

## Easy Ontology Made Easier

This paper takes as its starting point Carnap’s idea of paradigmatic ontological questions as easily answerable, but diverges on the question of how ordinary, “serious” metaphysicians should be interpreted. My main thesis will be that in his classical 1950 paper, Carnap took an early wrong turn, and ended up with an unnecessarily complex and obscure theory, wedded to an implausible interpretation of ordinary metaphysicians.

Carnap took for granted that metaphysicians cannot be asking internal questions, and claims instead that they use and understand ontological questions in a special, “external” *sense*, i.e., with a certain *lexical meaning* (1950/1956: 209, 210, 213). As we will see, however, all extant proposals about this alleged, special sense are untenable. Fortunately for EO, there is no need to identify such a special sense: we can just take metaphysicians to (typically) use and understand ontological questions in their ordinary sense, which is their internal sense. This interpretation of metaphysicians is more charitable and yields a simpler and more innocuous version of EO—indeed, one which makes no use of the notion of an external question. This is a radical departure from the views of Carnap himself and his main contemporary follower, Amie Thomasson. It makes EO easier to state, understand, and defend.

## 1. What to keep

This section lays out what I take to be the central aspects of EO, which I think should be retained, while the next one describes Carnap's and Thomasson's views about how metaphysicians ought to be interpreted, which should be abandoned. The positive view I describe below will also include some additions not found in Carnap's or Thomasson's work, but which are relevant for my overall case.

Now, consider the following question:

Q Are there numbers?

I will throughout use Q as an example of a paradigmatically *ontological question*. When referring to Q or to an "ontological question", however, I will sometimes refer to a mere string, i.e., an uninterpreted sentence in interrogative form, which is individuated purely orthographically-phonetically. The reason is that I sometimes discuss whether Q might have several senses, which sense(s) it has, etc., which makes no sense if Q is semantically individuated. Similarly, one cannot sensibly discuss the different senses of non-linguistic entities that are *expressed* by linguistic entities, e.g., the question(s) expressed by utterances of Q. Therefore, when I discuss *questions* below, I will usually mean strings that are interrogative sentences, rather than something expressed thereby. Context will make clear which type of entity is referred to by 'Q' or 'ontological question'.

Ontological Deflationism in general is typically defined as the view that ontological questions are not deep, substantive questions about the extra-

linguistic world. Carnap's theory is a subspecies of this view, since ontological questions do not come out as deep, substantive questions about the extra-linguistic world on any one of the senses he distinguishes (as we will see below). But there are also non-Carnapian instances of Ontological Deflationism, e.g., Eli Hirsch's view, discussed in §3.

It is not entirely clear how ontological questions should be distinguished from existence questions that are not ontological, if such there be (see, e.g., Hofweber (2016: Ch. 12) and Korman (2019) for discussion). If one takes all existence questions to be ontological, then it is clear that we cannot say that all ontological questions are easily answered (consider, 'Bosons exist'). Even so, Carnapian deflationists will insist that the difficulties involved in answering some existence questions are not of the kind that worry metaphysicians. They are due to complexity, unavailability of empirical evidence and the like; they are not, in Ted Sider's phrase, "epistemically metaphysical" (2011: 187).

To take these complications into account, Thomasson proposes that EO be defined as the conjunctive view that

all well-formed existence questions may be answered by conceptual and/or empirical work (requiring nothing 'epistemically metaphysical'), and that at least some disputed existence questions may be answered by means of trivial inferences from uncontroversial premises. (2015: 128)

Here, "empirical work" does not include pragmatic considerations, e.g., of simplicity. I will follow Thomasson's definition of EO.

Among existence questions, Q would count as one of the easily answered ones (when taken internally). To wit, the answer to Q is Yes, and can be conclusively justified simply by noting, e.g., that 3 and 4 are greater than 2, hence, there are numbers greater than 2, and, hence, there are numbers. I will call this piece of reasoning *Simple Reasoning* and I will take the claim that Q is “easily answerable” to follow (more or less) from the claim that Q can be given a correct answer purely on the basis of Simple Reasoning.

When it is said that Q is easily answered, this should be understood as the claim that it is easy to *know* the answer, i.e., to know that there are numbers. Naturally, the claim is not that it is easy to produce a token of the word ‘Yes’ in response to the question. The issue also cannot be taken to concern merely believing the truth, since it can plausibly be easy to make a lucky guess. Even those who claim that it is not easy to make a lucky guess as to whether there are numbers should agree that this is not what the debate is about. What is at issue is knowledge. However obvious, Thomasson’s *Ontology Made Easy* actually never makes this explicit. Doing so, as will see in §7, turns out to reveal some interesting possibilities for EO hitherto unnoticed.

Since many philosophers think the proposed version of EO is a non-starter because it is immediately undermined by the “Bad Company Problem”, I should say, very briefly, why such an assessment would be premature. Adherents of EO think that the existence of properties, for instance, can be established by a simple application the unrestricted, “naïve” inference rules for ‘property’, which are held to be analytic. However, if applied to the property of being a property that does

not instantiate itself, these rules also allow us to infer a contradiction. This may seem to show that the existence of properties cannot be known, let alone easily known, by applying these rules.

The reason this problem does not *immediately* undermine EO is that it is possible for Carnapian to adopt a (rather standard) form of reliabilism, on which one knows P just in case P is true and one believes P on the basis of a reliable method, and add that believing a proposition on the basis of one's conceptual competence is a reliable (but fallible) method. Thus, when a proposition is believed on such a basis and it is true, then it is known. (One can also argue that if it is *easy* to come to believe a given true proposition on the basis of one's conceptual competence, this proposition is also easily known. The reliabilist response is therefore not merely "possible", but also has some benefits.)

