959); Kant’s rejection of knowledge of the noumena (Kant 1998); Carnap’s analysis of language (Carnap 1931, 1950); Putnam’s critique of metaphysical realism and defence of Internal Realism (Putnam 1981); and Hirsch’s defence of Quantifier Variance (Hirsch 2011). Though these figures might disagree over why metaphysics is non-substantive, and over what metaphysical claims really are about, each are plausible some form of content deflationism. In each case, metaphysics is not really about the world, and is instead (at worst) meaningless or (at best) merely a reflection of how we happen to think, talk, or perceive the world.³

The second form of deflationism is methodological deflationism. As the name suggests, this form of deflationism focuses on the methods of metaphysics. For example, Ladyman and Ross in their critique of metaphysics argue that a priori methods cannot provide us with knowledge of the nature of reality (in part) due to the ways in which our concepts arise not being conducive to genuine knowledge of the world (Ladyman and Ross 2007). They argue that traditional (or ‘analytic’) metaphysics is rationalistic and relies on flawed a priori methods, while naturalistic metaphysics embraces science, and holds that it is through a close relationship with empirical science that we can arrive at knowledge about the nature of the world. Hence, (this version of) naturalised metaphysics accepts methodological deflationism, but rejects content deflationism.

Debating the merits of methodological deflationism is difficult as it is disputed as to what the methods of metaphysics actually are. What counts as a ‘method’ of metaphysics? How many are there and (in some cases) how can they be differentiated from each other? For instance, we might take the naturalised metaphysician to be correct in that a traditional method of metaphysics is a priori reasoning, but does conceptual analysis fall under this label? Are thought experiments entirely ‘a priori’? And if so, where does that leave, epistemically, the use of such methods in the sciences?

³ See Miller (2022) for a more general discussion of various views that deny our ability to ‘access’ reality in the way presupposed by substantive (or perhaps realist) metaphysicians. Note that although I mention these figures as arguing for some version of content deflationism, this does not mean that these views only deflate the content of metaphysics. Many of them also argue for the second form of deflationism – methodological deflationism – as well. The specifics of how content and methodological deflationism interact for each of these figures will vary. For some, content deflationism underpins methodological deflationism; for others, it is methodological deflationism that leads to content deflationism. A full discussion of each of these views and the specific structure and interaction of the different forms of deflationism is not possible here, but could be interesting in future work to see if any patterns emerge in terms of whether concerns about the content of metaphysics drives claims about its methods or vice versa.

These are broad and difficult issues that I cannot go into depth on here. My intention here is to talk about the sort of deflationism that Amie Thomasson defends in her work, not about deflationism in general. With that in mind, and noting that this leaves many of the above issues un(der)explored, let us turn now to Thomasson and her ‘easy ontology’ and assess it with respect to these forms of deflationism.

II

Thomasson has outlined and defended her ‘Easy Ontology’ approach in a number of publications (2007, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2020a). I will assume that the audience for a book such as this one will already be familiar with many aspects of easy ontology, and so to avoid giving a long outline of a view that is already familiar to readers, I will only highlight a few aspects that relate to the topics I wish to focus on.

Versions of the easy approach have been around for a while.⁴ A history of easy approaches normally includes Frege, and the neo-Fregean views in philosophy of mathematics that his work inspired (see Hale and Wright 2001, 2009) and Schiffer’s arguments that apply an easy approach to other abstract entities, such properties, propositions, events and fictional characters (Schiffer 2003). In both, the central idea is the same. Existence questions can be answered easily, merely through some simple valid inference, that starts from an uncontroversial premise and ends with a conclusion about what exists. For example, in the case of numbers, we can begin from the uncontroversial premise that ‘The cups and saucers are equinumerous’, make use of the conceptual truth of Hume’s principle (that ‘The number of ns = the number of ms iff the ns and the ms are equinumerous), to derive the claim that ‘The number of cups = the number of saucers’. From this, as the conclusion is a true identity claim and singular terms in true statements must refer, we can conclude that numbers exist. A great and seemingly difficult metaphysical question is thus solved easily.

One highly significant aspect of Thomasson’s work has been to expand the range of entities the existence of which might be secured through easy means. In particular, Thomasson has argued that the existence of ordinary concrete objects can also be secured easily. There are two key aspects to this extension. The first concerns the fundamental rule of use for ‘exist’. Thomasson holds that the ‘core’ rule of use for ‘exists’ is that ‘Ks exist iff the application conditions actually associated with ‘K’ are fulfilled’ (2015: 86). There is, for Thomasson, nothing more to the notion of existence beyond this, and she rejects any ‘substantive’ criteria of existence (which I will talk about more below). The second key aspect is the notion of ‘application condition’. Very briefly stated, application conditions are ‘rules of use’ for a term. These are typically rules that competent speakers of a language already know (though need not be able to state; see Thomasson 2015: section 2.2).

