**Carnap and the Prospects for Easy Ontology**

Amie L. Thomasson

**Abstract:**

After more than fifty years, metaontology has come back in fashion. But in most of the recent discussion, the original Carnapian deflationist position has been missed. How could a Carnapian form of deflationism—probably the most prominent historical form of ontological deflationism—have been missed? And what difference would rediscovering it make to contemporary discussions in metaontology? Those are the questions I aim to answer.

I’ll argue, first, that Carnap’s original position was wrongly dismissed by association with verificationism and anti-realism. It was then put aside and forgotten given the common assumption that Quine had won the Carnap-Quine debate and made the world safe for serious metaphysics. Later attempts to revive a deflationary position only made matters worse: Putnam’s deflationism linked the view to anti-realism, and Hirsch linked deflationism to quantifier variance. Ever since, metaontological disputes have largely focused on quantifier variance. Each of these moves, I’ll argue, went wrong.

Taken together, they led the original and most promising deflationary position to be largely overlooked. I’ll close by sketching a contemporary neo-Carnapian form of deflationism, arguing that it is largely untouched by recent defenses of serious ontology, and that its prospects are rather promising.

**Key Words:** Carnap, Existence, Metaontology, Deflationism, Quine, Quantifier Variance, Easy Ontology, Putnam

After more than 50 years, metaontology has come back in fashion. And so we now see intensive discussions about whether or not ontological disputes are ‘merely verbal’, whether the meaning of the quantifier does or could vary in the mouths of disputants, and whether we can understand the quantifier (or a special ontologese quantifier) as having a fixed meaning in virtue of ‘carving the world at its logical joints’.

But in most of the recent discussion, there is a deflationary position that has been missed. The missed position is not some obscure newcomer, but rather a view along the lines of Carnap’s original form of ontological deflationism—that very deflationism that was thought to have been defeated by Quine as he inaugurated a renaissance for serious metaphysics.

But how could a Carnapian form of deflationism—probably the most prominent historical form of ontological deflationism—have been missed? And what difference would rediscovering it make to contemporary discussions in metaontology? Those are the questions I aim to answer in this paper.

I’ll argue, first, that Carnap’s original position was often dismissed because it was wrongly associated with verificationism and anti-realism. But I will argue that there is a way to interpret Carnap’s view that does not rely on verificationism nor lead to anti-realism. Carnap’s view was then put aside and forgotten given the common assumption that Quine had won the Carnap-Quine debate and made the world safe for serious metaphysics. Later attempts to revive a deflationary position only made matters worse: Putnam’s deflationism linked the view to anti-realism, and while Hirsch rescued it from that association, he linked deflationism to a form of quantifier variance. Since then, quantifier variance has come to be considered *the* route deflationists must take. Putnam, Carnap, and Hirsch and other deflationists have all been lumped together as defenders of quantifier variance, and serious metaphysicians have set their sights on defending serious metaphysics by attacking quantifier variance or defending the idea that the quantifier is (or can be) univocal. I’ll argue, however, that Carnap in fact is not committed to quantifier variance in anything like Hirsch’s sense, and that he does not rely on it in his ways of deflating metaphysical debates. As a result, the contemporary focus in metametaphysics on quantifier variance is the product of a historical wrong turn, and is irrelevant to the prospects for evaluating a truly Carnapian approach.

In closing I sketch a contemporary neo-Carnapian form of deflationism (one which I develop and defend at much greater length elsewhere (2015)). I hope to show that the original and most promising deflationary position has been largely overlooked, and the prospects for a neo-Carnapian meta-ontology are really rather good.