Some propositions that we can infer by purely conceptual means are false, like the contradictions involving pathological, self-referential properties or sets. But this is consistent with the view proposed, since we already agreed that the relevant method is fallible. Since this line of defence is at least possible, it shows that the examples of pathological properties does not immediately undermine EO. I take this also to be the most promising way to supplement EO and that it forms part of a plausible overall treatment of the Bad Company Problem (which is more complex than suggested by my quick account above), but the full defence must await another occasion.

## 2. What to give up

Let us now turn to the claims by Carnap and Thomasson that I think should be rejected, namely the idea that metaphysicians understand ontological questions in a special, “external” sense. Carnap is usually interpreted as distinguishing *three* ways of taking an ontological questions: as *internal questions*, in which they are answerable by purely conceptual and/or empirical means (and in which some of them, like Q, are easily answered), and as *external questions*, which are in turn divided into two kinds: *factual, language-independent questions*, which are “meaningless”, or “pseudo-questions”, and, secondly, as *pragmatic questions about language*, in which they are sensible, but *normative* questions of which “linguistic framework” to adopt. (We can now see more clearly why Carnap’s view is a species of ontological deflationism, as defined above: Internal questions are trivial, and, hence, not deep or substantive; factual-external questions are not even meaningful, and so cannot be deep or substantive; and external-pragmatic questions are worthwhile and perhaps deep, but they are not about the extra-linguistic world, but rather about language.)

Why did Carnap identify other ways of taking ontological questions than the internal? One reason (probably the main reason, and perhaps the only reason) was to make sense of ordinary, “serious” metaphysicians, i.e., philosophers who take these ontological questions to be important, deep, and difficult. He writes,

...nobody who meant the question ‘Are there numbers’ in the internal sense would either assert or even seriously consider a negative answer. This makes it plausible to assume that those philosophers who treat the question of the existence of

numbers as a serious philosophical problem and offer lengthy arguments on either side, do not have in mind the internal question (1950/1956: 209).

Carnap thought that metaphysicians rather have in mind “external questions”. Thomasson (2015: 33f.) cites this passage approvingly. In §6, I criticize Carnap’s reasoning in the quoted passage in detail, but before that, in §§3–5, I will argue that all of the interpretations of metaphysicians that have been offered on behalf of EO (namely, candidates (a)–(c) below) are untenable. Fortunately, since Carnap’s reasoning in the quoted passage can be resisted, EO is not committed to choosing between them, but can without strain be coupled instead with what I call the “internal interpretation” (candidate (d) below).

- (a) Quantifier variance: metaphysicians’ disagreements are merely verbal: they (can be taken to) interpret quantifiers and ‘exist’ differently in such a way that each makes claims that are true-in-their-language (cf. Hirsch (2009, 2011)).
- (b) External-factual: metaphysicians (attempt to) use ontological expressions, not metalinguistically, but somehow externally to the linguistic framework they belong to. When used in this sense, they are nonsensical and raise mere “pseudo-problems” (cf. Eklund (2013)).
- (c) Normative-metalinguistic: metaphysicians, while apparently discussing non-normative questions about non-linguistic matters, are really engaged in

discussions about which terms or terminologies to use, i.e., normative discussions about expressions or concepts.

- (d) Internal: metaphysicians use and understand ontological questions in their ordinary, internal sense, in which, e.g., Q is easily answered.

My critique of (a)–(c) will repeat some familiar complaints, since they form part of my case for (d), but several new ones will be appear, too. As we will see, comparisons between these interpretations will have much to do with interpretive charity, as will my case for (d), presented in §7. (I will not discuss the idea that different metaphysicians may require different interpretations, since the upshot of my discussion will be that, except perhaps in some special cases, (d) is the only plausible interpretation.)

Let me close this section by clarifying and qualifying my positive view. Firstly, (d) must be qualified, since metaphysicians sometimes explicitly claim to use quantifiers or the existence predicate in some alternative, technical sense, or in some alleged ordinary sense, on which they are not answerable by purely conceptual and/or empirical means. This is so, for instance, when philosophers characterize quantifiers or the existence predicate in terms of “joint-carving”, “fundamentality”, or “domain condition”—see, e.g., Hofweber (2016: Ch. 3). (d) should therefore be taken as concerning only metaphysicians doing ontology without such terminological preliminaries. Even with this qualification (d) is

substantive and contentious claim, which is rejected by Carnap and Thomasson, as well as by opponents of EO.

Note that this paper is not exactly about the question of how serious metaphysicians ought to be interpreted, but rather about what adherents of EO should say about this matter. Although I will mostly leave this qualification implicit, it is important to keep in mind when assessing the philosophical significance of the paper. For while it is commonplace to say that metaphysicians usually understand ontological questions in their ordinary, literal senses, it is very contentious to say that adherents of EO can and should say this. Indeed, Carnap and Thomasson both reject this claim, and think they are committed to doing so.

Is the question of this paper about what Carnap in particular should say about serious metaphysicians, or what Carnapians more generally should say? There is no clear, significant difference here. In his seminal 1950 paper, Carnap made many different claims that were often obscure and often in tension with each other, resulting in an overall picture that is not clearly different from “Carnapianism in general”, on any reasonable understanding. Also, no specific issue arising in my discussion depends on this choice. Nevertheless, since my purposes are philosophical rather than exegetical, I would prefer to say that this paper concerns EO in general, keeping in mind the obvious weight of Carnap himself in determining the content of this position.

