Anti-Realism, Easy Ontology, and Issues of Reference

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ABSTRACT

In order to re-contextualize the otherwise ontologically privileged meaning of metaphysical debates into a more insubstantial form, metaphysical deflationism runs the risk of having to adopt potentially unwanted anti-realist tendencies. This tension between deflationism and anti-realism can be expressed as follows: in order to claim truthfully that something exists, how can deflationism avoid the anti-realist feature of construing such claims singularly in an analytical fashion? One may choose to adopt a Yablovian fallibilism about existential claims, but other approaches can be appealed to as well. Amie Thomasson's Easy Ontology is one such approach, whereby the interaction of empirical as well as analytic features within the construction of its ontological theory affords a role for analytical rules without forsaking a link with empirical reality. The development of these analytical and empirical features has resulted in significant critiques regarding, one, potential reference failure of easy-ontological claims, and two, a circularity in how easy ontology explains the relation between its analytical rules and existential claims. This essay offers a response by showcasing how an easy ontological deflationism can reject these criticisms without succumbing to, one, the anti-realism of pure analyticism, and two, a further critique of wholesale referential indeterminacy in its referring terms.

Keywords: Deflationism; Anti-Realism; Easy Ontology; Circularity; Reference Failure; Indeterminacy

This essay seeks to explore a way for metaphysical deflationism to resist its anti-realist tendencies through an interpretation of Amie Thomasson's Easy Ontology that avoids critiques of reference failure, circularity, and referential indeterminacy. Section 1 introduces deflationism before, in Section 2, discussing its tension with anti-realism. Section 3 outlines Thomasson's thesis and its potential to resolve this tension, Section 4 brings up the aforesaid critiques and responds to them, and Section 5 offers concluding remarks.

1. Introduction

As an initial approximation, we call a deflationary approach to ontology any method that does not lead to distinct "philosophical consequences" (Heylen and Horsten 2017, 106), in that it does not lead to privileging any one result of quantifying over what exists over any other. This is opposed to ontologically non-deflationary approaches that do favor one set of existents over others – e.g., the universalist's composites vs. the nihilist's mereological simples. Deflationists then regard metaphysical debates to be "in some sense shallow, trivial, or merely verbal", since no one answer to the debate is non-trivially favored over any other, and "that although there may be objective answers to metaphysical questions, these answers are grounded in conceptual truths" (Miller 2016, 425). A conceptual truth is conceptual in nature because it is based, according to Manley (2009), on a conceptual framework for language consisting in "a set of terms in a language along with rules or 'ways of speaking' that govern their use." (7) For Thomasson's deflationism, a framework also licenses the truth conditions of concepts based on it if their constitutive terms have their meanings derived from said framework's rules (Thomasson 2014b, 506), hence why such concepts' corresponding rules are considered *analytic* rules for the use of a framework's terms (Thomasson 2015, 41). This is not to say that a deflationary metaphysical theory *must* attain *only* analytical features, just that, in general, what predominantly grants metaphysical disputes their sense is the ways in which linguistic terms are defined by the conceptual apparatuses and frameworks in play.[1] Therefore, deflated answers to metaphysical disputes can still be objective in the sense that their objectivity is a logical feature of the underlying framework being employed – i.e., not all deflated answers are objectively, as in necessarily, true, but that some answers are contingently true while others necessarily true is a fact logically entailed by the framework.[2]

The link between a deflationary approach employing conceptual truths in answering metaphysical debates and that approach not favoring any one set of existents over others is therefore easy to make: since the truth conditions of a set of existents is expressed by a framework that quantifies over these existents, and given that frameworks can always license the falsity of sets of existents other than what they license as true, then barring any principled

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[1] Mitchell (2014) concurs when explaining failed metaphysical disputes as those that do not follow the "customary rules of use" for terms employed within these disputes (582).

[2] Cameron (2009, 14) and Tahko (2013, 1377) apply this fact of framework-based necessity to modal truths. *Cf.*, Sider 2003.

way of determining which framework is in fact the true descriptor of the world, there is thus no principled way of determining with set of existents is *the ontologically privileged* set. In other words, for the deflationist, in principle we cannot determine which framework "is metaphysically more right than [any] other" if they are all equally adequate in describing the world (Hirsch 2011, xi. *Cf.*, Eklund 2008, 390, 394). Mitchell (2014) elaborates on this, in that our "[l]ogical vocabulary serves a *prescriptive* rather than a descriptive function in illustrating rules governing thought and talk" (587), in the sense that in their prescriptive function, no one vocabulary is privileged over others as the only one that truthfully describes what exists in the world. Stated in another way, for the deflationist, different metaphysical languages/frameworks are all equally expressive of the facts of the world, wherein a language's expressivity is tied to its "set of unstructured propositions", with each proposition corresponding to "a set of possible worlds."[3]

2. Deflationism's tension with anti-realism

However, there is a veritable tension between many deflationary approaches and the anti-realist tendency to consider answers to metaphysical debates as *solely* mind-dependent in their truth. For example, an anti-realist may accept "statements like '[b]efore we had introduced our conventions, not all horses were horses'" (Mitchell 2014, 586), if by convention we mean conceptual framework, and by 'all horses are horses' we mean a necessary truth licensed by that convention. A deflationary position on 'all horses are horses' (call it HORSE) may, on the other hand, regard its truth as mind-*independently* the case and as based on the fact that, indeed, all horses are horses. This insight may be interpreted in terms of possible worlds: the necessary truths that are possible do not change every time we decide to employ a different framework, for these possibilities are not *up to us*, only how we choose to describe them.[4] Relatedly, for deflationism, contra an anti-realist stance, what is possible in our world does not hinge upon our framework of choice, but on the world itself; contra a non-deflationary stance, the fact of

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[3] Horden 2014, 229. Horden later on denies the validity of deflationism's espoused equality of framework expressivity since he takes different metaphysical frameworks to not necessarily *mean* the same thing by their constitutive propositions – i.e., different frameworks do not express the same metaphysical possibilities (2014, 233). Nevertheless, we may instead tie expressivity to *empirical* expressivity, allowing for different metaphysical frameworks to all be equally *empirically* adequate descriptors of the set of possible worlds. This is elaborated further in Sections 3 and 4.

