New perspectives in metaontology: introduction to the special issue

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'Metaontology is the new black', or so Cameron (2008: 1) wrote a little over a decade ago. Since then, interest in metaontology—inquiry into the nature and status of the philosophical practice of asking and answering existence questions—is still going strong. Debates in metaontology have seen a proliferation of novel ideas, shifts in focus, and new critiques and challenges. In this special issue, we bring together four papers highlighting where much of the action lies today.

Much of the recent metaontological literature concerns ontological deflationism: the view that serious metaphysical inquiry into what exists is, in some sense, misguided. For years, debates about ontological deflationism tended to center around the doctrine of quantifier variance—the thesis that our quantifiers have many different candidate meanings—most prominently defended by Hirsch (2011). However, there has been a recent shift in focus towards a deflationary metaontological position that doesn't rely on quantifier variance. In particular, a view called 'easy ontology'—defended by Thomasson (2015)—has attracted much attention. According to the easy ontologist, serious metaphysical inquiry into what exists is often misguided because ontological questions can be answered starting from uncontroversial truths and reasoning by what seem like trivial steps to reach ontological conclusions. For example, from the observation that my sweater is red, the easy ontologist will claim that we are entitled to infer that my sweater therefore has the property of being red and so there exists a property: the property of being red. The first two essays in this special issue are primarily concerned with challenges to this kind of view.

In his paper, 'The neo-Carnapians', Peter van Inwagen presents a critique of, not only Thomasson's, but also Price's (2009) deflationary positions and a corresponding defense of neo-Quinean metaphysics. His strategy consists in presenting, what he

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calls, a 'typical neo-Quinean argument' for the existence of numbers. According to van Inwagen, this argument relies on only two philosophical assumptions, taken from Quine's philosophy of quantification: (1) that variables may only occupy *nominal* positions, rather than sentential, adjectival, adverbial, or other positions; and (2) that the range of a variable *cannot be restricted* to objects of a given kind, category or domain of quantification—the variables of our quantifiers are therefore unrestricted, ranging over objects of any kind or category. Once, the typical neo-Quinean argument is established, van Inwagen considers whether or not Price and Thomasson will be able to say anything to render this argument *defective*, ultimately concluding that they cannot.

He starts by considering whether or not the typical neo-Quinean argument may be thought of as defective because it can only be stated from within a 'linguistic framework'. Ultimately, van Inwagen argues that this won't do, for the notion of a linguistic framework is too obscure to render the typical neo-Quinean argument defective. For example, van Inwagen claims that making sense of the argument within a linguistic framework would require the premises to be analytically true, but that there is no reason to think the kinds of trivial inferences Thomasson relies on are analytically true. In addition, even if they were analytically true, van Inwagen claims that some these inferences could lead to contradictions and that, for Gödelian reasons, there will always be analytic truths which are not deducible from the axioms specified by the linguistic framework—which, for van Inwagen, defeats the purpose of introducing a linguistic framework. Finally, van Inwagen considers whether or not the typical neo-Quinean argument is defective because it might not be an argument for a *metaphysical* conclusion at all, but rather a scientific or common sense conclusion instead, as suggested by Price's (2009) critique of indispensability arguments. In response, van Inwagen suggests that arguments of this kind fall into 'verbal essentialism': they cannot be stated without using a philosophical term of art—in this case the term 'metaphysical'. Thus, according to van Inwagen, 'neo-Carnapians' like Price and Thomasson cannot provide reasons or thinking that the typical neo-Quinean argument is defective.

In his paper, 'Deflationary Metaphysics and Ordinary Language', Tim Button also presents a critique of Thomasson's deflationary metaontology, but from considerations derived from the methodology of appealing to ordinary language. His aim is to argue for two broad conclusions. First, that discovering the ontological commitments implicit in ordinary language is wildly complicated, rendering appeals to ordinary language in ontology a *non-trivial* enterprise. Second, that the ontological commitments of ordinary language can often point us in different directions simultaneously. According to Button, this entails that a range of existence questions cannot in fact be settled by appealing to ordinary language in the way that Thomasson hopes they might be.

To argue for his first general claim, Button distinguishes between 'good' and 'bad' easy arguments. The 'good' easy arguments are arguments for the existence of numbers, properties, and other entities Thomasson would like to endorse; the 'bad' easy arguments are similar in kind to the ones Thomasson makes use of, but result in the affirmation of the existence of things like sakes, smarts, and snooks. Button then argues that the only way for Thomasson to accept the good arguments and rule out the bad ones is by appeal to a general *Context Principle*: that when looking for the meaning of a phrase, we should do so neither by looking at the phrase in isolation nor within

an individual sentence, but rather within the context on an entire linguistic practice. With the context principle on board, Thomasson can now argue that 'sakes', 'smarts', and 'snooks' do not genuinely refer to objects, but only at the price of making the good easy arguments non-trivial and often difficult to establish. To argue for his second general claim, Button argues that appealing to ordinary language in the way the easy ontologist hopes to can result in arguments for two contradictory ontological positions. On the one hand, Button argues that appealing to ordinary language can get us to endorse mereological universalism: the claim that any particles, arranged in anyway, compose to create a new entity. On the other hand, however, Button argues that, for any argument in which ordinary language pushes us towards universalism, we can build a similar argument pushing us towards mereological nihilism: the thesis that simple particles never compose a further entity. The upshot is that that appealing to ordinary language can pull us in two directions simultaneously. Button therefore that the easy ontologist cannot solve settle ontological debates of this kind by appealing to ordinary language.