### 3. Quantifier variance

Option (a) is loosely connected with Eli Hirsch, whose views has been intensely discussed in the literature. It is something of an outlier in the present context, however, which rather concerns Carnapian metaontology (Eklund (2013) argues that the relationship between quantifier variance and Carnap's views is tenuous at best). While they are both instances of Ontological Deflationism, as defined above, they differ on what is wrong with metaphysical disputes. Hirsch thinks they are merely verbal, in that different metaphysicians mean different things, and thus speak past each other. Carnap held no such view.

Hirsch sometimes formulates his view in terms of what metaphysicians *might have* meant, rather than what they actually mean. His point is that for each metaphysical sentence, there is a language (in the abstract, Lewisian sense) in which it comes out true, and that the different languages are all metaphysically on a par. It is mainly this last claim that his opponents have criticized (e.g., Sider (2011)). Since the present paper concerns what metaphysicians *actually* mean, however, we will pay less attention to this more general and abstract formulation.

One influential objection against (a) is that it is uncharitable. This may seem surprising, since (a) makes metaphysicians' claims come out true (as stressed by Hirsch himself). But, as argued by Brendan Balcerak Jackson (2013, 2014), (a) is still uncharitable, because it makes the contestants' assertions come out as *trivial* (given what they mean by the relevant expressions). Similarly, John Horden (2014) argues that while the Hirschian interpretation of what

metaphysicians are *saying* is charitable, the accompanying interpretation of what they *intend* and *desire* is not. (McGrath (2008) finds several further, more specific, reasons why (a) involves uncharitable interpretations.)

Interpretation (a) is also uncharitable in that it entails that the contestants mistakenly think they have a genuine disagreement, which they don't (cf. Thomasson (2017a: 9)). Actual metaphysicians will often reject the notion that they are just talking past each other, each speaking a language in which their respective claims come out true. Thus, while (a) makes their basic first-order claims come out true, certain central higher-order beliefs of theirs come out false, namely, beliefs about what they mean, what they are doing, and what their debates are about. It is arguably less charitable to attribute false beliefs about what one means than about philosophical matters, the latter being notoriously difficult and the former something that should be more or less transparent to speakers.<sup>1</sup>

As against this, one might note that it is rather common, even for intelligent, rational, and patient people, given sufficient time to think things over, to mistake a verbal disagreement for a real one. On the other hand, the case of metaphysicians is extreme. It is an understatement to say they have had "sufficient time to think things over", and they cannot plausibly be taken to be lack sufficient intelligence, rationality, or patience. In particular, they are surely especially acute with respect to the relevant kind of semantic/conceptual matters. Also, as Balcerak Jackson notes, it is difficult to see, in the case of ontological

debates, how the differences in meaning are supposed to have arisen, and how they could have gone unnoticed for so long (2014: 43).

While some of the above considerations tell against (a), others may seem to mitigate. The responses on behalf of (a) seem rather weak, but there is a more conclusive point to be made against (a): (d) has several benefits that (a) lacks, and, moreover, it does not have (a)'s disadvantages listed above. The overall cost-benefit analysis therefore favours (d) over (a).

#### **4. Factual-external questions**

Option (b) derives directly from Carnap's seminal paper and is notoriously obscure. Matti Eklund (2013) identifies several different interpretations of the notion of a factual-external question, and takes the most promising one to be a "language pluralist" one. On this interpretation, external questions are confused because they conflict with a certain trivial way in which ontological matters depend on language. Eklund explains,

Suppose one of us speaks a language where "there are numbers" is true and one of us speaks a language where "there are numbers" comes out false. Suppose we come to find out that it is so. But then I go on to say "OK, 'there are numbers' comes out true in my language and false in yours. But, *language-independently*, are there numbers?". This would be confused. What could this supposed *further* question amount to? (2013: 232)

But is it really confused to think there is a further question whether there are numbers, once it has been established that ‘There are numbers’ is true? If the sentence is not semantically individuated, it seems perfectly fine to think that its being true does not settle whether there are numbers (whether language-independently or not). It seems this is potentially confused only if it is presupposed that the sentence *means that there are numbers*. Then, thinking the question is not settled amounts to hesitating over an inference of the form ‘*s* means that *p* and is true; therefore, *p*’.

Such inferences have occasionally been rejected, however, particularly in the literature on the Liar paradox, so it would be too strong to say that doubting them is just confused. On the other hand, in those discussions, there has always been a *reason* to doubt them, namely, the fact that rejecting them is a way of avoiding contradiction. So perhaps Eklund’s idea is that what is confused is to doubt such an inference without having any special reason to.

Against the idea of interpreting metaphysicians as asking external questions in this sense, one might note, firstly, that doing so is uncharitable. It is also hard to think of any textual evidence for interpreting actual metaphysicians as taking metaphysical questions not to be settled by claims about sentence-truth in the relevant way. Nor can I think of any actual metaphysician whose views can be seen to make more overall sense if interpreted in this way. (I should add that Eklund does not himself take this to be a plausible interpretation of metaphysicians: it is rather a proposal that arises in his Carnap exegesis.)

Since the primary aim of this paper is to discuss how to interpret actual metaphysicians from the perspective of EO, these considerations seem to me sufficient for rejecting (b) on Eklund's interpretation. (One may also feel that Eklund's "language pluralist" interpretation anachronistically brings in topics and concepts introduced in the debate between Sider and Hirsch, that were not discussed by Carnap.)

I will now consider two further interpretations of 'external-factual question'. It will turn out that metaphysicians may well be taken to ask external questions on each of these two interpretations, but that their doing so is consistent with (d).