[4] *Cf.*, Cameron 2009, 7. Hirsch (2011) expresses that whether or not something exists does not depend "on our linguistic decisions" (70).

some necessary truth's possibility does not mean that we can in principle determine which of the possible frameworks consists of the necessary truths that describe the world in a way that is not merely trivially licensed by their underlying framework.

In this sense, for Mitchell (2014), statements derived from our conventions can deal with "logical truths like [HORSE, which is a] necessary [truth], while statements about our linguistic conventions are contingent" (586). Here, what is contingent (up to us) is the framework we choose to describe the world, but which necessary truth of the world we decide to express by a framework would remain necessary (not up to us) even if no one was around to think it. As such, anyone denying, for instance, the truth of HORSE either has misunderstood what is being meant by the concept 'horse' employed by a framework that does license HORSE as necessary, or is choosing to use the concept 'horse' in a different way. Tahko (2013) expresses this sentiment when arguing that "linguistic conventions may determine which necessary proposition is being expressed by a given statement, but the modal status of the proposition is not grounded in linguistic conventions" (1377).

Similarly, Cameron (2009), in discussing modal properties of objects, describes different frameworks as having terms that "pick out" different properties of objects; he ends up favouring a deflationary stance when explaining that while it is "up to us" which terms pick out which property, the fact that objects do and do not possess certain properties is in some sense not up to us (4). We can contrast this deflationary stance with an anti-realist one whereby, according to Cameron (2009), all necessary truths are so simply because it is *inconceivable* that such truths would be contingent (3-4). From this interpretation of anti-realism we have the rule that conceivability implies how to render both meaningful *and* true what is possible, whereas for deflationism, conceivability can only render meaningful what is possible, not which possibilities are true – i.e., how we conceive can allow for a possibility's truth conditions to be made intelligible for us, but that does not mean our conceptions necessarily *fulfill* those conditions. In other words, according to this interpretation of a deflationism that avoids the anti-realist tendency of wholesale mind-dependency, the inconceivability of a necessary truth being contingent is not a sufficient condition for determination of that truth's modal status.

Nevertheless, not all deflationary approaches agree on precisely what a necessary truth like HORSE is even meant to represent. Does HORSE, by being a necessarily true fact of the world, entail that the world cannot ever be different from one wherein HORSE does apply to it? How can HORSE ever not be true for *any* world? If by HORSE we simply express a logical

tautology, then it trivially applies as a necessary truth for all possible worlds; but if we want HORSE to express an objective fact of the world, then in what sense can this non-tautologously be the case so that it does not beg the question against the deflationist? The main issue can be expressed as follows: let there be two statements,

(**H1**) HORSE is true iff there are horses,

(**H2**) If HORSE is true, then all horses are horses.

It would be simple for the deflationist to accept H1, given that it expresses the truth of HORSE as based on the fact that there are horses. However, H2 is worrying inasmuch as it allows the truth of HORSE to be wedded to anything other than there being horses, which is quite the anti-realist turn. In short, given H1, HORSE would not be true in a horse-less world; given H2, HORSE could still be true in a horse-less world, which may imply a problematic analyticity in H2. How so?

We can explore another example to answer this. For instance, if we accept as necessarily true the statement, 'water is H2O' (call it WATER), we can still ask: in virtue of what is WATER necessarily true? Cameron (2009) claims that denying WATER is to commit a logical error *iff* what is denied is either the statement 'water is water' or 'H2O is H2O', both of which *can* be known "*a priori*" as necessarily true (7. Italics added). What can only be known *a posteriori* is what chemical substance composes water, which has been discovered to indeed be H2O – we can only know *a priori that* water necessarily is a substance, but only *a posteriori what* that substance is composed of. Sidelle (2002) agrees with Cameron, in that WATER expresses both an

> analytic principle [such as] 'Nothing counts as water in any situation unless it has the same deep explanatory features (if any) as the stuff we call "water"', and the [*a posteriori*] fact … that the deep explanatory feature of the stuff we call 'water' is being composed of H2O (319).

Following Cameron and Sidelle, we ought not be tempted to think that, for deflationism, what grants WATER its necessity entails identifying the analytic with the *a priori* in such a way that what analytic principles can be known *a priori* to be necessarily true have nothing to do with the empirical facts of the world. Remember that, if deflationism is to avoid anti-realist tendencies, then necessary truths, not just contingent ones, have to in some sense be based on the world and not merely on our frameworks and conventions. Otherwise, the necessary truth

of WATER would not be based on the fact that water is indeed H2O, since then the world in which WATER is stated could turn out to be different at no risk to the truth value of WATER.

All this means is that even the necessary truth of HORSE ought to not be seen as merely *analytically* true, lest deflationism bleeds over into anti-realism. In this way, we can have *a priori* knowledge that HORSE is *non-analytically* and necessarily true, and generalizing this achievement to other possible statements has been an endeavor undertaken in the past (*Cf.*, Soames 2006, 307). Similarly, knowing that WATER is necessarily true entails *a priori* knowledge "that the natural kind water has its actual composition essentially[,] even though empirical work is needed to determine of what individual instances of water are made" (Tahko 2013, 1371). If we disregard for now the detailed sense in which something possesses a feature essentially, we can still see that what HORSE and WATER are meant to represent are statements that can in some sense *fail to obtain* despite them being necessary truths licensed by their corresponding frameworks.