**1. Carnap’s approach to existence questions**

Carnap famously argues that there are two “kinds of question concerning the existence or reality of entities” (1950, 206): internal questions and external questions. To be able to speak about a kind of entity at all, or inquire about its existence, we must introduce terms for the relevant entity as part of a ‘linguistic framework’. Internal questions Carnap initially characterizes as “questions of the existence of certain entities of the new kind [asked] *within the framework”;* they include questions (asked within the framework of everyday language) such as “Is there a white piece of paper on my desk?” (1950, 207), or (asked within the framework of natural numbers) “Is there a prime number greater than 100?” (1950, 208-9). The answers to internal existence questions, Carnap holds, “may be found either by purely logical methods or by empirical methods, depending upon whether the framework is a logical or a factual one” (1950, 206). In either case, internal existence questions may be answered straightforwardly using standard analytic methods (here: of mathematics) or empirical methods (here: of looking). There is no special mystery here, and no special role for philosophy. These are existence questions even Hume could love.

The metaphysician’s existence questions are generally expressed as highly general questions such as “Do numbers exist?”, “Do material objects exist?”, “Do properties exist”. But although Carnap uses specific questions as his examples of internal existence questions, that is not to say that general existence questions could not be asked—and answered—as internal questions. They certainly can be answered that way, as we can get trivial entailments from, e.g. ‘five is a number’ to ‘there are numbers’ (1950, 209). Carnap argues, however, that metaphysical questions, e.g. about the existence of numbers, can’t be intended as general internal questions, for:

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, 209).

Thus, he concludes, the sense in which these general existence questions are raised and seriously debated by philosophers must be an external sense.

External questions are raised “neither by the man in the street nor by scientists, but only by philosophers” (1950, 207). They include questions such as “are there numbers?”, or “is the thing-world real?”. Carnap argues that if we take external existence questions literally (as attempted theoretical or factual questions), they are ill-formed pseudo-questions. As a result, neither the nominalist’s nor the Platonist’s answer to the question ‘Do numbers exist?’, taken as an external question, should be embraced. Instead, the best we can do with them is to consider them as implicitly answering practical questions about whether or not to accept the relevant linguistic framework: “we have to make the choice whether or not to accept and use the forms of expression in the framework in question” (1950, 207). Reconstrued as practical questions about the advisability of adopting a certain linguistic framework, there is here again no special philosophical or ontological insight into reality involved. Instead, the philosopher’s work lies in constructing linguistic frameworks (a kind of ‘conceptual engineering’) and making practical decisions about which to adopt for which purposes.

Contemporary metaphysicians generally respond to this division of existence questions with two skeptical questions: First, why should we care about answers to internal questions if they are only describing what exists ‘internal to some linguistic framework’, when what the metaphysician cares about is what *really* exists ‘outside of all frameworks’? Isn’t this a kind of anti-realism on which we can’t say what exists ‘outside of all frameworks’? Second, why must we think of external questions (if interpreted theoretically) as mere ‘pseudo-questions’? Doesn’t this dismissal rely on a discredited verificationism?[[1]](#footnote-1)

But there is an interpretation of Carnap’s internal/external distinction that enables us to answer these questions without appeal to anything like anti-realism or verificationism. What follows isn’t so much a work of historical interpretation as appropriation: what I’m interested in is showing that a viable Carnapian position is available. I hope nonetheless that it is at least reasonably faithful to the spirit of his original view (though put in simplified contemporary terms in a new dialectical context).

The basic idea is that we can understand the internal/external distinction in terms of the use-mention distinction. Huw Price suggests this idea as follows:

In my view, it is helpful to frame Carnap’s point in terms of the use-mention distinction. Legitimate *uses* of the terms such as ‘number’ and ‘material object’ are necessarily internal, for it is conformity (more or less) to the rules of the framework in question that constitutes use. But as internal questions, as Carnap notes, these questions could not have the significance that traditional metaphysics takes them to have. Metaphysics tries to locate them somewhere else, but thereby commits a use-mention fallacy. The only legitimate external questions simply *mention* the terms in question. (2009, 324).

This is the reading I shall develop here, arguing that such a view is invulnerable to the sorts of worry that have led deflationism to be dismissed.