A first interpretation takes an external question to concern which framework is *the right/best one*, where this concerns some kind of fit with reality that goes beyond purely empirical or pragmatic considerations. It is clear that some metaphysicians—notably, Ted Sider (2011)—think this is an important question. But their doing so is consistent with (d). For asking external questions in this sense does not entail using ontological expressions in any particular *sense*.

Secondly, we might think of an external question as by definition a question that can only be asked if the asker believes that it cannot be settled merely by conceptual or empirical means. To ask an external question in this sense is to ask a certain question *and* to take it *not* to be easily answerable (but, perhaps, answerable only in what Thomasson calls "epistemically metaphysical" ways). The claim that metaphysicians ask external questions in this sense is very plausible, but it, too, is consistent with (d) (since someone's believing a question not to be answerable a certain way does not make it so).

Carnap would reject my above claims about that asking external questions in either of these two sense is consistent with (d). As is made clear in the passage quoted above, he thought that if one asks a question in either of these ways, one must *ipso facto* understand it in some other sense than the internal one. But, as I will argue at length below, this was a mistake.

Both of these last two interpretations fail to capture Carnap's claim that external-factual questions are questions used in a certain *sense*. They also fail to capture his claim that external-factual questions are "meaningless". These two claims of Carnap's are of course hard to reconcile. According to the present paper, both claims are false. The latter claim, moreover, is extremely implausible, and is best seen as an instance of Carnap's and many of his contemporaries' sloppy and exaggerated rejections of various claims as "meaningless". The simpler and more moderate diagnosis advanced in this paper is that metaphysicians understand ontological questions in their ordinary, internal sense, in which they are easily answered, but falsely believe they are difficult.

## **5. Pragmatic-external questions and metalinguistic negotiation**

The second understanding of the notion of an external question takes such questions to concern which linguistic framework we ought to use (for certain purposes), how we ought to reform our language, etc. Of course, metaphysicians asking questions like Q cannot well be taken thereby to *explicitly* ask such

normative, metalinguistic questions. But maybe they can be taken to do so somehow *implicitly*? Amie Thomasson (2017a) proposes that metaphysicians are engaged in *metalinguistic negotiation*, a kind of discourse which appears superficially to be concerned only with non-linguistic, non-normative matters, but which is in fact about which terminology to use, or how to modify our terminology, or some such normative, metalinguistic matter (see also Price (2011: §13.2) and Belleri (2017)). My discussion of (c) will focus entirely of this idea, since, taken so widely as Thomasson takes it, it seems to cover any possible rendering of the idea that metaphysicians are “implicitly discussing normative, metalinguistic questions”.

Metalinguistic negotiation is arguably a real phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> A good example comes from Peter Ludlow (2008: 118), and involves a debate in which one party assertorically utters, while the other dissents from, ‘The racing horse Secretariat is an athlete’. Thomasson writes,

Even if we interpret the disputants as using the term ‘athlete’ in different ways (given their dispositions to apply/not apply it to non-human animals) and each speaking a truth in their own idiolect, we can still see them as involved in a genuine dispute: not at the level of literally asserting conflicting propositions, but rather at the level of pragmatics. For each speaker can be seen as advocating for ways the term ‘athlete’ should be used: whether it should be applied to non-human animals or reserved for humans. And such disputes may be very much worth having. For how we use words matters, given their relations to other aspects of our conceptual scheme, and to our non-verbal behavior (2017a: 10f.).

Paralleling Hirsch's distinction between metaphysicians *actually* and *possibly* speaking past each other, Thomasson distinguishes between the idea that metaphysicians actually engage in metalinguistic negotiation and the idea that it can be fruitful to view their debates in such a way (see her (2017b, 2020)). Given my aims, however, I will focus only on the former.

Thomasson highlights several important advantages of interpreting metaphysicians as engaging in metalinguistic negotiation. Firstly, it is charitable because, contrary to option (a), it takes them to genuinely disagree. This is an advantage, firstly, because they themselves *believe* that they disagree. Hence, this (higher-order) belief comes out true, whereas on (a), it doesn't. Secondly, the fact that they disagree makes broader, practical sense of their conversation: genuine disputes are precisely genuine, whereas verbal disputes are not.

Furthermore, this interpretation is charitable because it takes metaphysicians to be engaged in a kind of dispute that is not only genuine, but *important*. It may be important whether 'athlete' should be used for non-human animals, given the social significance of this label. Similarly, it is obviously of great practical and moral importance whether 'torture' should be applied to water-boarding and whether 'marriage' should be applied to same-sex unions (cf. Chalmers (2011: 516f.)). Closer to the metaphysical case, it is arguably important (as far as philosophy is important, anyway) which terminologies or notations we use, and what virtues they may have (simplicity, manageability, expressive power, etc.).

But (c) also has its problems. The most serious problem is the plain fact that virtually every contemporary metaphysician will deny that they are engaged in

metalinguistic negotiation. They will not just say that this is not *primarily* what they are doing: they will typically say they are *exclusively* concerned with describing extra-linguistic reality. As with (a), this fact is particularly pressing given that it cannot be explained away by saying that metaphysicians lack the requisite intelligence, conceptual/semantic competence/expertise, rationality, patience, or time. It is simply hard to see how metaphysicians, not lacking in any of these respects, could fail to know, when prompted to reflect on the matter, that they are engaged in metalinguistic negotiation, given how this notion was explained. For in real-life examples of the phenomenon, like the debate about Secretariat, the contestants would surely realize, if they were sufficiently rational and intelligent, etc., that their disagreement really concerned how a certain word should be used, or at least that this is what they *should* have been debating instead. To accuse metaphysicians of the kind of error that these contestants would be making if they insisted that their disagreement was purely factual seems uncharitable.