⁴ A useful history of easy arguments can be found in Thomasson 2020b.

Combining these two elements, we arrive at the position whereby ‘existence questions that are well formed and answerable to be answered straightforwardly by conceptual and/or empirical means, without the need for distinctively philosophical inquiries into existence, or for any ‘epistemically metaphysical’ knowledge’ (Thomasson 2015: 129).

For example, consider the question of whether a table exists. Traditionally, the debate is such that on the one side are eliminativists who hold that tables do not exist – there is no table; there only are particles-arranged-tablewise. And, on the other, realists (or compositionlists) who hold that in addition to those particles, there exists a table – the particles compose some further entity that is the table. But Thomasson holds that:

A competent speaker, for example, who has mastered the use of the noun ‘table’, is in a position to know that the term may be successfully applied in restaurants all over the country, and so to conclude that there are tables without the need to read the copious metaphysics literature on composite objects. (Thomasson 2015: 113).

Therefore, in the case of tables, we first use some conceptual knowledge – our knowledge of the application conditions for the relevant term – and then some empirical knowledge – our simple perceptual abilities in various restaurants – to conclude that the application conditions are fulfilled, and hence that tables exist. It is this that secures the wider scope to Thomasson’s easy ontology than other easy arguments that came before it. Thomasson’s version can be applied to existence question beyond those concerned with abstract objects, just so long as we know the application conditions and can use empirical and/or conceptual means to assess whether those conditions are fulfilled.

Another important way that Thomasson’s easy ontology is different from the easy approach that preceded it concerns the status of the entities that we secure the existence of via easy means. For others, in particular Schiffer, the entities whose existence we secure via easy means are ‘pleonastic’. They are ontologically ‘lightweight’ and ‘have ‘no hidden and substantial nature for a theory to uncover’’ (Schiffer 2003: 63). Thomasson rejects this. By extending easy arguments to cases involving disputes over ordinary concrete entities, Thomasson undermines the motivation for thinking that the entities that we secure the existence of through easy means are ontologically lightweight. For Thomasson, all entities derived via easy means are as real as each other, and none has any lessened ontological status. After all, concrete entities are often taken to be the gold-standard of existing entities, and so if we can secure them, then why think that other entities (such as propositions or numbers) shown to exist via the same methods are any less real.

Putting these pieces together, we arrive at what Thomasson calls ‘simple realism’. Simple realism is a first-order metaphysical position – it is about what exists (or does not exist), not about the nature of metaphysical disputes. Easy ontology ‘typically leads to realism about the disputed entities’ (2015: 155), and so Thomasson is committed to there being many things, and that these things are simply real.

With this very simplified description of Thomasson's views in mind, in what sense is it deflationist? First, as simple realism commits us to the existence of a number of entities, we can see immediately that this is not a form of content deflationism. Content deflationists hold that we cannot have knowledge of the nature of reality, with metaphysical claims (including existence claims) really being claims about the nature of our language, concepts, or how we perceive the world. Simple realism is clearly inconsistent with this form of deflationism. The entities whose existence is secured through trivial inferences are not 'shadows' of our language. They are simply real. On the reasonable assumption that knowing that something exists is to know something about the nature of reality, if we accept easy ontology, we can still arrive at knowledge about the nature of reality.

This suggests that if easy ontology is deflationary, then it should be a version of methodological deflationism. This is borne out in two other aspects of Thomasson's easy approach. First, by Thomasson's suggestion that the easy approach relies only on conceptual and/or empirical truths, and requires nothing 'epistemically metaphysical'. Easy ontology is intended to demystify metaphysical debates, allowing us to resolve them without appeal to methods or claims that are 'epistemically metaphysical' and hence are on shaky epistemological ground.

And, second, by Thomasson's way of differentiating the way in which we arrive at simple realism within the easy approach, and other views in the metaphysical literature that also posit the existence of various entities, such as Platonism concerning abstract entities. The difference between simple realism and Platonism is not found via considering (at least directly) what entities each view accepts as existing. For it could be the case that supporters of the two views are committed to the existence of the same things. Rather, the difference arises in ways in which the two views will arrive at claims about the existence of said entities and whether or not they accept some substantive criteria of existence.

Easy ontologists, as we have seen, will make use of only conceptual and/or empirical truths, and simple valid inferences from undisputed premises. The easy ontologist accepts whatever entities fall out of this method. This allows the easy ontologist to deny that there is any universal criteria of existence. That is, the easy ontologist need not hold (and indeed Thomasson argues *should* not hold) that there is any 'substantive criteria' that we can use to determine whether or not something exists.