How failure conditions for statements like HORSE and WATER can be meaningfully understood is a question that one could interpret as a motivation underlining Thomasson's *easy ontology*, regarding what statements like the two above are meant to precisely represent. To arrive at a clearer picture of what is at stake in specifying what is meant by said statements, it is her thesis to which we must now turn. We begin by outlining Thomasson's easy ontology before, in Section 4, briefly exploring how one can respond to three important critiques thereof relating to circularity, reference failure, and referential indeterminacy.

3. Easy ontology's resolution

For Thomasson (2014b), her easy ontology entails that "all existence questions can be resolved straightforwardly by empirical and/or conceptual means" (503).[5] In regards to the conceptual side of the picture, Thomasson's approach relates significantly to what has been discussed above: inquiries into sets of existents must be had at the level of what is licensed by conceptual frameworks if these inquiries are to make any sense at all – to have a framework-dependent approach to answering an existence question is to require it to be *trivially* answerable, otherwise "it cannot be a well-formed, fully meaningful question at all" (Thomasson 2014b, 506). Obviously, Thomasson's stance towards ontology is a deflationary one in regard to it "being skeptical about [supposedly non-trivial] ontological debates", but it

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[5] *Cf.*, Thomasson (2009b; 2015) for further discussion.

also avoids an anti-realist mind-dependency problem by sticking quite unapologetically to "a straightforward simple realism about the entities in question" within a debate (2014b, 502, 503n8).[6]

Thomasson (2014b) has also interpreted her approach along a Carnapian framework, in that,

> [w]hen the easy ontologist says existence questions about numbers, properties, or ordinary objects are easily answered, it is the *internal question* she speaks of. … If we managed to ask, 'Presupposing the existence of numbers, are there numbers?,' we would clearly get a positive answer to a very stupid question. Moreover, if we take it as an external existence question, … it cannot be answered (505).[7]

These internal questions are rendered meaningful once the terms thereof are understood by the rules that govern the terms' proper use, implying that the internal existence question becomes easy to answer "[a]s long as the terms in question are used with their standard rules in place" (506). In other words, meaningful answers are provided in the context of a framework, such that their truth values become easy and trivial inferences *licensed* by the framework in use (518-9). For *external* existential questions, according to Thomasson (2014b), asking them involves, say, "asking 'Are there numbers?' in a way that severs the term from its constitutive rules of use, those rules that give it meaning—leaving the question meaningless (or assigning new rules that change the question)" (506. *Cf.*, 521).

What are these proper rules of use? According to Thomasson (2015), they are meant to characterize *application conditions* that list out what needs to be met for a term to validly apply to a situation at hand. In this way, we can say that "*K*s exist iff the application conditions actually associated with '*K* ' are fulfilled" (86). These conditions are derivable from any language and allow for existential inferences to be made; the example of composition is one often employed by Thomasson, whereby the easy ontologist "can begin from a sentence even the eliminativist accepts, say, 'There are particles arranged tablewise,' and make a trivial inference to 'There is a tablewise arrangement of particles,' and from there introduce the noun 'table' accordingly, to conclude 'There is a table'" (Thomasson 2014b, 503). Here, following the sense in which existence questions are conceptually and empirically solvable, the

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[6] *Cf.*, Thomasson 2015, chap. 3. Thomasson (2014a) elsewhere qualifies this realism as, in part, a simple common-sense normativism as well. However, see Note 8.

[7] *Cf.*, Thomasson (2015, chap. 1) for a development of her reading of Carnap.

application conditions of 'table' could reasonably conform to empirical requirements (phenomenal observations, measurements, etc.) and logical relations dictating that these requirements instantiate a 'tablewise' arrangement. The above adumbration is not meant to be a justification for utilizing rules of term-use as a way of conclusively settling ontological debates – there are issues, for instance, centering on how the commonplace imprecision of language use undermines the clarity of existential inferences in the easy ontological way (Egerton 2016, 53; Button 2020, 41, 46n32) – just that it is a way of explicating how trivial existential inferences can be made *given* precise rules of use for terms associated with a linguistic framework that thereby renders ontological debates meaningful.[8]

Now, the validity of existential inference – i.e., inference to existential quantification – contingent upon proper use of the terms of a framework that grants the inference its meaning – e.g., from 'I see a table' to 'a table exists' based on application conditions for 'table' denoting phenomenal requirements – is not a unique deflationary position.[9] The issue is in how the inference may be used to interpret that there is nothing non-trivially at stake in 'non-deflationary' ontological debates. For instance, the inference above, from the nihilistic 'tablewise' term to the more universalist one of 'table', is meant to indicate how different ontological positions can be rendered conceptually consistent with each other.[10] Thomasson is not claiming that every ontological position is identical to each other, just that how they are

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[8] Mitchell (2014), for example, accepts the cognitive limitations we possess in relation to ascribing clear meaning to terms of which we can be somewhat ignorant, yet using even imprecise and/or incomplete rules of use for understanding when a term is correctly applied still may serve a *pragmatic* function (575-8. *Cf.*, Williams 2013). There is also a further issue, in that Thomasson seems to be claiming that ordinary usage of constitutive rules of term-use naturally leads one to affirm universalism. Indeed, Thomasson (2016) remarks that advocates of mereological nihilism are "not making any theoretic claim[s] we can make sense of" (13. Italics removed). I am not following Thomasson here since, as Button (2020, §3.3) argues convincingly, the construction of constitutive rules of use should not have to be exclusionary against other ontological paradigms. Button himself even claims that his own favoured parochialism is not the only "*unique* way to pursue ordinary usage" of constitutive rules within easy ontology (52). This will hopefully be made clearer in the paragraphs that follow, although I will not be focussing on ordinary usage *per se*. Instead, I will simply be taking for granted that these rules can be made precise in whichever ontologically leaning way; although, as argued in Section 4.2, it may be the case that precisification cannot afford us fully explicable rules without an ascription of circularity.