Internal questions, questions asked *within,* or *using* the framework, are questions that make *use* of the relevant terms (property terms, number terms, material object terms) in accord with the rules introduced. To introduce a linguistic framework, according to Carnap, requires introducing “a system of new ways of speaking, subject to new rules” (1950, 206). The framework of number language “is constructed by introducing into the language new expressions with suitable rules”: rules that take us from determiner uses of number terms, as in ‘there are five books on the table’, to introduce noun terms like ‘number’ and sentence forms like ‘five is a number’. Eventually, we may introduce new terms for properties of those entities (e.g. ‘odd’ and ‘prime’), and variables that take numbers as values in sentences quantifying over numbers (1950, 208). Similarly, the framework of proposition language is introduced by way of rules that license us to introduce variables p, q… to range over declarative sentences, and to introduce the term ‘proposition’ such that we are licensed to say ‘p is a proposition’ where any declarative sentence may stand in for p. (1950, 210).

Once those rules for introducing the new terms are in place we can *use* the relevant terms in accord with those rules and straightforwardly evaluate the truth of existential sentences containing those terms.[[2]](#footnote-2) Making use of those rules, we are able to evaluate the truth of ‘There is a white piece of paper on my desk’ by engaging in the usual straightforward kind of empirical checks (we look, touch, etc.), and of ‘There is a prime number between one and five’ by engaging in mathematical reasoning and proof. We can also answer *general* internal questions in this way. By making use of not only the rules of use for the terms but also ‘customary deductive rules’ (1950, 208), we can make simple inferences from specific truths like these to general truths such as ‘there is at least one material object’ and ‘there is at least one number’. As Carnap puts it, the statement ‘There is an n such that n is a number’ “…follows from the analytic statement ‘five is a number’ and is therefore itself analytic” (1950, 209). Linguistic frameworks for introducing talk of propositions and properties are introduced similarly: in the case of properties, for example, we may begin from the ‘thing’ language that contains predicates such as ‘red’, ‘hard’, and the like, and then introduce noun terms for properties, and variables for which the property terms are substitutable. Finally, “new rules are laid down which admit sentences like ‘Red is a property’ and ‘Red is a color’” (1950, 211).

So understood, we can easily see why questions asked within—or better, *using—*a linguistic framework are straightforward to answer. For example, the very rules for introducing property language (combined with ‘customary deductive rules’) license us to infer from an ordinary truth like ‘the house is red’ that ‘the house has the property of being red’ and so to provide an easy affirmative answer to the general question (asked internally) ‘Are there properties?’ (cf. Schiffer 2003, 61-71). But that is not to say that what there is depends on what linguistic framework we accept. In fact, Carnap himself clearly insists that although talk, e.g., of propositions is introduced by introducing noun terms for propositions and variables that range over them, that does *not* entail that propositions are linguistic entities or in any way subjective. On the contrary, the rules of use (which do not require any reference to a language or a subject or observer) show that propositions are *not* linguistic, mental, or subjective entities (1950, 210-211)—or, one might add, mind-dependent.

Nor does Carnap, on this interpretation, leave us with a kind of anti-realism on which we can only answer questions of the form “what exists, *according to* this or that framework” [[3]](#footnote-3)—or, as Andre Gallois (1998) puts it, according to which “whatever ontologically committing discourse we consider, sentences in it will be true only in a framework-relative sense” (1998, 273). On the interpretation I am defending, when Carnap says that internal existence questions are questions of the existence of entities of a certain kind asked “within the framework” (1950, 206), the point is not that claims about what exists are ‘internal to’ a framework, where that is like saying what exists *in the story* in a work of fiction—i.e. what exists *according to the story,* or according to someone’s theory or set of beliefs, or in the content of a game of make-believe. This mis-interpretation seems to be in part behind the common resistance to Carnap’s view.