By 'substantive criteria of existence' Thomasson has in mind things like the Eleatic principle (that: "Everything that exists makes a difference to the causal powers of something" [Armstrong 1997: 41]); or that we should only be committed to the existence of things that are 'mind-independent' (e.g. 'Lakoff 'Existence cannot depend in any way on human cognition" [Lakoff 1987: 164]); or the neo-Quinean idea that we should accept those entities that are required by our best theory with the entities posited because they can play some (indispensable) explanatory role within that theory. Thomasson's rejects both these specific criteria and the very possibility of there being a 'substantive' (or 'deep') criterion of existence:

A deflationary treatment of existence, however, involves the idea that there is no call for a theory aiming to uncover a deep and substantial nature of existence, for there is nothing more to the notion than is captured in the rules of use that enable it to fulfill its function. If the deflationary approach to existence is right, we may reject all attempts to find an acceptable principle telling us what it is to exist, or what features are definitive of existence. So we deny that we should even be looking for any principle of the following form: for every x , x exists iff x is such and such (causally relevant, mind-independent, in possession of a real nature . . .). The deflationary approach thus involves rejecting the idea that there is a shared substantive criterion for existence. (2015: 116)

Thus, within Thomasson's easy approach 'what is deflated is not the entities but rather the ontological debates about the entities' (2015: 154). The deflationary element is metaontological, being founded on a deflation of the *methods* of metaphysics, not its content.⁵

Metaphysical debates, on this view are not shallow or pointless. Metaphysical work remains 'difficult and of worldly significance and interest' (2017: 365), but it does take metaphysics 'away from the epistemological mysteries of 'serious metaphysics'' (2017: 364). The work of the metaphysician is conceptual, but this does not mean that this work is limited to being mere description. Instead, Thomasson suggests that metaphysical work should be prescriptive and normative, engaging in the task of working out what our concepts should be like. Thomasson ties this idea that view metaphysics is engaged in normative conceptual work closely to her deflationism:

For metaontological deflationists like myself, the idea that metaphysics has often been and can be engaged in normative conceptual work is particularly helpful and important. I have argued elsewhere (2015) that ontological questions can be answered 'easily'. That is, meaningful, well-formed questions about whether things of a given kind exist can be answered by a combination of conceptual work and (often) straightforward empirical work, and often can be answered (in the affirmative) by trivial inferences from uncontested premises. Metaphysical modal questions, too, I have argued (2007, 2013), can typically be addressed by a combination of empirical work and conceptual analysis. (2017: 364; see also Thomasson 2020).

Thomasson conceives of this conceptual work as being pragmatic in nature. It is work that aims to arrive at a view of how our concepts should be, and what concepts we should accept for some particular purpose or function. This means that the role of metaphysics, for Thomasson, is primarily (if not

⁵ After all, a non-deflationary metaphysician might agree with Thomasson that there is no single universal criteria of existence.

entirely) to engage in metalinguistic negotiation. To do this work, we need to ‘figure out, empirically, what function(s) the concepts have served and do serve (where these, of course, might differ), and do descriptive conceptual work in figuring out how they work and what the ‘site constraints’ are: how they are related to other concepts and practices’ (2020: 455). We must make decisions about what function we want our concepts to serve in the future, and then ‘we combine that with empirical work, in doing constructive conceptual engineering: determining whether (given worldly constraints) certain modifications or precisifications would better enable the term to fulfill its function’ (2020: 455).

These ‘worldly constraints’ also indicate that the commitments derived from the easy approach are intended to be reactive to and reflective of the real world. This is because some of the functions that we want terms to play might require those concepts to be responsive to the world in certain ways as concepts might be ‘designed to figure in our explanatory and predictive theories’ (2020: 451). This normative conceptual work might lead us to suggest a change in application conditions for a term – conditions that better reflect the function that we want that term to fulfil. But Thomasson suggests that this is still taken to be ‘a method that does not require appeal to specifically metaphysical facts for guidance’ (2020: 455). Thus, metaphysical disputes are not devoid of content in the way that other deflationists have argued: easy ontology is not a form of content deflationism. Rather, metaphysics is deflated in its methods as we should reject ‘epistemically metaphysical’ knowledge and embrace conceptual analysis as the (primary) role of the metaphysician.

III

As we have seen, for Thomasson, the role of metaphysics is to engage in conceptual analysis. From that conceptual analysis, we arrive at views about what the application conditions for our terms are, or what they should be. And by considering whether those application conditions are fulfilled or not, via conceptual and/or empirical means, we can arrive at claims about what exists.