Still, some uncertainty lingers, due to the lack of a precise definition of metalinguistic negotiation. Here are some things one would like to know in order to assess the idea that metaphysicians are engaged in it:

- (1) Must speakers who engage in metalinguistic negotiation be able to know that they are, given sufficient intelligence, rationality, time to ponder, patience, etc.?

- (2) Do people engaged in metalinguistic negotiation thereby *mean that* so and so is the case (e.g., that some expression ought to be used a certain way)? That is, is metalinguistic negotiation manifested at the level of speaker meaning?
- (3) Does metalinguistic negotiation consist in participants' *conversationally implicating* propositions of the relevant kind?

These questions are closely connected, and are reasonably answered the same way. When we consider how they might be answered, however, a problem looms. For if the answer to these questions is Yes, it seems hopeless to argue that serious metaphysicians are engaged in metalinguistic negotiation. But if it is No, it is hard to see what metalinguistic negotiation is supposed to be. The most promising option for interpretation (c), in any case, seems to be answer questions (1)–(3) in the negative, and then provide a different understanding of metalinguistic negotiation. I will consider two possibilities, but argue that the claim that metaphysicians are engaged in metalinguistic negotiation is implausible on both understandings.

Firstly, we could suppose that although metaphysicians do not actually mean to discuss normative questions about words, they can still, in some sense, be “charitably interpreted as doing so”, in the sense that there is some similarity between what they are actually saying, what they actually mean, etc., and something one *could* be saying, where the latter is reasonable. The interpretation

could be seen as charitable because of the reasonability, and it could be called an interpretation of *metaphysicians* because of the similarity.

I think the distinction between “actually meaning” and “being charitably interpretable as meaning”, in the special sense explained, while important in many contexts, is of no help to (c). Note that the claim that metaphysicians are, in this special sense, “charitably interpretable as engaged in metalinguistic negotiation” is *uncontroversial*, at least to Carnapian deflationists. But it does not even begin to answer the question that is the subject matter of this paper, which is what deflationists should say about what metaphysicians *actually* mean.

Here, it may be objected that if someone is “charitably interpretable” as meaning *p*, then that is *ipso facto* reason to take them as actually meaning *p*. This is true, but the reason here must be seen as merely defeasible. While perhaps decisive in a tie, this kind of charity cannot trump clear, first-person judgments by sufficiently rational, patient, and intelligent speakers, about what they mean. However reasonable we take it to be to engage in metalinguistic negotiation, metaphysicians think it is equally reasonable to engage in purely worldly metaphysics. Even if they are wrong about this (as ontological deflationists maintain), that fact cannot be used, in conjunction with some principle of charity, to show that they didn’t actually mean to discuss purely worldly matters.

The second proposal is inspired by Thomasson’s characterization of metalinguistic negotiation as a conversational move in which participants *push for* certain linguistic or conceptual changes. This is an interesting and telling phrasing, for it suggests that metalinguistic negotiation might not best be cashed

out in terms of the usual speech acts, but rather in terms of some other type of action. As such, it is consistent with a negative answer to (1)-(3).

Here is a possible clarification. Suppose a person knows, at least inchoately and implicitly, that facts about which sentences are uttered (assertorically and seriously) contribute to determining the extensions of the words therein, and that they also *want* the extension to change in a certain way. Suppose, more concretely, that they know that utterances of a sentence '*Fa*' contribute to making *a* part of the extension of '*F*' and that they also *want* this to happen. Then, uttering 'Secretariat is an athlete' could be seen as an action performed with the intention of making Secretariat a member of the extension of 'athlete' (at some future time). Performers of this action need not take it to lead *directly* to the intended goal, but may take it to do so indirectly, by leading *others* to make the same utterance, so that, if enough people do it, the balance is eventually tipped, resulting in the desired change of extension.

While this may be an interesting notion, it does not seem to help (c). Surely, metaphysicians' disputes cannot plausibly be taken to consist of utterances-intended-to-change-extensions of this kind. Metaphysicians instead take their claims to be accurate descriptions of reality, i.e., true, given the actual, current extensions of the terms used. The fact that they would therefore protest against an interpretation on which they instead make their utterances in order to change those extensions seems enough to refute it. Hence, metaphysicians cannot plausibly be taken to engage in metalinguistic negotiations in either of these two senses, and so it becomes even less clear whether there is any sense of

‘metalinguistic negotiation’ in which metaphysicians could reasonably be said to engage in it. This concludes the part of this paper, where I argue that the alternative interpretations of metaphysicians that Carnap and Thomasson are forced to choose between are all implausible. I proceed in the next section to Carnap’s argument for thinking some such special interpretation is necessary.

## **6. Carnap’s wrong turn**

The passage quoted in §2 shows that Carnap considered (d) patently false. But this was a mistake, for (d) is both available to deflationists and the most plausible interpretation of metaphysicians they can offer. The positive support for (d) will be deferred to the next section. Here, we will rather consider three possible motivations for Carnap’s reasoning in the quoted passage, and argue that each motivation fails. This list of possible motivations and accompanying rebuttals also functions as a list of objections against (d) with replies, and will thus form part of my overall case.