Instead, the point is the simple, almost trivial observation that for a question to be asked meaningfully the terms in it must be governed by rules of use: we must be *using* a linguistic framework to ask an (internal) existence question. For example, if we are to ask ‘Are there properties?’ in a way that has sense, then the crucial term ‘property’ must be introduced with some rules of use. Once those rules are mastered (rules that license inferences like those above), then specific questions about whether certain properties exist (or whether two red houses ‘have something in common’) may be simply answered, and the answer to the general existence question (construed as internal) follows trivially from the answers to these specific questions. We can answer direct questions about whether this or that sort of thing exists—not just about whether they exist *according to* this or that theory or framework—but to ask them we must be *using* language; using a framework that establishes the rules of use for the terms used in asking and answering the question.[[4]](#footnote-4) And the answers we get may be true—though they may only be *expressed* using language, that is no reason to think they are true in merely some ‘framework relative sense’, or anything less than simply true.

What then of external existence questions—why must we think of them as pseudo-questions, if they are construed as factual/theoretical questions? The answer now becomes equally simple. In raising an existence question, we must use a term (‘number’, ‘property’, ‘proposition’…) to ask “are there numbers/properties/propositions?” But if we are using those terms according to the rules of use by which they come to be introduced to the language, then those rules enable us to resolve the questions straightforwardly (through analytic or empirical means), as above: the question is an internal question. So, if the external question is *not* supposed to be so straightforwardly answerable (so it is *not* an internal question), then it must be aiming to use the terms in question *without* their being governed by the standard rules of use. But if they attempt to use the terms while severing them from these rules of use, they make the terms meaningless, and the questions pseudo-questions. A question like “Are there huasadoes?” cannot be answered, as ‘huasadoe’ is a meaningless term, without rules of use that would determine under what conditions ‘huasasdoe’ is to be applied or refused. So similarly, if we take a familiar term but strip it of its rules of use (not using it in a way governed by those rules), the term is left meaningless, and the existence question unanswerable. That (and not any sort of verificationism) is what makes external questions (theoretically construed) unanswerable pseudo-questions.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This also explains why external questions can be given a pragmatic construal according to which they are really asking about the advisability of adopting the new linguistic framework. For what else is left to do with the terms, except use them? Mention them, of course. So if we are charitable, we can treat external questions not as *using* the disputed terms (governed by their associated rules of use) nor as attempting to use them while severing them from their meanings, but rather as *mentioning* the terms and raising the pragmatic question of whether we should adopt the terms (of the number-language, property-language, proposition-language) with the associated rules of use. Such pragmatic questions can be meaningfully formulated and debated, and so if we want to make some sense of the debates of serious metaphysicians, we can treat them as engaged in that sort of dispute.[[6]](#footnote-6)

On this interpretation, then, we get an easy approach to those existence questions *that can be meaningfully stated and asked.* If we ask a general existence question such as ‘are there numbers?’, ‘are there properties?’, ‘are there propositions?’, using those terms *in the only sense they have—using the rules by which they are introduced into the language,* the answer is a straightforward, easy ‘yes’. If we are spoiling for a debate (if it is to be meaningful), we must undertake it on other territory: regarding whether we should use these terms, governed by their customary rules of use, at all.

Some who go this far with Carnap nonetheless resist at this stage, on grounds that it seems to make it totally *arbitrary* which linguistic framework we use, and thus which assertions of existence we make. But this is a needless worry, for Carnap himself acknowledges that some languages may be better than others for various purposes, and that there may be theoretical issues involved in determining which language is best for a given purpose (or set of purposes). The acceptance of a linguistic framework can “be judged as being more or less expedient, fruitful, conducive to the aim for which the language is intended” (1950, 214). The decision to accept a language, such as the thing language:

will nevertheless usually be influenced by theoretical knowledge, just like any other deliberate decision concerning the acceptance of linguistic or other rules. The purposes for which the language is intended to be used… will determine which factors are relevant for the decision. The efficiency, fruitfulness, and simplicity of the use of the thing language may be among the decisive factors. And the questions concerning these qualities are indeed of a theoretical nature. (1950, 208)

The rules we adopt need not be arbitrary, given our purposes, since some rules may serve the purposes better than others.