We have also noted that the ontological commitments we arrive at are intended to be reactive to and reflective of the world. Easy ontology is not a form of linguistic idealism. As Thomasson states: ‘the trivial inferences entitle us to infer that objects of a certain kind exist, but they do not *create* the disputed objects, or in any way call them into existence’ (2015: 217, *emphasis in original*). Rather, the entities ‘typically exist quite independently of our language and concepts’ (2015: 217).⁶

However, this leads a question raised by Evnine (2016) about the *natures* of the entities that we are able to assert the existence of. For, when I do metaphysics, I am not only interested in the basic question of whether there is some thing that we can use the word ‘rock’ to talk about. What I am interested in is whether there are entities in the world such that they satisfy various criteria that I think are associated with being a rock, such as being made of stone, or being mind-independent. It is not the case that just

⁶ Note that by including ‘typical’ here, Thomasson only means to allow that some social and cultural entities may depend on language or concepts (2015: 217).

any *thing* can satisfy this. The entities in the world must be such-and-such a way – have certain characteristics if you prefer – which ensures that there are the right sort of things in the world to allow us to conclude that there are rocks. The concern is that even if the fulfilment of application conditions secures that some thing exists, it is not enough to secure that the *right sort of thing* exists.

Thomasson has responded to this. In brief, her response is to hold that the coapplication conditions for a term help to ‘determine *what sort of thing* our terms refer to, if they in fact refer at all, and so also help determine what sort of thing we are asking about when we ask the existence question in the first place (2015: 224, *emphasis in original*). Thus, the coapplication conditions ‘fix the most basic identity conditions for the things the term is to refer to (should it refer at all)’ (2015: 224). This ensures that if we conclude that the application and coapplication conditions are fulfilled, we thereby secure the existence of an entity of the right sort, and ‘that the entities referred to are guaranteed to have many of the identity conditions, persistence conditions, and other features supposed to characterize them’ (2015: 229).

There is, though, in my view, a lingering related issue. To see this issue, let us consider a simple case – that of the existence of tables. Let us grant that the existence of tables can be secured via easy means. Indeed, it is one of Thomasson’s examples to illustrate the way in which the easy approach can seemingly solve the debate between the nihilist and the compositionalist. Now focus on the entity – in this case some particular table – itself. As noted above, when say that the table exists, we want to ensure that the right sort of thing in the world exists to fulfil the application conditions for the term ‘table’. That is, we would like it to be the case that whatever exists includes some entity with the right sort of characteristics to be a table.

We should therefore ask what sort of thing is a table? What characteristics must some entity have in order to be the right sort of thing to fulfil the application conditions for ‘table’? Presumably it is a physical object, on the assumption that tables are not abstract objects. Being a physical object, we might plausibly think that a table has certain characteristics. We might hold, for instance, that like all physical objects, tables must be uniquely spatiotemporally located and must possess certain causal powers. We would not want, I assume, to hold that the application conditions for ‘table’ are fulfilled by some entity that lacks these characteristics. Russell’s table – a companion of his more famous teapot – would not be an acceptable thing for the term ‘table’ to refer to for it would lack some of the key characteristics that we take a table to have (if tables do in fact exist).

As we have seen, Thomasson appeals to coapplication conditions to ensure that tables do in fact have these sorts of characteristics. Thus, it is the coapplication conditions for ‘table’ that ensures that it has the right identity conditions, persistence conditions etc. This seems persuasive at first. We are able to secure the existence of tables, *and* we are able to ensure that the things in the world that the term refers to are the right sort of thing.

However, like all terms, we might come to think that we should adjust the application conditions for 'table'. That is, we might come to think that the term 'table' requires some normative conceptual work to better allow the term to fulfil some function that we wish it to play within our language. My question is: what limits are there on this normative conceptual work? Are there conceptual claims that we simply must accept because if we do not, the world will not contain entities of the 'right sort' to be the referents of our terms? It seems that there must be such limits for if the world turned out to contain Russell's table, then, presumably, it should be the case that the application conditions we typically accept for the term 'table' are not fulfilled as there is no entity of the 'right sort' to be a referent of 'table'.

The issue is not just that simple realism commits us to the existence of certain entities. It is that the coapplication conditions ensure that those entities are of the 'right sort'. This commits the easy ontologists to the view that the world cannot contain just anything. If there are entities of the 'right sort', then there are constraints, driven by the world not our language or concepts, on what does and does not, and can and cannot exist. Without this, there would not be the entities of the 'right sort' to fulfil our application and coapplication conditions for our terms. There must be worldly constraints on what application conditions can be fulfilled and our normative conceptual work must be responsive to these limits.

To stress, this is not intended to be a *problem* for the easy ontologist. The easy ontologist will hold (in my view, rightly) that there are some things that exist in the world independently of our language as it is not a form of linguistic idealism. This implies that the world contains some constraints on what exists. And, the easy ontologist will hold that if our concepts do not – or even cannot – refer, then that might be a reason to change or abandon those concepts. These claims are part of easy ontology, and are not aspects that I wish to argue against.