Carnap claims that “nobody who meant the question ‘Are there numbers’ in the internal sense would either assert or even seriously consider a negative answer”. He thus inferred from the fact that metaphysicians take ontological questions to be difficult to the conclusion that they do not understand them in their internal sense. It seems to me that the most obvious explanation of why anyone would reason like this is that they accept

(C) Someone who uses and understands Q in its internal sense *ipso facto* knows that it is easily answerable in the affirmative.

According to the present paper, (C) is false. Rather than trying to refute it, however, I will here consider three possible motivations for it, and argue that they all fail. This should be enough for undermining any initial plausibility of (C).

Firstly, (C) may seem to follow from some plausible principle of the transparency of meaning, i.e., some claim to the effect that one always knows what one means, or in which sense one is using one's expressions. But while there are plausibly true principles of this kind, it is doubtful whether there is any such principle that is both true and supports (C). For even if one knows in which sense one is using an expression, one need not know *all* meaning-related facts about the expression, taken in that sense. There are many facts about expressions that hold in virtue of their being used in a certain sense by a given person, which that person need not know. For instance, a sentence, when used in a certain sense, might have certain truth-conditions relative to worlds, contexts, and further parameters, that one need not know about, even if one uses it in that sense. At least, one need not know about this *explicitly*, which is enough to show that there are meaning-related facts of which competent users may be ignorant.

To take a more relevant example, the sense of a word may be determined by certain meaning-constitutive inference rules even if a speaker using the word in that sense fails to know that it is so determined. This is true independently of

whether meaning is determined by normative or non-normative inferential facts about expressions. It may be that competence with the relevant expressions requires a defeasible disposition to infer in accordance with such rules. But such a disposition does not entail knowledge that the meanings of the words are determined by those rules (it does not even entail any ability to conceive of the rules). This is evidenced by the fact that philosophers disagree about which rules are meaning-constitutive—indeed, about whether any rule is—while still using them in the same senses. This example is more relevant because adherents of EO seem committed to some form of inferential role semantics (cf. Thomasson (2015: 95, esp. note 13)). If one accepts such a semantics, then one is clearly committed—given some obvious empirical facts about what philosophers say and think—to saying that one can use an expression in a sense determined by a given inference rule without knowing that it is so determined.

Now, is easy answerability the kind of meaning-related property one must know *qua* competent speaker? More precisely, if a speaker uses and understands Q in its internal sense, must she then know that it is easily answered? One may be tempted to argue that Carnapians must answer in the affirmative, and for the following reason. Firstly, and to repeat, Carnapians are committed to some version of inferential role semantics. But on this kind of semantics, one can be competent with the expressions of Q only if one will answer Q in the right way, since doing this requires merely inferring in accordance with meaning-determining rules. Thus, Carnapians are committed to taking “easy answerability” to be a meaning-related property one must know of, if one uses

the relevant expressions in the internal sense. Hence, the internal interpretation of metaphysicians is false, since they do not recognize any easy answerability.

The problem with this argument is that it presupposes an implausible version of inferential role semantics, namely, one which takes it to be necessary for understanding an expression that one *actually* infer in accordance with a particular rule. Any rule whatsoever can be rejected by competent speakers, e.g., for theoretical reasons (cf. Williamson (2007: Ch. 4)). The more plausible alternative holds that semantic competence with the relevant expression consists in a *defeasible disposition* to infer in accordance with the rules (Williamson's argument of course mainly targets this position, but it can be resisted—see Eklund (2007: 562ff.) and [REDACTED]). This is commonplace among non-normativist inferentialists (see, e.g., Paul Horwich (2005: 49f.), [REDACTED], and Daniel Korman (2019), who makes this point in relation to Thomasson's theory in particular). That a disposition is defeasible means its manifestation can be blocked by various factors, such as the philosophical belief that certain considerations going beyond the simple inference rules are relevant for answering Q.

On the basis of such a defeasibility view, we can easily explain how a competent speaker could understand Q in its internal sense without knowing it is easily answered: she may have some theoretical belief leading her to think Q is *not* easily answered and yet be defeasibly disposed to follow these rules. Her having this defeasible disposition should here be understood as entailing that: *were she not to have any such recalcitrant theoretical belief, then she would make the*

*relevant inference*. Alternatively, we could simply take this counterfactual, more directly, as a necessary condition for competence with the expression in question, and leave dispositions aside.<sup>3</sup> I conclude that the above attempts to support (C) on the basis of some transparency-of-meaning thesis are unsuccessful. It is unclear whether any such argument for (C) could work.

Having thus criticized the idea of supporting (C) on the basis of some transparency-of-meaning principle, let me now close this section by considering, more briefly, two further possibilities. A second possible motivation for accepting (C) stems from verificationism, in particular, the conditional,

If a sentence has one set of verification conditions, when taken in one sense, and a different set of verification conditions when taken in another, then the two senses are distinct.

This claim is plausible, perhaps trivial, but note that it does not entail that if two people *associate* different verification conditions to a given sentence, they must mean different things with it. For one of them might simply be wrong, just like a sceptic might simply be wrong about what justifies belief in external objects, or like two people may disagree about which inference rules are valid. Such disagreements do not immediately entail that the disagreeing parties differ in how they interpret the relevant expressions. Hence, while metaphysicians and Carnapians disagree about what verifies Q, it does not follow that they associate

different senses to it. Hence, metaphysicians may well understand Q in its internal sense.