So why was the Carnapian deflationary approach to existence questions discarded, left behind in the history of philosophy, with Quine’s brand of ontology soon to take over and dominate for the next sixty years or more? For that, we need to move to the next stage of the story.

**2. Whatever happened to Carnapian deflationism?**

If we ask why Carnap’s deflationary approach fell by the wayside and serious metaphysics made a comeback, the answer usually begins with the Quine-Carnap debate. Around the same time as “Empiricism, semantics and ontology” (1950) came out, Quine was laying out his own vision for ‘ontology’—most famously in “On what there is” (1948/2001), and he directly criticized Carnap’s position immediately after it was published, in “On Carnap’s Views on Ontology” (presented at a colloquium with Carnap in 1951, and published later that year).

After reviewing his own approach to ontological commitment, the core of the latter paper is devoted to criticizing Carnap’s distinction between internal and external questions. Quine recasts Carnap’s internal/external distinction as ‘derivative’ from another more basic distinction: the distinction between *category* questions and *subclass* questions. Category questions, as Quine defines them, are “questions of the form ‘Are there so-and-so’s?’ where the so-and-so’s purport to exhaust the range of a particular style of bound variables”; subclass questions are questions of the same form “where the so-and-so’s do not purport to exhaust the range of a particular style of bound variables” (1951, 207).

Carnap’s internal questions then, on Quine’s view, are by and large *subclass* questions: they ask, of a general kind of entities (say numbers), whether there are any that have particular other features (say, are prime)—where the entities enquired about would not include *all* of the numbers, but only a subclass of them. Quine acknowledges, however, that internal questions may also take the form of category questions “when these are construed as treated within an adopted language as questions having trivially analytic or contradictory answers” (1951, 207). That is, we may also ask general existence questions about *all* of the entities of a given category (which would exhaust the range of the introduced style of bound variable) in an internal way, and we do so if we treat them as being answerable trivially, by moves such as going from ‘five is a number’ to ‘there is a number’. Carnap’s external questions Quine describes as *category* questions asked ‘before the adoption of a given language’ (1951, 207). This seems to be compatible with the understanding I have suggested above of external questions as not *using* the terms (once a language has been adopted), but rather implicitly *mentioning* them as we consider “the desirability of a given language form” (Quine 1951, 207).

However, Quine argues, the distinction between category and subclass questions depends on a “rather trivial consideration” (1951, 208) of whether we use different styles of variables for different sorts of thing. For we may choose to adopt a single style of variable for several sorts of thing, and if we do, then even general questions of existence, e.g. of numbers, abstracta, physical objects, can be phrased as *subclass* questions: informally, they may be thought of as asking, say, of all the *things* there are, whether any are numbers (and thus as parallel to asking, of all the *numbers,* whether any are prime). Since such purported external existence questions may be turned into internal (subclass) questions by simply adopting a style of variable to range over a more inclusive domain, Quine concludes, the distinction between category questions and subclass questions is of little interest, since it varies given ‘logically irrelevant changes of typography’ (1951, 210).

But although it occupies the vast majority of this influential article, the discussion about styles of variables, and category versus subclass questions, is really a technical sideshow distracting from the real metaontological issues. For if I am right above, the real issue is not (and never was) the distinction between category and subclass questions: that is Quine’s own imposition. Carnap’s internal/external distinction is not the same as Quine’s subclass/category distinction—as can be readily seen by the fact that category questions may be asked either as internal questions (answerable trivially) or as external questions.

The real distinction instead is between existence questions asked *using* a linguistic framework and existence questions that are supposed to be asked somehow without being subject to those rules—asked, as Quine puts it ‘before the adoption of the given language’. That distinction is not in the least undermined by Quine’s arguments that the distinction between category and subclass questions rests on trivial typographical decisions.