Rather it leads to a question for the easy ontologist. If we are able to engage in this productive normative conceptual work, then it seems that we must have some knowledge of the limits that the world sets down on what application conditions even *could* be fulfilled. If we want to say tables genuinely exist, and we secure their existence via coming to know that the (co)application conditions for the term are fulfilled, then we have already decided that those application conditions *could* be fulfilled. And this knowledge of what application conditions could be fulfilled is part of what drives our normative conceptual work. It is why we do not consider (or argue for) application conditions for 'table' that would include the possibility of non-physical tables. For we have already taken the view that *if* the world contains tables, then those entities must be of the 'right sort', and cannot be non-physical entities. In order to be able to come to some view about whether something exists or not, even if derived via easy inferences and a consideration of application conditions, we first need to (implicitly or explicitly)

have taken a view about what could exist, or (in my terms) what is metaphysically possible. How, though, do we come to know what is metaphysically possible?⁷

Another example may help here. Consider the question of whether or not square circles exist. The term ‘square circles’ will have certain application and coapplication conditions, which I assume most think are not satisfied. However, most think it is not just some contingent fact that square circles do not exist. Rather, we reject their existence because although we can come up with application and coapplication conditions for the term, we do not think that the world can be such that those conditions are satisfied. This could be done through arguing that the application and/or coapplication conditions are inconsistent. But even in those cases, inconsistent application conditions only secure the impossibility of square circles if we have already accepted the claim that the world itself cannot be such that it contains entities whose application and/or coapplication conditions are inconsistent. To conclude that the application conditions of ‘square circle’ are inconsistent and hence that the concept cannot refer, we must already have a view that there are worldly constraints that help to determine what can exist, and one of those constraints is that an object cannot be both a square and a circle (at least at the same time).⁸

Whatever normative conceptual work we might do around the term ‘square circle’ will need to respect this. Unless I also propose some argument that it is possible that the world could contain an entity that can be both a square and a circle, and assuming that we must hold the meanings of the terms ‘square’ and ‘circle’ relatively stable, there is no amount of conceptual work that I can do that should allow us to conclude that square circles exist. For most people, the world simply cannot contain entities of the ‘right sort’ such that any proposed application conditions for the term ‘square circle’ will be fulfilled.

This should not, I think, be bad news for the easy ontologist given their commitment to simple realism and the rejection of linguistic idealism. The easy ontologist accepts the claim that the world constrains what exists. This is, I take it, partly why Thomasson stresses the role of empirical data in answering existence questions to ensure that easy ontology can maintain a genuine connection with the world. The easy ontologist should accept that there are worldly constraints that are prior to any conceptual work we might do that restrict what sorts of things can exist, and hence what sort of application conditions even *could* be fulfilled. This means that in order to do the sort of normative conceptual work assigned to metaphysicians, and to allow us at the end of that process to arrive at application and coapplication

⁷ If there were no worldly constraints on what might be included in any particular application condition, then it is unclear how the easy ontologist can avoid being some form of linguistic idealism wherein what exists, and the nature of those things that exist, is determined not by the world, but by how we think or conceive of the world. As Thomasson is clear that easy ontology is not a form of idealism, I will not even consider this line of thought here.

⁸ More accurately, it might be that what we hold is that there cannot be a square circle on the basis of the property of being a square excluding the property of being a circle. Thus, no object could have both of these properties. This additional level of detail does not affect my argument here.

conditions for terms that at least *could* be fulfilled, we must already have taken a view about what *could* exist.

But, this is what leads to our seemingly simple but ultimately very difficult question: what are those worldly constraints, and how do we investigate them? It is this, I will argue, that creates the room for substantive metaphysics. Or at least substantive metaphysics on a certain conception of metaphysics. In the following section, my suggestion will be that under a certain conception of metaphysics, answering these questions is (at least) a significant part of what metaphysics aims to do: metaphysics is concerned with working out what are the possible ways that reality might be. Furthermore, I will argue that this sort of metaphysics requires anything ‘epistemically metaphysical’. It requires conceptual analysis, but conceptual analysis trained towards the question of how might the world be, and of what sorts of things could exist and co-exist.⁹

IV

Thomasson’s work has rightly encouraged many metaphysicians to think more carefully about what it is that they are doing when they do metaphysics. Whether or not we consequently accept a form of deflationism will turn on what we think metaphysics (and ontology) is. Thomasson’s target in her discussion is quite clear: it is neo-Quinean conception of metaphysics wherein the central question of metaphysics is ‘what exists?’.