A third argument for (C) assumes that the internal sense is *technical* and that this fact makes it impossible to attach this sense to Q without knowing that it is easy. The underlying reasoning is that one can only attach this sense to an expression by way of some explicitly made stipulative definition, which would unfailingly make one aware that Q is easily answerable. While this might appear to be a promising argument for (C), it is actually unavailable to Carnapians. For Carnapians cannot say that Q and similar questions are easily answerable only when taken in a certain technical sense. This claim is something metaphysicians and opponents of EO may well accept. That is, metaphysicians can easily grant that Q could be imbued with a special sense such that Q is easily answerable (on the basis of Simple Reasoning) when taken in that sense. (Metaphysicians merely need to deny that they are themselves using Q in this special sense.) Note that I'm not saying that Q could be imbued with such a sense. The point is rather that it is a claim that opponents of EO can accept, and therefore not contentious in the way it would have to be in order to be identified with an interesting version of EO. Thus, Carnapians must take the internal sense to be a non-technical, "ordinary" sense of Q.

Could we even go further, and say that the internal sense is *the* ordinary sense of the relevant questions? That would presuppose that the relevant expressions ('there is', etc.) have only one ordinary sense. Carnap and his contemporaries would probably have found this naïve, given their default assumption that

natural languages are rife with ambiguity and other kinds of obscurity.<sup>4</sup> However, with Grice's razor and his reduction of lexical meanings by appeal to conversational implicatures, and, subsequently, a host of other putative pragmatic mechanisms, this presumption has increasingly come to be seen as unwarranted. Most philosophers of language now take it as a non-negotiable methodological principle that lexical ambiguity should be appealed to only given special reasons to think that the data cannot be accommodated without it. (Ideally, the ambiguity posited should also be independently justified and/or explicable, e.g., justified by intuitions and/or explained causal-historically.)

I know of no data that justify positing further senses of 'There are numbers'. Furthermore, the sentence seems to fail the standard ambiguity tests (see, e.g., Zwicky and Sadock's classical (1975)). By the methodological principle described above, we are therefore justified in presuming it to be unambiguous, and, hence, in using the definite, '*the* ordinary sense'.<sup>5</sup>

The more important conclusion, however, is that also the third argument for (C) fails, since adherents of EO cannot hold that it is true because the internal sense of ontological questions is a technical one. Hence, all three motivations for (C) fail.

## **7. The positive case for (d)**

The position being advanced here is that metaphysicians who discuss ontological questions without terminological preliminaries typically use and understand such

questions in their internal sense, in which they are answerable by purely conceptual and/or empirical means, and, in the case of Q and certain other cases, they are also easily answered. Aside from simplicity, the main recommending feature of this alternative is its interpretive charity. It does take metaphysicians to make a mistake, of course, in thinking Q is not easily answerable. But, firstly, it is clear that a Carnapian deflationist must take them to be wrong in *some* respect. Secondly, it seems preferable to take them to be wrong about philosophical matters, on which we are often wrong, rather than in the ways implied by the other interpretations.

The respect in which (d) takes metaphysicians to be wrong is in thinking that Q cannot be easily answered. This is a mistake about what kind of considerations may and may not be adduced in answering a certain philosophical question. Attributing this mistake to someone is not particularly uncharitable. (Diagnoses of this philosophical mistake are bound to be plentiful, but a natural suggestion is that it results from over-generalizing from real, substantive questions (cf. Horwich (1998: 89f.)).)

By contrast, (a) takes metaphysicians to be wrong about whether they disagree with each other, and about whether they are saying something trivially true. (b) entails that they are discussing meaningless, pseudo-problems, or (on the pluralist interpretation) that they doubt a trivial inference for no reason. (Of course, something along the lines of (b) may still be a plausible view of metaphysicians who assign technical meanings to ontological questions, but this issue falls outside the scope of this paper.) Finally, (c) entails that they are discussing normative

questions about language but have the false belief that they are only debating substantial, non-linguistic questions. As I have been arguing, (a)-(c) therefore entail that metaphysicians are wrong about what they mean, what they say, and similarly conceptual matters that people, and especially philosophers, can be expected to get right.

It may be thought, however, that (d) is in a worse position than I have admitted, since it takes metaphysicians not merely to have a false philosophical belief, but to take something trivial to be non-trivial, and, in the case of nominalists, to take something trivial to be *false*. How does this square with my claim that (d) allows us to give a reasonably charitable interpretation of said metaphysicians?<sup>6</sup>

Let me first grant that EO indeed takes the answer to Q to be trivial, i.e., that it is trivial that there are numbers. This seems to me part and parcel of EO. Let me also simplify the discussion by discussing, more directly, the proposition that there are numbers, rather than the claim that Q can be truly answered in the affirmative. Let us also treat ‘it is easy to know that’, ‘it is trivial that’, and ‘it is obvious that’ as interchangeable. Then, it becomes clear that EO, as defined above (and given a few further innocuous assumptions) entails that it is trivial that there are numbers (and so on for properties, sets, etc.). These simplifications allow us to discuss the matter as one concerning the proposition that there are numbers and the “triviality operator”.

I will now first propose two possible answers to the question how expert philosophers can deny that there are numbers, even though this is trivial. This

will then immediately yield a response to the objection that it is uncharitable to interpret them as denying something trivial. This line of reasoning can then be trivially applied to the case of realists who do not *deny* something trivial, but nevertheless take it to be non-trivial.

Carnap's solution to this problem would be to say that apparent rejections of what is trivial are only apparent, and that what nominalists actually reject (and realists take to be non-trivially true) is something else, i.e., an answer to an external question. The two alternative responses I will offer are very different. While the first one is not obviously untenable, the second one seems overall more plausible.