A common theme amongst deflationists is that we can answer existence questions by relying on conceptual analysis. In their paper 'Abductive Two-Dimensionalism: A New Route to the A Priori Identification of Necessary Truths', Jessica Wilson and Stephen Biggs, although not defenders per se of a deflationist project for ontology, provide an understanding of conceptual analysis which reestablishes the tie between the necessary and priori. They do this by defending a version of epistemic two-dimensional semantics (E2D) in which abduction can be thought of as an a priori inference. Kripke (1972) famously undermined the traditional link between necessity and a prioricity on the grounds that many necessary truths about individuals and natural kinds are known to us only a posteriori. Since then, such arguments have enjoyed wide acceptance amongst metaphysicians, yet Wilson and Biggs claim in their paper that there are at least two powerful reasons to rethink the link between these notions: (i) the intuitive appeal of the idea that, given that necessary truths are true in all possible worlds, our knowledge of these truths must involve a strong a priori component, and (ii) the possibility of knowing modal truths in much of our philosophical, semantic, and scientific practice independently of empirical inquiry.

Wilson and Biggs therefore claim, both at an intuitive and theoretical level, that it would be good news if we could restore the link between the necessity and the a priori. They see this as the core of the proposal of E2D, at least as it has been advocated by Jackson (1998) and Chalmers (2006), among others. According to Wilson and Biggs, 'E2D characterizes distinct aspects of meaning as distinct intensions, and maintains that access to certain intensions provides a basis for a priori knowledge of a wide range of modal truths, including a conditional such basis for the truths at issue in Kripke's discussion' (§1. Introduction). The most prominent difficulty Wilson and Biggs see for E2D in fulfilling this promise is that access to the requisite intensions from the armchair, as it were, may not ultimately be available to us (Wilson 1982; Melnyk 2008). And if that is so, then such access cannot be used to acquire the aforementioned a priori knowledge. Wilson and Biggs believe that although a good number of the extant versions of E2D fall prey to this kind objection, the prospect for E2D looks brighter once we understand the role that the assumption of a conceiving-based epistemology of intensions has in this type of objection. It is because of the flaws of this epistemology

and not E2D as such, Wilson and Biggs argue, that the whole E2D project is often considered unviable. Building on their account of abduction as a mode of a priori inference, Wilson and Biggs go on to show that their abduction-based epistemology of intensions can overcome the objections that have traditionally undermined E2D and offer a more plausible characterization of the philosophical disagreements that take place than other versions of E2D supplemented with a conceiving-based epistemology of intensions.

Finally, another major theme in recent metaontology concerns the metaphysical relation of grounding. The notion of grounding is commonly introduced by its supporters as a type of explanatory relation that provides us with distinctive non-causal metaphysical explanations about the world. In his paper, 'Grounding and Dependence', Benjamin Schnieder explores the relation between this notion and ontological dependence, although the ensuing discussion is couched in terms of the notions of existential and factual dependence, which Schnieder believes correspond with some qualifications to the notions of ontological dependence and grounding. In doing so, Schnieder embraces a distinctive Aristotelian approach, which claims that there is more to ontology than simply determining what entities there are. Crucially, he claims, metaphysicians must also capture the way in which certain entities in the world depend for their existence on more fundamental entities, so as to unveil how reality in its totality is structured. Ontology would demand then, apart from the notion of existence, a notion of existential dependence.

Schnieder believes that this goal of ontology could be analogously extended to science, in that a further goal of science, besides determining what truths or facts there are, could be to understand how certain propositions depend for their truth on other propositions, or how certain facts obtain in virtue of some other. According to Schnieder, given that his notion of factual dependence allows us to capture the structure of truths about the world, it would be crucial for a proper understanding of science. Given this picture of ontology and science, Schnieder pursues three main aims pertaining to the relation between existential and factual dependence in his paper. The first one is rather general: to clarify what is at stake in how we conceive of the relation between existential and factual dependence and to explore some potential answers. The second aim, once the systematic connection between both kinds of dependence is established, is to defend a particular proposal to understand this systematic connection. Here Schnieder considers three options: identity (as suggested in Schaffer's works), definition [as suggested by Correia and Schnieder (2012)], and grounding [as suggested by Koslicki (2015) and Orilia (2009)], and makes a case in favor of the definitional proposal. Finally, though Schnieder believes this aim is contingent on certain assumptions about quantification and elimination rules (among others), he nonetheless makes the case for a third aim of the paper: to bring to light the theoretical choices that determine the relation between factual and existential dependence.

To sum up, this special issue covers a wide range of exciting topics in contemporary metaontology. It offers two novel challenges to the increasingly popular varieties of ontological deflationism that don't center around the notion of quantifier variance. On the one hand, there is the challenge put to easy ontologists and other 'Carnapians' to be able to specify precisely what is wrong with neo-Quinean arguments in metaphysics, due to van Inwagen. On the other hand, there is the challenge of being able

to show that appeals to ordinary language in order to derive ontological conclusions are actually as straightforward as deflationists often take them to be, due to Button. In addition, this special issue provides two new contributions to the methodology of metaphysics. Wilson and Biggs suggest that, in contrast to post-Kripkean conceptions of metaphysical inquiry, conceptual analysis and the traditional link between the necessary and the a priori may be seen as a key feature in metaphysical theorizing once again. Finally, there is Schnieder's call for ontology and science to concern themselves with the notions of existential and factual dependence, rather than simply listing what there is. As we hope you'll be able to see, over a decade onwards, metaontology is still a thriving and exciting field.

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