However, this is not the only conception of metaphysics available, and there are many metaphysicians (myself included) who would also want to reject the neo-Quinean conception. A question therefore arises. What is the impact of easy ontology on those other conceptions of metaphysics? Does easy ontology include arguments that would deflate those other forms of metaphysics? Given the limited space, I will only focus on one other conception here – one that, in my view, does not receive as much discussion as it deserves. The view that metaphysics is, at least substantially, concerned with not only the way the world *is*, but also with how the world *might* be. To outline this conception, I will draw heavily on the work of EJ Lowe.¹⁰

Lowe writes: ‘I do not claim that metaphysics *on its own can*, in general, tell us what *there is*. Rather – to a first approximation – I hold that metaphysics by itself only tells us what there could be. But given that metaphysics has told us this, experience can then tell us which of various alternative metaphysical possibilities is plausibly true in actuality’ (1998: 9; see also Lowe 2018). The way I interpret this is that it is to suggest that metaphysics (and ontology) is, at least initially, involved in an exploration of the

⁹ To stress, although I will suggest we can arrive at views on this via conceptual analysis, this does not mean that it is a mere conceptual matter. The issue is whether the world could contain entities of the right sort to be the referent of our terms with certain coapplication conditions. This is a worldly matter. I do rely on the claim that our concepts can be reflective and/or responsive to the world, however this is something that the easy ontologist also accepts, hence I will simply assume it here, though see also fn. 14 below.

¹⁰ I am not here endorsing Lowe’s whole metametaphysical view which also includes a strong commitment to essences. I will remain neutral about those elements of Lowe’s metametaphysics here.

ways in which the world might be. That is, it is interested in what things, or sorts of things, might exist, and what combination of things might exist – in what is possible and compossible (see Miller 2020).

How do we inquire into what is possible and compossible? What is the methodology of metaphysics on this view? It is a mixture of conceptual and empirical – the method ‘is first to argue, in an a priori fashion, for the possibility – and compossibility – of certain sorts of things and then to argue, on partly empirical grounds, for the actuality of some of those things that are compossible’ (Lowe 2011: 105).

For example, we observe Hesperus and Phosphorus and that their orbits coincide. Does this, *by itself*, allow us to conclude that Hesperus is Phosphorus? Following Lowe, I think not. The empirical observations alone do not secure that conclusion. The discovery that Hesperus is Phosphorus is not *solely* empirical, though it does play an important role. What happens is that we observe certain phenomena in the world, and those observations combined with a claim about whether spatiotemporal colocation implies identity for things like planets together allow us to reach our conclusion. That is, we need to also take a view about what spatiotemporal coincidence implies for entities of this sort.¹¹ As Lowe writes:

‘it is only because Hesperus and Phosphorus are taken to be planets and thereby material objects of the same kind that their spatiotemporal coincidence can be taken to imply their identity... the principle that distinct material objects of the same kind cannot coincide spatiotemporally is not an empirical one: it is an a priori one implied by what it is to be a material object of any kind’ (Lowe 2013: 150).¹²

Similar claims, though negative, can be made concerning square circles. In order to discover whether there *are* square circles, we must first consider whether there *could* be square circles. Whatever our answer is to this question, we are taking a position on what is, or is not, possible – on the ways that the world could be and whether those ways include some entity being both a square and a circle. What view we take on these specific cases – on what we think is a possible way that the world might be – will also be heavily influence by considering what is *compossible*. That is, to work out if it is genuinely possible that there are square circles will likely require us to consider various other concepts, most centrally that of ‘property’ to consider whether there are certain properties that cannot be coinstantiated by the same object at the same time.

¹¹ We might, I suppose, try to establish that spatiotemporal coincidence implies identity for all physical objects. However, this is a controversial claim, and certainly there are those that do not accept that spatiotemporally coincidence implies identity for all physical objects, as the literature on the material composition and statues/lumps illustrates.

¹² Note, Lowe connects this claim with his views about essence, but we need not accept essences to accept this role for metaphysical theorising.

There are two important questions that now need to be answered. First, is this a ‘substantive’ view of metaphysics? And, second, does this conception of metaphysics rely on, or presuppose access to, ‘epistemically metaphysical’ knowledge?

The first question can, in my view, be easily answered positively. Even if our ultimate aim is to know what the world is like, knowing how the world could or could not be is a valuable step in that direction. From a more pragmatic perspective, much of the metaphysical literature is filled with papers arguing that certain combinations of views are not possible rather than directly arguing for or against specific views. Thus, consideration of what the world could be like, and what combinations of commitments are compossible is at least part of the aim and activities of metaphysics. Of course, defining what counts as ‘substantive’ is not a simple task, but I suggest that any reasonable definition should be such that this conception of metaphysics is categorised as substantive.