[9] This is the case even for those who would seek to ascribe to existential quantification a more inflated role that captures some joint-carving sense for the quantifier, such as Sider (2011).

[10] In this way, Thomasson is agreeing with Hirsch (2011). *Cf.*, Horden (2014, 226) and Miller (2016, 429) for a related discussion on ontological pluralism.

often made to seem mutually opposed is often an outcome of their employment of divergent and/or esoteric rules of use for their corresponding terms. If these rules were to be given precise meaning – i.e., they become constitutive of *internal* existential questions in the Carnapian sense – in terms of specification of understandable application conditions for the corresponding terms, then it would not seem rational to further inquire into some extra way that the objects these terms are meant to express do exist (Thomasson 2014b, 507).[11] Thomasson does not disagree that different existential statements, rendered precise in this way, can still have divergent truth values; she just thinks that the failure conditions that prompt a statement's falsity would be in no sense non-trivially *ontological*, just *empirical* (508-509).[12]

Thomasson explains that the capacity for a framework to meaningfully license the truth value of an existential statement through the expression of precise truth conditions, or simply the valid application of a term for existential quantification, depends heavily on whether its failure conditions are ontologically or empirically characterized: an object can only be given meaningful failure conditions for its existence once that existence is adjudicable in an empirical fashion (Thomasson 2014b, 514-515, 528). In other words, only empirical failure conditions are amenable to specification by conceptual/linguistic frameworks. The point being made here is not that ontological failure conditions do not exist, just that we cannot express them in any sensibly tractable way. Thomasson takes this to indicate "that there need be no ontologically privileged way of saying what the conditions are under which [a term] is (to be) applied" (Thomasson 2014b, 526n76). Stated differently, according to easy ontology, it is an open question as to what objects ontologically fail to obtain, and in what way they do ontologically fail to obtain (nihilistically, universally, etc.), whenever empirically conditioned existential statements are made about these objects. As such, we can clearly see how Thomasson's

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[11] Specification of these constitutive rules of use for our terms corresponds to laying out the application conditions that express the truth conditions for our existential claims. Thomasson remarks that these rules are analytic in nature – a claim's truth conditions are set out via our analytic constructions thereof, of course *modulo* considerations of empirical discovery, e.g., observation reports. (*Cf.*, Thomasson (2007, 30-36) for a relevant discussion on Quine's criticism on the analytic-synthetic distinction.)

[12] *Cf.*, Thomasson (2009a) for a discussion concerning the misguided sense in including these extra-empirical failure conditions within our talk about objects.

approach appeals to the deflationary implication that no specific way of quantification, notwithstanding however what concords with empirical methodology, is to be favored.[13]

In terms of the abovementioned statements of HORSE and WATER, what would their empirical failure conditions look like? It is difficult to imagine those for HORSE other than, for instance, something akin to the falsifiability of the law of identity. On the other hand, for WATER, its failure could instantiate when some substance that fits the phenomenal characteristics of water does not possess the H_2O structure. Now, that water is not H_2O in the above sense is surely not metaphysically impossible (*Cf.*, Soames 2005, 191), but if we want to avoid simply presupposing that WATER is true we would need to attain first some non-analytic *a priori* knowledge – e.g., "[w]e know a priori that, necessarily, only the actual molecular composition of any chemical substance can produce the chemical properties (i.e. phenomenological properties) of that substance" (Tahko 2013, 1372) – before *a posteriori* knowledge that the actual structure of water is H_2O. Attaining the latter *a posteriori* knowledge is in theory possible, but whether it would just require empirically surveying all instances of the substance of water and determining if the H_2O structure is instantiated in each will be addressed later.[14] The former *a priori* knowledge, if we are to interpret WATER in an easy ontological fashion, would have to be a trivial deduction from, one, a framework's rules of use for the terms involved in, 'molecular composition ↔ phenomenal properties' (call it MOL), and two, the fulfilment of the application conditions constituting those rules. Since this knowledge is *a priori* and thus non empirical in nature, the corresponding application conditions cannot be empirically falsifiable, meaning that the truth of MOL and the knowledge of its truth must be trivially the case if it is the case at all.

Without evaluating whether such *a priori* knowledge can be reasonably structured in the above way, we can still venture an account as to how this trivial knowledge and truth could turn out. Remember that knowledge that WATER is meant to represent knowledge of some necessary truth, so an interpretation in terms of possible worlds would be of help here. Cameron (2009) describes that "the property of being water is a function such that when it takes a world

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[13] This may explain Egerton's interpretation of Thomasson that ontologists who try to introduce non-empirical failure conditions for their non-deflationary existential statements are "being methodologically out of place" by appealing to "*ad hoc* and . . . dogmatic" standards (Egerton 2016, 44). Interestingly, as pointed out in Section 4.2, there may be a viable attribution of *ad hoc*-ness and dogmatism in the introduction of empirical failure conditions in light of how one would make their linguistic terms refer to whether these failure conditions obtain or not.