Quine only arrives at what he himself calls the ‘basic point of contention’ between himself and Carnap in the penultimate paragraph of “On Carnap’s Views on Ontology”: whether to accept Carnap’s view that *internal* questions may be easily answered by analytic or empirical means, while *external* questions can only be sensibly understood as purely *pragmatic* questions of whether to adopt a certain linguistic framework. This three-way division of questions (into the analytic, empirical, and pragmatic) relies on the analytic/synthetic distinction, and that is what the real core of disagreement between Carnap and Quine comes down to. That distinction is required to distinguish the empirical nature of existence questions such as ‘are there black swans?’ from the analytic nature of existence questions such as ‘are there prime numbers between 5 and 10?’, and to maintain the idea that many of the metaphysician’s most general existence questions (taken internally) can be answered trivially by analytic means. This distinction is also required to distinguish the purely pragmatic issue of which linguistic framework to choose (a pragmatic issue that nonetheless, as I have emphasized above, may be empirically influenced and informed), from the empirical issues about what true statements (including what existence claims) may be made using that linguistic framework.

Quine, of course, had by this stage already rejected the analytic/synthetic distinction in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (1951/2001) and elsewhere. Without the analytic/synthetic distinction, Quine can’t (with Carnap) accept a division of labor between constructing and pragmatically selecting among linguistic or conceptual frameworks on the one hand, and empirically determining the truth of statements made using that framework on the other hand.[[7]](#footnote-7) Nor can we say that (given the rules of the linguistic framework we use) questions about the existence of numbers, propositions, properties and the like may be answered through trivial analytic means.

Quine’s reasons for rejecting Carnapian deflationism (and the basis for his own positive alternative) lie firmly in his rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction. But, as I (2007, chapter 2) and others (Strawson/Grice 1956, McGinn 2011, Russell 2008) have argued elsewhere, Quine’s arguments against the analytic/synthetic distinction are far from decisive, notwithstanding the extraordinary influence they have had on the profession. Even Quine himself backpedals substantially in his later work, allowing that analyticity “undeniably has a place at the commonsense level” (1991, 270). Moreover, as Richard Creath has argued (2004, 49) Quine’s arguments against the analytic/synthetic distinction ultimately rest on his behaviorism: it is the failure to find a behavioral criterion for applying the terms that ultimately leads him to reject the distinction (see also my 2007, 34-37).

It thus becomes a sociological curiosity that (what is taken to be) a Quinean approach to ontology has been nearly universally taken on board, when it relies on his rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction—a point less universally agreed on—and especially when that in turn relies on his behaviorism—a point most contemporary philosophers would reject.

There is not space here to defend the analytic/synthetic distinction or respond to Quine’s (early) attacks.[[8]](#footnote-8) But the important thing to note is that without good reason for rejecting the analytic/synthetic distinction, Quine’s famous criticisms give us no reason to reject Carnap’s deflationary picture of metaphysics. Nor were they ever intended to revive anything like traditional serious metaphysics.[[9]](#footnote-9) As long as room remains for something like Carnap’s analytic/synthetic distinction and room remains for the use/mention distinction, room remains for Carnapian deflationary metaphysics.

**3. Putnam takes deflationism on an unfortunate turn**

The full story about why Carnapian deflationism about ontology virtually fell off the map for the next several decades may have as much to do with the friends as enemies of deflationism.

The next prominent appearance of something like Carnapian deflationism about metaphysical issues writ large (rather than as applied to particular debates) was in the work of Hilary Putnam (1987, 1990). Putnam of course famously argues for what he calls ‘internal realism’: “the insistence that realism is *not* incompatible with conceptual relativity” (1987, 17). Conceptual relativity, in turn, he considers to be the idea that the question ‘what exists’ can only be answered in terms of a particular ‘version’, that is, in terms of a particular conceptual/representational system. Put in Carnapian terms, that sounds like the claim that existence questions can only be answered *internal* to a particular framework—i.e. (if our earlier interpretation was correct) *using* a linguistic framework which provides rules of use for the terms and thus for answering such questions. Questions asked outside of all ‘versions’, or external to a linguistic framework, are rejected (at least as long as they are supposed to be ‘factual’ metaphysical questions). So far, so Carnapian.