The second question will take a little longer to answer. A deflationist might well argue that this conception of metaphysics is on just as shaky epistemic ground as other conceptions. After all, how could we ever come to know what are the genuine ways that reality might be? Does that not rely on us being able to come to know ‘epistemically metaphysical’ knowledge? I suspect this might be where Thomasson and I will disagree, but, for myself, I do not think this does require anything epistemically metaphysical. It requires only conceptual analysis and/or empirical work, and this can be seen by considering how we gain knowledge of what the world could be like.

A first way is that we might through some conceptual work come to realise that the commitments of a theory mandate certain other views. For example, given conceptual work, we might come to think that a theory that proposes a particular view about how objects persist requires us to also accept some theory within the metaphysics of time which is independently implausible. If this happened, it could lead us to think that that account of persistence is itself less plausible also on the grounds that it could only be true if some problematic account of the metaphysics of time were true also. Or we might use conceptual work to arrive at the view that some combination of entities cannot co-exist, as in the case of square circles which we reject because we think, due our conceptual work, that the world cannot be such that it contains an object that is both a square and a circle at the same time. We do not think square circles are impossible merely because we have not observed any in the world. Rather their impossibility is arrived at given certain views about the nature of the properties of ‘being a circle’ and ‘being a square’ (and perhaps some additional claims about how objects have or instantiate properties). These would be therefore appear to be instances of conceptual work providing insights into what is possible and/or compossible.

Or new empirical data might lead to new views about what is possible and compossible.¹³ Empirical findings might indicate that some ways that we thought the world could be are not genuine ways after all. For instance, to its supporters, phlogiston theories described possible ways that the world might be. Indeed, they may have even thought that the world could *only* be such that phlogiston existed. Further empirical work showed this to be false, and that any theory that posits phlogiston as existing is not a description of a genuine way that the world can be. We came to conclude that such views are not descriptions of genuine ways that the world might be (at least significantly) on the basis of empirical work.¹⁴

Furthermore, this conception of metaphysics relies on no method or knowledge that the easy ontologist does not also rely on. As noted above, the easy ontologist wants to hold that the entities that we show to exist via easy inferences are genuine parts of the world – they are not ‘pleonastic entities’. The easy ontologist also holds that (co)application conditions should be reflective of the world to allow those concepts to play a role in our explanatory and predictive activities. And the easy ontologist holds that (co)application conditions ensure that the entities in the world that are referred to by our terms have the identity conditions, persistence conditions, and other features that they are supposed to have.

If we accept simple realism, then the world genuinely contains entities that are referred to by the term ‘table’ and those entities must have the right identity conditions, persistence conditions and other features that are supposed to characterise them. Those conditions are imposed by the world itself, not by our conceptual practices as easy ontology is not a form of linguistic idealism. In addition, the world must also contain all the other entities, again of the right sort, as required by the application and coapplication conditions of our other terms (or at least those whose conditions are satisfied).

If we accept all of this, then to conclude that tables *do exist*, we must already have accepted a view such that entities like tables, with the right identity and persistence conditions as specified in the application and coapplication conditions of ‘table’, *could* exist. And that they can co-exist with those entities of the ‘right sort’ which fulfil the application conditions of all the other terms for which the application conditions are fulfilled. If I am right, this suggests that to accept the ontological commitments that come

¹³ I am happy to accept that it might be the case that the majority of the work of the metaphysicians is on the conceptual side of this. I illustrate the empirical side here to show how it is the case that knowledge of what is possible and compossible can be gained by conceptual *and/or* empirical means.

¹⁴ Some might object here that it could be that we cannot gain *any* knowledge into how the world might be. That is, we might take a radical sceptic view, and say that no amount of conceptual analysis could ever arrive at claims that we can take to be true about how the world itself might be. I accept that there could be such a radically sceptic response, and I will not seek to refute it here. My own view is that we can be reasonably sure about a number of claims about how the world *cannot* be. For example, I accept the law of non-contradiction. My view is that it is simply not possible that the world is such that the law of non-contradiction is false. Again, I will not argue for this here, but it illustrates how radical such a sceptical position would have to be. I also take it that Thomasson’s commitment to simple realism means that she will also wish to reject the sceptics claim that we cannot have any knowledge of the world or how it might be.

from easy ontology requires accepting (at least implicitly) a certain view about what could exist, and what could co-exist. Or, in my terms, a certain metaphysical view about how the world could be.

V

Where does this leave us? I have suggested that there is still room for substantive metaphysics, at least on a certain conception of metaphysics. Under this conception, in agreement with the easy ontologist, a (or even the) primary role of the metaphysician is to engage in conceptual analysis, and hence the concern that metaphysicians engage in ‘mere’ conceptual analysis is blunted. We should not be afraid of conceptual analysis as it is through this method that metaphysics engages in an investigation into the ways that reality might be. Furthermore, I have suggested that simple realism and our ability to engage in the sort of normative conceptual work assigned to metaphysicians by the easy ontologist actually implicitly relies on this sort of work. To be able to say what the application conditions for a term *should* be, we need to (implicitly or explicitly) accept that those conditions at least *could* be fulfilled, and hence that the world at least *could* contain entities of the ‘right sort’ to be the referents of those terms.