[14] *Cf.*, Cameron (2009, 8) for a relevant discussion.

w as its argument it yields as its value the singleton of the substance water, or perhaps the set of all the water molecules, in *w*" (9). Additionally, according to Cameron, for the deflationist,

> the reason that nothing can be water and not H2O according to this view [deflationism] is not plausibly to be taken as the result of some necessary connection between the structured universal being H2O and the function being water, as is the case according to [the non-deflationist], but rather because our usage of the term 'water' is such that the term would not apply to any function which took you from a world to a thing in that world that did not instantiate the H2O structured universal (9).

Here, knowledge that WATER is attained in some *w* in which it is empirically impossible for the phenomenal properties of the substance that one would call 'water' to possess any other molecular structure than H2O. WATER, as a necessary truth in any *w*, is licensed by the framework that furnishes water instances *as* H2O instances.

In terms of application conditions, 'water' and 'H2O' have empirical failure conditions – phenomenal and molecular, respectively – yet their 'necessary connection' is not some deep ontological feature of *w* but a trivial implication from a framework. Such a framework could be constituted by statements such as MOL whose application conditions are *non-empirical*, and a rule whereby the fulfillment of the above *empirical* conditions would allow us to conclude, 'H2O ↔ water', which is just WATER. Thus, for the Cameron-style deflationist who employs easy ontology's application conditions for proper term use, knowledge that WATER consists of trivial *a priori* knowledge that MOL and fallible *a posteriori* knowledge that the actual structure of water is H2O, which by an additional rule in the framework licenses the conclusion that WATER.

Do these empirical conditions require us to survey all instances of water in all worlds in order to attain this *a posteriori* knowledge that water is H2O? For Cameron (2009), not necessarily, as he seems to argue that any water instance that is not H2O would just not be called 'water' by the framework that licenses WATER as necessary (9-11). However, this outcome is not problematic for the deflationist, because even though the necessity of WATER is given by the framework, whether or not that framework is the *only* correct description of possible states of affairs is irrelevant. As such, the aforesaid rule that infers WATER from MOL can be enacted by seemingly *any* discovery of an instance of a phenomenally watery substance that is also molecularly structured as H2O. In relation to a possible world interpretation of WATER, we know that our world is one wherein WATER truly applies, we just do not know if our world is one wherein watery stuff can also be non-H2O stuff. This latter

fact deals no damage to WATER's necessary truth however, because 'water' was never meant to apply to anything other than a substance with an H2O structure in the first place *once* we had started discovering this structure appearing in our observations of water. The fact that our use of 'water' picks out H2O instances is not because of some inherent eligibility in choosing this water-H2O connection, just that once this connection had been chosen it therefore became necessary by dint of the framework – we could have employed another framework and had 'water' pick out something else – but this choice, in order to be not merely an analytic one, needed to be sensitive to actual observations of water as H2O-structured (Cameron 2009, 10-11, 13).

4. Some Critiques

4.1. Reference failure and circularity

However, there is a potential issue here concerning the relation between the empirical failure conditions of terms like 'water' and 'H2O' and the non-empirical application conditions of the terms involved in MOL. This relation is captured by the rule that licenses the inference from *a posteriori* knowledge of H2O-structured instances of water to WATER itself, given MOL of course. In what way should empirical conditions relate to non-empirical ones when both types of conditions are necessary in licensing statements like WATER? It seems rather *ad hoc* that any observation of an H2O-water relation is a necessary condition for validating WATER. If a deflationist wants to avoid an analytic understanding of this rule, then the rule itself must be defeasible, in that it is entirely possible that the inference from H2O-water observations to the validity of WATER can fail in a way that is not just analytically licensed as such. In other words, the mere fact that some number of these observations is necessary to license WATER cannot just be arbitrarily decided upon, because it is still open for WATER to fail by virtue of future observations of water instances that are not H2O-structured. If the deflationist contests that these observations would simply not be picked out by 'water', then yes, she may be appealing to the proper deflationary tendency to not privilege any one set of existents as what is picked out by the terms constituting our contingent frameworks, but this result nonetheless looks to be highly non-defeasible and analytic. Would this still be problematic for the deflationist?

Kovacs (2019) succinctly describes this issue as follows: "The rules of use guiding a concept F in conjunction with [the fulfillment of] F's application conditions may indeed justify (perhaps even a priori justify) the belief that there is an F. But such justification is defeasible"

(§2.1). It is not enough for the deflationist to just keep asserting that what some concept/term applies to is up to us, and that what is not up to us is that what these terms apply to are objects whose features are mind-independent – e.g., it is up to us to have 'water' pick out instances of H_2O, but that water is H_2O is a mind-independent truth that can be empirically observed – because these mind-independent features are never granted as certain. The only way we could grant them as certain is by some analytic gerrymandering of the field of possibilities. This may be non-problematic for the deflationist, yet it does not necessarily preclude the possibility that, according to Yablo (2014), based "on the deep metaphysics of the matter", our terms that are meant to express mind-independent features of reality can have their application conditions fail to obtain if these features turn out different than our initial thoughts thereof (496). To already presuppose that these features cannot ever turn out different is therefore naïve.

Let us call the presupposition of these mind-independent features, P, and the mind-dependent construal of terms meant to express these features, R – i.e., rules of use relating to fulfillment of application conditions – and any framework statement employing these expressive terms, S. In effect, S is highly factorizable into P and R (*Cf.*, Yablo 2014, 489-491). P tells us something useful about the world – i.e., information about an existence in the world – and thus serves as part of our set of "representational aids" concerning the world (Yablo 2005, 94-95). R, on the other hand, acts as the analytic facet of S and can thus be true, and knowable *a priori*, regardless of the truth value of P (Yablo 2009, 522).