The first possibility is to reject S4 for triviality, and say that while it is trivial that there are numbers, it is not trivially trivial. The rejection of S4 for triviality could be motivated as follows. Triviality comes in degrees and is a threshold concept. Something is trivial if (and only if) it is easy *enough* to know it, i.e., if a relevant threshold is surpassed. Since the relevant threshold is plausibly not a precise boundary, the notion of triviality will be vague, but this is independently plausible.

Now, knowing that  $p$  may be easy enough for the proposition that  $p$  to be trivial, while knowing that trivially  $p$  is not easy enough to make the proposition that trivially  $p$  trivial. This is unsurprising, since the two propositions are typically rather different: whereas the proposition that trivially  $p$  always concerns epistemic matters, the proposition that  $p$  does not, for many  $p$ . Further, if one

proposition is more complex than another, it can be more difficult to know, and ‘Trivially  $p$ ’ is of course more complex than ‘ $p$ ’.

Triviality is different from *a priori* knowability. Chalmers (2012: 154) claims that the latter obeys S4. Although we may stay neutral on that matter, we can note that this claim at least cannot be refuted by any argument analogous to the above argument against S4 for triviality. This is because apriority does not depend on how easy it is to know something in a certain way, but only on whether it is possible at all. Knowing something could be *practically* impossible because it is too difficult to know (e.g., because the proposition is too complex to grasp), but this does not affect *a priori* knowability, since the latter is meant to concern possibility *in principle*.

One might now go on to say that it is no mystery that experts deny that there are numbers, although this is trivial, since it is not trivial that it is trivial. And one can then say that it is not overly uncharitable to take experts to deny trivial truths, as long as they are not trivially trivial.

Denying S4 also allows us to shed some light on the dialectics surrounding EO, which some might find confusing. Consider the following *modus ponens*:

- (i) Simple Reasoning is sufficient for knowing  $p$
- (ii) If Simple Reasoning is sufficient for knowing  $p$ , then it is easy to know  $p$
- (iii) It is easy to know  $p$ ,

We could say that (iii) is not easy to know, even though (ii) is, because (i) is not easy to know. This diagnosis is open to EO, for EO is not committed to the claim that it is itself easy to know.

Perhaps, finally, we could also propose that the reason Carnap thought that metaphysicians “must have some other question in mind” than the internal question is that he mistakenly accepted S4 for triviality. This would then have lead him to think that it is trivial that Q can be easily answered, and, hence, that metaphysicians cannot well have denied this.

While this response to the objection is possible, I believe there is a more compelling one, which is neutral on S4 for triviality. It begins with the observation that Q is not (of course) considered difficult because it involves advanced mathematics. Rather, it is held non-trivial due to certain philosophical considerations that seem compelling to many. But a proposition may be trivial even though there are considerations that experts take seriously, and which lead them to think the proposition in question is non-trivial. Thinking otherwise would involve a sloppy inference from a proposition being trivial to the conclusion that any consideration making it seem non-trivial must be clearly incorrect (and, hence something that experts would not be taken in by).

The proposition that there are numbers is trivial in that one can easily know its truth (namely, through Simple Reasoning), but this does not entail that an expert might not come to think of arguments against it that they find compelling. Carnapians are committed to taking these arguments to be unsound, of course,

but they can easily do so, since being an expert does not entail never being moved by unsound arguments.

Thus, it is no mystery that experts can deny or doubt something trivial, and, therefore, it is not unduly uncharitable to sometimes take them to do so. In some cases, however, like those figuring in the so-called “Bad Company Problem”, the considerations making certain existence questions seem non-trivial cannot as easily be dismissed as mistaken. This is a serious problem for EO, but it has no relevance for the question of charity discussed here, and hence of no relevance to the reform of EO advocated in this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Analogous objections threaten Yablo’s (1998) identification of the internal/external distinction with the fictional/literal distinction. He claims that metaphysicians understand ontological questions literally, whereas laymen understand them fictionally. But since metaphysicians take themselves to understand these questions in their ordinary sense, Yablo’s theory commits him to saying that they are wrong about whether they are speaking literally or fictionally, which is uncharitable. This objection presumably targets other forms of “hermeneutical fictionalism” as well, e.g., concerning mathematics. See Eklund (2019) and [REDACTED].

<sup>2</sup> See Burgess and Plunkett (2013a, 2013b), Plunkett and Sundell (2013), and Plunkett (2015).

<sup>3</sup> See [REDACTED] for details.

<sup>4</sup> Notable philosophers with such views include Frege, Næss, Waismann, Wittgenstein, and the “Oxford philosophers”, including Austin, Strawson, and many others.

<sup>5</sup> Hofweber (2016: Ch. 3) appeals to certain linguistic data to justify an ambiguity view of quantifiers. But these data, it seems to me, are better explained by appeal to ordinary quantifier restrictions (*pace* Hofweber (2016: §3.5.2)). This issue cannot be resolved here, however.

A different question is whether quantified sentences like, ‘There are numbers’ entail corresponding existence claims (‘Numbers exist’). There do seem to be reasons for denying this, and, if so, Carnapian ontological deflationists might have been wrong to suppose that existence questions are easily answered in just the same way as quantificational questions like Q.

This intuition that quantification and existence come apart is central to neo-Meinongians, but it bears noting that many neo-Meinongians hold views about existence that are in fact congenial to Carnapian ontological deflationism. Richard Routley and Graham Priest, for instance, hold that existence entails concreteness (Priest (2005: 136)). But this view is arguably in line with the Carnapian deflationist’s claim that Q is easily answered. For it can be argued that if existence entails concreteness, then the question whether numbers exist can be easily answered *in the negative*, and perhaps by partly empirical means, rather than merely conceptually.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to XXX for raising this difficulty.

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