None of this has argued against core parts of the easy approach. I have not questioned the easy approach’s core idea that to see if some entity exists, we should consider whether the application conditions for that term are fulfilled. I have not suggested that there is some ‘substantive’ criterion of existence of the sort that Thomasson rejects. The idea that we must consider what *could* exist does not require us to take a position on *what* exists or *how* any thing exists. If wished, existence questions could still be deflated. And, if I am right, investigating the ways the world could be does not require any ‘epistemically metaphysical’ knowledge.

But, I still do not expect all easy ontologists to be persuaded by this. I imagine that claiming we can have knowledge of the possible ways that the world might be will still seem to be ‘epistemically metaphysical’ to some. My own view is that this is in fact something of a conciliatory proposal. I think (non-deflationary) metaphysicians can accept the claim that the primary role for metaphysics is to engage in conceptual analysis, and I think that the sort of normative conceptual work assigned to the metaphysician by Thomasson can be valuable in helping us clarify what could exist (and co-exist). But to do this, in my view, substantive metaphysical work, there is no need for ‘epistemically metaphysical’ knowledge and hence the metaphysician need not be afraid of conceptual analysis. At least so long as it is conceptual analysis that seeks to investigate the ways that the world could be.

References

- Armstrong, D.M. 1997. *A World of States of Affairs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carnap, R. 1931. ‘Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache’. *Erkenntnis* 2: 219–241.

- Carnap, R. 1950. 'Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 4(11): 20–40.
- Chalmers, D. 2009. 'Ontological anti-realism'. In D. Chalmers, D. Manley & R. Wasserman (eds.), *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 77-129.
- Evnine, S. 2016. 'Much Ado about Something-from-Nothing; or, Problems for Ontological Minimalism'. In S. Blatti, and S. Lapointe (eds.), *Ontology after Carnap*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 145-164.
- Hale, B. and Wright, C. 2001. *The Reason's Proper Study: Essays towards a Neo-Fregean Philosophy of Mathematics*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Hale, B. and Wright, C. 2009. 'The Metaontology of Abstraction'. In D. Chalmers, D. Manley & R. Wasserman (eds.), *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 178–212.
- Hirsch, E. 2011. *Quantifier Variance and Realism: Essays in Meta-Ontology*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kant, I. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Eds. and trans. P. Guyer and A.W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ladyman, J. and Ross, D. 2007. *Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, G. 1987. *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lowe, E.J. 1998. *The Possibility of Metaphysics: Substance, Identity and Time*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lowe, E.J. 2011. 'The rationality of metaphysics', *Synthese*, 178: 99-109.
- Lowe, E.J. 2013. *Forms of Thought: A Study in Philosophical Logic*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lowe, E.J. 2018. 'Metaphysics as the Science of Essence'. In A. Carruth, S. Gibb and J. Heil (eds.). *Ontology, Modality, and Mind: Themes from the Metaphysics of E.J. Lowe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 14-34. First published in French as 'La métaphysique comme science de l'essence' in E. Garcia and F. Nef (eds), *Métaphysique contemporaine: propriétés, mondes possibles et personnes*, Paris: Vrin, pp. 85–117.
- Miller, J.T.M. 2020. 2020, 'Metaphysics as the Science of the Possible'. In R. Bliss and J.T.M. Miller (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Metametaphysics*, London: Routledge, pp. 480-491.
- Miller, J.T.M. 2022. *Metaphysical Realism and Anti-Realism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Putnam, H. 1981. *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Putnam, H. 1987. *The Many Faces of Realism*, LaSalle: Open Court.
- Schiffer, S. 2003. *The Things We Mean*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Strawson, P.F. 1959. *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Thomasson, A.L. 2007. *Ordinary Objects*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thomasson, A.L. 2015. *Ontology made Easy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thomasson, A.L. 2016a. 'Easy Ontology and its Consequences'. In G. Ostertag (ed.), *Meanings and Other Things: Essays on the work of Stephen Schiffer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 34-53.
- Thomasson, A.L. 2016b. 'Why We Should Still Take it Easy', *Mind*, 126(503): 769-779.
- Thomasson, A.L. 2017. 'What Can We Do, When We Do Metaphysics?'. In G. d'Oro and S. Overgaard (eds.), *Cambridge Companion to Philosophical Methodology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 108-29.
- Thomasson, A.L. 2020a, *Norms and Necessity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thomasson, A.L. 2020b. 'Easy Ontology'. In R. Bliss and J.T.M. Miller (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Metametaphysics*, London: Routledge, pp. 159-170.