Thomasson (2014b) wants to regard P as empirically adjudicable for any meaningful S, and while R is indeed an analytic principle, she considers that any object that S can be about simply cannot fail to exist in such a way as to damage the truth value of S *once* P has been empirically decided (520). This is not to say that Thomasson (2014b) believes that a term cannot ever refer in ontologically/non-empirically substantive ways, only that she denies "the appropriateness of thinking that there are certain *presuppositions required for it* to refer" (520n61. *Cf.*, Thomasson 2013). Nothing fails to refer in an ontologically substantive way if nothing is made to refer in the first place past what is prescribed by a term's rules of use – i.e., past what the framework's rules of use for its terms license, and what the fulfillment of application conditions imply as empirically adjudicable[15] – for "there is again a difference

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[15] This empirical adjudicability is structured analytically, in that what counts as an appropriate observation report has to be decided by us through the application of some relational rule: for instance, 'phenomena of such and such type correspond to the fulfillment of application conditions of such and such character.' *Cf.*, Thomasson, 2010,

between guarding against empirical errors and guarding against ontological errors [affecting a term's referential status]" (Thomasson 2014b, 526). She is not saying that these ontological errors are non-extant, just that talk about existence need not be beholden to them.

Therefore, Thomasson is not part of the school of thought wherein, according to Miller (2016), ontological "representation [for terms] is *in principle* impossible" (428). For Thomasson, there is a way to include a possible ontological sense of P in a counterfactual rule for R. Generally, R is true iff C is such that P $\rightarrow$ S for any S factorizable into R and P. (P $\rightarrow$ S) is a trivially true inference for any framework purporting to include terms that are about mind-independent features; this inferential rule is not technically part of R, but it is analytic nonetheless. Of course, the circumstance, C, surrounding one's claiming that S would need to also be sensitive to observation reports that people take to be unproblematically about S, which is just the expression of the fulfilment of the terms' empirical application conditions in S. Thomasson (2014b) applies this rule to talk about the existence of statues (P), the statement that 'there is a statue here' (S), and some analytical 'feature-placing' verbalization of statue as 'statuing' (R): "It is statuing around here if and only if circumstances are such that, if statues existed, it would be true that there is a statue here" (512).[16] Now, the use of P in the above counterfactual rule pertains either to an empirical or ontological sense of the existence of some object, meaning that R is true in any world wherein, one, certain application conditions are fulfilled for R, and two, the truth of P licenses the truth of S *no matter* how P ends up obtaining past what has already been empirically adjudicated on.

How does this relate to WATER? P would express the existence of water as H_2O, while R includes MOL and (P $\rightarrow$ S) pertains to the inferential rule that licenses WATER from fulfillment of some empirical, *a posteriori* conditions for observation of water molecules. Moreover, S would just be WATER and C would be sensitive to actual observational reports of water as H_2O-structured. Now, P allows for water to exist in ways that are not amenable to empirically minded discernment – i.e., in ontologically substantive ways – but since we cannot specify exactly how these ways would look like observationally, it is sufficient for us to simply consider the set of all possible such ways as a good enough descriptor for the possibilities of P's expression past empirical adjudicability. The upshot to this is that (P $\rightarrow$ S) can remain

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for a response to objections that what suffices for these relational rules and grants us non-analytic application conditions.

[16] This formulation is adapted from Merricks 2001.

analytic/non-defeasible without detrimental ramifications for the truth of S that would otherwise be had by the failure-to-obtain of some mind-independent property of P. This is because in the above counterfactual formulation of WATER, for instance, MOL and (P → S) would still be true, concerning P, whether water is in some sense *ontologically* H2O or not.

The only question remaining then is whether any number of observations of H2O-structured water instances is just as good as any other number for enacting (P → S) and therefore for validating the necessary truth of WATER; deflationism's usual egalitarian approach towards existential quantification would have to answer this in the affirmative. But if the deflationist accepts this outcome, then the issue of how statements like WATER and HORSE can be about the world while also having their truths be licensed by their corresponding frameworks that render them meaningful can be resolved: given a set of observed instances fulfilling empirical application conditions for terms meant to express these instances, whatever necessary truth we could then say is being indicated by this observed set is subsequently up to us to decide. While these necessary truths are licensed by frameworks – they have to be if one wants to avoid the possibility of these truths failing to obtain by virtue of future observations – we would not know how to correctly apply them to the world had it not been for that initial set of observations. In short, each discovery of water as H2O-structured does not necessarily entail that WATER is a necessary truth unless licensed by a framework granting WATER its meaning. Thus, in claiming that WATER is a necessary truth about the world, we cannot forget the at least equally significant result that WATER is about what we have discovered of the world so far as well.

The discussion on WATER so far has the counterfactual rule applying to sets of entities, but what about existential statements regarding singular objects? Do they fare much better in having a less *ad hoc* way for determining what empirically counts as enacting (P → S)? Yes, they do, for existential statements about singular objects only require the one observation/measurement of the object for the counterfactual to apply. Nonetheless, P for singular entities would still pertain to their existence either as an empirical or ontological mode, so there still is no issue of favoring how an entity is supposed to ontologically exist as a criterion for validly asserting existential statements. Given this, a singular entity could then fail to obtain in some ontologically substantive way (or in any such way) without necessarily undermining existential statements about this entity.