But there are two ways in which Putnam’s deflationism takes importantly different turns than Carnap’s, both of which have had unfortunate consequences. For these differences have deflected the main metaontological dispute away from the central issues and have contributed to making the deflationary project distasteful and keeping it largely underground.

First, Putnam ties the idea of conceptual relativity to the idea that certain core terms used in metaphysical debates—“exists” and “object”—have different meanings in different ‘versions’. As he writes:

…it is no accident that metaphysical realism cannot really recognize the phenomenon of conceptual relativity—for that phenomenon turns on the fact that *the logical primitives themselves, and in particular the notions of object and existence, have a multitude of different uses rather than one absolute ‘meaning’.* (1987, 19, italics original)

And elsewhere:

…the idea that there is an Archimedean point, or a use of ‘exist’ inherent in the world itself, from which the question ‘How many objects *really* exist?’ makes sense, is an illusion. (1987, 20).

Second, Putnam uses this observation in the service of a general denial of ‘Realism’,[[10]](#footnote-10) for from the fact that a question like ‘how many objects are there’ can only be answered within a version, Putnam concludes that we must reject the idea that there are objects that exist independently of our conceptual scheme:[[11]](#footnote-11)

What is wrong with the notion of objects existing ‘independently’ of conceptual schemes is that there are no standards for the use of even the logical notions apart from conceptual choices (1987, 35-36).

These two features of Putnam’s view have been very influential. The first, the idea that ‘exists’ and ‘object’ vary in meaning, turned metaontological debates to focus heavily on the idea of ‘quantifier variance’ for the next twenty years or more. The second, the association between ontological deflationism and anti-realism, led many philosophers to reject deflationism, keeping it very much a minority position until quite recently.

But both of these features are separable from Carnapian deflationism. It should by now be well known that it is simply a mistake to think that if we hold that the meanings of terms like ‘object’ or ‘exists’ vary, then we are committed to denying that objects exist independently of conceptual schemes. The idea has been quite fully and properly demolished (Hilpinen 1996, Hirsch 2002a).[[12]](#footnote-12) In brief, the mistake is a use-mention mistake (Hirsch 2002a, 52). The *meaning* of a term like ‘object’ or ‘exists’, or of the existential quantifier, may vary according to our conceptual scheme.[[13]](#footnote-13) And it is surely the case that unless such terms have meaning (as part of a conceptual scheme or linguistic framework) a question framed using the following symbols: “how many objects exist” cannot be answered (since one or more of the terms would lack meaning). So, without some meaning attached, the question ‘how many objects exist’ would be meaningless. True, but trivial. But to say that the meaning of the term “object” or “exists”—or of sentences framed using those terms—depends on our conceptual scheme is not at all to say that *objects* (the term now being *used* in accord with the rules of an established language, say English) depend on our conceptual scheme. The meaning of ‘planet’ similarly depends on our choice of conceptual scheme, but *planets* (now using, not mentioning, the term) don’t depend on there being any conceptual scheme whatsoever (cf. Hilpinen 1996).

Let us go back, then, to the first point: that key terms used in metaphysical debates, such as ‘objects’, ‘exists’, or the existential quantifier, do (actually) or may (in the mouths of the disputants) vary in meaning. Eli Hirsch showed that quantifier variance did not lead to any conflict with realism and developed Putnam’s notion of quantifier variance in new ways. While Putnam argued for actual quantifier variance, i.e. the idea that there is no single absolute meaning for the quantifier and allied notions (1987, 19), Hirsch argues only for *possible* quantifier variance (as he thinks that there is a unified meaning of the quantifier in standard English).