Furthermore, the counterfactual rule gives us a way of answering a potential criticism of the above method of having our existential terms refer to mind-independent existents or features of existents. According to Yablo (2014), existential statements about, say, tables must be sensitive to the fact that "there is no rule that says that the world has to contain tables, if it cannot tell you why it is holding out" (501). Elsewhere, and more generally, Yablo (2009) claims that the fact of some entity's existence cannot be appealed to in answering its existence question – i.e., there is no fact of the matter that can adjudicate on this question (521). In other words, since we cannot gather from our discoveries about objects a privileged reason as to why these objects have to exist/not exist, we have no privileged reason to think that these objects do exist, and if the only alternative would be to simply presuppose their existence, which would beg the question, then there is no fact we could in principle appeal to in order to validly answer existential questions about these objects. Furthermore, not having this privileged reason may elicit a worrying circularity if, in tandem with appropriating an object's existence to explain empirical discoveries about the object, we also explain its existence via an appeal to these discoveries. One may interpret easy ontology as committing this circularity, given that its analytical rules of existential inference can explain one's unprivileged claim of an object's existence, *but only if* this claim is also being used to explain in some way those rules. The latter condition seems plausible for easy ontology when considering that the above definition for the truth of an analytical R is dependent on an empirically informed circumstance condition, C, associated with empirical discovery of the object in question.[17] Yablo's own ontological deflationism can thus be characterized as an epistemic uncertainty towards existential claims, which captures the sense in which "epistemological notions do not flawlessly track ontological ones" (Egerton 2016, 47).

We can appropriate Thomassons' own description of her easy ontology in answering Yablo's criticisms. For instance, she does not treat the problem of existential statements "as a merely epistemic one" (Thomasson 2014b, 502), since the focus on application conditions for the valid use of terms means that easy ontology is primarily concerned with *analytic clarity*, with clear rules of use for the terms of a framework so as to meaningfully license valid existential claims. There is no issue of epistemological fallibility here because the significance of whatever gap exists between what we know and what there is is of little importance for

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[17] A different critique of easy ontology's circularity can be found in Raab (2020), where it is argued that circularity is vicious within the terms that constitute the analytical rules themselves. Although it is outside the scope of this paper to respond in detail to this critique, an attempt towards resolution is made in Section 4.2.

Thomasson: there is simply the case of whether or not application conditions are fulfilled, so there is no need for easy ontology to mull over how an epistemological gap could damage the easy ontological approach's value. Now, as said before, there is issue with a problematic imprecision when it comes to these rules' formulation, but we are here simply taking it for granted that precise rules can be constructed. Given what we have just granted, we can restate Yablo's concern in this way: since we cannot gather from our empirical discoveries about objects a privileged reason why these objects have to exist/not exist in ways that are not empirically adjudicable, we have no privileged reason to think that these objects do exist in ontologically substantive ways, and if the only alternative would be to simply presuppose their existence as such, then there is no fact (ontological or empirical) we could in principle appeal to in order to validly answer existential questions about these objects' ontological existence. However, this restating of Yablo is precisely what Thomasson agrees with, thereby rendering Yablo's original concern misapplied to easy ontology, for there is no issue of privileging or presupposing an ontological way of existing if all that is licensed by the rules of use for a framework's terms and the fulfilment of their application conditions is at most an *empirical* mode of existence, one that is given precise meaning by the *analytic* construction of the framework. Whatever *ontologically* is the privileged case is therefore the hard question that easy ontology was never meant to answer in the first place, for "we should not expect anything in the world to determine which of various ontologically alternative languages or conceptual schemes is the *right one*" (Thomasson 2014b, 518).

A critique of circularity on Thomasson's part can also be avoided here. Yes, easy ontology's application conditions – the rules for existential inference – do explain existential claims made within this ontology's framework. However, the explanation is meant to be for the empirical *actuality* of an object, along with its ontological *possibility*, whereby what is ontologically the case for the object is up in the air. Circularity would apply here if, *ceteris paribus*, the explanatory direction reverses, but here the direction reverses *with a contentful change*: what is used to explain specific details of the analytical rules – i.e., what the specific application conditions look like – are the discovered empirical features of an object's existence, *not* whatever features apply to its possible ontological existence. In other words, while the analytical rules help explain existential claims, only certain parts of said claim (namely, the empirical ones) factor into an explanation of the rules themselves – the ontological facet does not feature in an explanatory bidirectionality, only the empirical part. In line with Thomasson (2015, chap. 2), there is no issue here of presupposing an object's existence in explaining the

application conditions being used, for what is being utilized in this direction of the explanation are simply instances of empirical discovery that possibilize for us a possible ontological existence of something that refers in some way to what we have discovered.

4.2. Referential indeterminacy

This may answer Raab's criticism that Thomasson's use of a "feature-placing language" (*Cf.*, Thomasson 2015, 107) – think the analytical 'feature-placing' verbalization of statue as 'statuing' in R – is "ontologically loaded" even if it does not make explicit mention of objects (Raab 2020, 23). This is not a worrying criticism, for whatever ontological load is present is restricted, if not completely negated to a mere existential load without any ontological privilege. Nonetheless, the more pressing critique from Raab is that even without ontological load, an analytical rule featuring some R-verbalization would still only allow for indeterminate reference to whatever is being claimed to exist (2020, §§ 4.1, 4.3) – for instance, reference to the existence of statues from, among other things, entailment by the fulfillment of statuing. This is because to avoid an infinite regress in the construction of ever finer-grained application conditions for a term, which would lead to reference failure for that term (18-19), we would have to choose to stop at a basic term in the regress that cannot be further definable. This basic term would have constitutive rules of use in terms of its own application conditions. However, if this term is properly basic, then its use cannot be characterized in terms of application conditions whose terms are themselves further definable via finer-grained application conditions, for then we would be dealing instead with a *derivative* term (10-12). Consequently, if the term is indeed properly basic, then we cannot define its application conditions in terms of anything else, entailing that how a basic term is used can only be defined circularly (12-14). Raab considers this circularity in terms of existential presupposition: for example, the application conditions for the term, 'cup', must at some point contain 'cup' lest 'cup' experiences reference failure via an infinite regress (§§ 3.2, 4.1).

Additionally, if we want to avoid the circularity charge altogether, by presumably not having fully explicable application conditions for basic terms at all, then this would just lead to indeterminate reference, as it would therefore be difficult to judge how one ought to use such terms (19-20). Given our discussion in Sections 3 and 4 thus far, we can avoid a circularity attribution since it is not necessary for easy ontology to utilize an object-placing language in dealing with application conditions the fulfilment of which grounds reference to an object's referring term. What must at least be utilized in dealing with these conditions could be

something like a phenomena-placing language that describes experiential phenomena that factor into observation reports about objects.

Still, if the terms we use to refer to such phenomena do not themselves presuppose the existence of the objects these phenomena are about, then Raab could just rewrite his circularity critique in terms of phenomena instead: claims of the existence of phenomenal or experiential properties of objects will, to avoid infinite regress, inevitably contain these properties as terms in the claims' application conditions. I can avoid this by simply making these phenomenally/experientially laden terms not possess fully explicable application conditions, which still commits me to an indeterminacy of these terms' referentiality. Can this be avoided?

Ultimately, what the charge of indeterminate reference says is that what counts as an appropriate observation report that fulfills some empirically discernable application condition for a term is not something that can really be made precise so as to achieve exact reference for that term. In line what was said previously,[18] in applying some relational rule when determining what counts as an appropriate observation report – for instance, 'phenomena of such and such type correspond to the fulfillment of application conditions of such and such character' – how we end up deciding that some phenomenon's referring term is the case is *ad hoc*. This allows for referential indeterminacy between a term and the phenomenal experience constituting the fulfillment of that term's empirical application conditions, but only insofar as it is considered challenging, if not nigh impossible, for that reference to be exactly re-determined once it has been initially made, even by the same person; after all, without fully defined application conditions, there is leeway in regarding how a term actually does refer. In other words, reference to objects via incompletely outlined application conditions only seems indeterminate because, for Raab (2020), there are no clear reasons, concerning proper term-use, "that we even established reference to the [objects] in question. This, then, blocks empirical inquiry until we have reasons to believe that we are actually inquiring about [these objects]" (19). That this is an issue of indeterminacy is clear when one considers that, if there are no clear reasons to which one can appeal in determining that an exact reference is made, then that throws into question prior instances wherein the reference had been claimed to obtain, thereby leading to the indeterminacy that the reference was made at these times.

I am willing to bite the bullet here, but not completely, because the indeterminacy charge is related to my abovementioned attribution of *ad hoc* decision making in choosing

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[18] *Cf.*, Note 15.

relational rules: it is up to us to decide on what counts as a valid observation report, and I cannot thus think of any convincing arguments that necessarily stops an entailment to it being also up to us to decide on what counts as the terms referring to the phenomena constituting this report. Said in another way, the phenomena that I choose to refer my terms by is by my own decision, which is *ad hoc*, and if this affords indeterminate reference because I cannot clearly communicate the intelligibility of this decision – i.e., my 'clear reasons' linking the phenomena to their referential terms in my choosing of said phenomena as constituting valid observation reports – to others, or even to my future self, then so be it. At the end of the day, with the use of varying degrees of fine-grained application conditions, an easy ontologist's decision to have their terms refer can avoid circularity and reference failure, at least in the empirical and non-privileged ontological status of an object's existential mode, by dint of that very decision. As such, the indeterminacy thus discussed may only apply to any other instance besides that of the decision of term referral itself – just because it is indeterminate what a term actually refers to at any other time does not mean that determinate reference was not made at the only time that counts: that of the decision itself. In short, I cannot ever tell what my terms determinately refer to outside of my decisions to have them refer, which applies even to times outside the moment of decision that I try to fallibly communicate to myself the intelligibility of that decision. Perhaps such communication can only occur at the precise moment of the decision.[19]

5. Conclusion

The above discussion of Thomasson's easy ontology is meant to clarify a way in which metaphysical deflationism can avoid unwanted anti-realist tendencies. How statements such as HORSE and WATER can remain as necessary truths about the world without being solely analytically constructed as such is through a specification of what is at stake whenever we make existential claims. The analytical features of our conceptual frameworks that render meaningful our utterances of these existential claims do not constitute the entire metaphysical picture, but this does not entail that an appeal to some esoteric ontological truth concerning such claims is being made. This appeal, for easy ontology, stops at the *empirical* application conditions, portraying truth conditions for existential claims that are neither analytically

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[19] Raab (2020) may consider this emblematic of an uninteresting analyticity whereby the existence of some phenomenon entails the existence of a term used to refer to it (*Cf.*, 27-28), but note that, by the above discussion, that this entailment is the case has to be decided upon by whoever is making use of the referring term. Furthermore, this decision is minimally constrained by the need for the phenomenon to be present to the user of the term, so there is at least some empirical grounding, no matter how loose of a constraint that grounding ends up being.

fulfilled nor ontologically privileged. A deflationism construed in this way would forego, for its construction, anything past empirical discoverability and analytical intelligibility that is not mere ontological possibility. Therefore, no privileged ontological existence is being presupposed here.

Moreover, no circularity is being committed here as well, because the explanatory relation for such a deflationism, between the rules for existential inference and the existential claims themselves, is not a bidirectional one. Lastly, any imputation of indeterminate referentiality may only be of an *apparent* indeterminacy, for an inability to convey clear reasons as to how a term is being made to refer does not necessitate that, at the instant the decision was made to have it refer, the reference was not determinate then, despite the conditions for such determinacy being *ad hoc* and ultimately fleeting.

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