Most of the focus of metaontological debates for about the next twenty years centered on the question of whether the quantifier varies in meaning or not (see, e.g. Hirsch 2002, 2009; van Inwagen 1998, 2009; Sider 2007, 2009). Both have come to be strongly associated with Carnapian deflationism. Thus, for example, Matti Eklund writes:

…it is common to take Carnap to be what I will call an *ontological pluralist:* to hold a view not unlike that today defended by Eli Hirsch (under the name *quantifier variance*) and Hilary Putnam (under the name *conceptual relativity).* (Sometimes Hirsch and Putnam are even described as ‘neo-Carnapians’). (2009, 137)

And Kit Fine explicitly attributes quantifier variance to both Carnap and Hirsch (2009, 164 n.2).

While deflationists like Hirsch have embraced quantifier variance, serious metaphysicians like Peter van Inwagen and Ted Sider have largely tried to defend serious metaphysics by arguing against quantifier variance, treating that as the main obstacle. Indeed Sider writes:

The deflationist *must* claim that the participants in ontological debates mean different things by the quantifiers. And so, the deflationist must accept that quantifiers *can* mean different things, that there are multiple candidate meanings for quantifiers. In Hirsch’s phrase, deflationists must accept *quantifier variance.* (2009, 391)

In arguing against quantifier variance as an attempt to defend serious ontology against deflationism, Van Inwagen argues that ‘existence’ is univocal. He does so by arguing that it is interdefinable with expressions that clearly apply in the same way to objects of different types. First, he argues, following Frege, that “...existence is closely allied to number”:

To say that unicorns do not exist is to say something very much like this: the number of unicorns is 0; to say that horses exist is to say essentially this: the number of horses is 1 or more… The univocacy of number and the intimate connection between number and existence should convince us that there is at least very good reason to think that existence is univocal. (2009, 482).

Second, van Inwagen argues that ‘exists’ may also be defined in terms of disjunction and ‘all’, as “we may replace the statement that there exists a prime number between 16 and 20 with the statement that 17 is a prime or 18 is a prime or 19 is a prime,” and (van Inwagen adds) that those are *all* the numbers between 16 and 20.[[14]](#footnote-14) But ‘or’ and ‘all’ van Inwagen takes to be ‘obviously univocal’ (2009, 484).

There is an interesting point to this line of argument that may be put succinctly: ‘exists’ and the existential quantifier are (like number terms, ‘or’, and ‘all’) topic-neutral: they are *formal* terms which may be conjoined with *material* terms of different categories while retaining their same sense—at least in the sense of retaining the same core rule of use. This seems right. But notice the lineage of the idea: van Inwagen attributes these observations to Carnap, the father of deflationism, and Frege, the grandfather of deflationism (as both teacher of Carnap and inspiration for the deflationary neo-Fregean position in the philosophy of mathematics). This should give us a clue already that something has gone funny, and that the deflationist position may not really be in tension with the idea that expressions like the quantifier and ‘exists’ are formal expressions that may be used univocally by disputants in ontological debates.

But it is a historical mistake to think that Carnap’s way of deflating ontological debates was to appeal to quantifier variance, and it is a philosophical mistake to think, as Ted Sider puts it, that “deflationists must accept *quantifier variance*” (2009, 391).

**4. Was Carnap committed to Quantifier Variance?**

It is understandable that Carnap might be associated with quantifier variance. He did of course embrace the principle of tolerance, and with it the idea that we should permit various different logical forms, and reject the attempt to find the one ‘true’ logic. And one may of course choose to use the letters “exists” or the symbol “∃” in different ways. There is also a trivial sense in which one might think of Carnap as accepting that the quantifier has a different meaning, say, when used by platonists than when used by nominalists. Since, for Carnap, the meaning of a term is given by the meaning postulates that are analytic within the relevant framework, any change in the analytic claims that use a given term in a framework counts as a change of meaning for that term. When we introduce a term like ‘number’, with rules that make it analytic that, say, ‘the number 5 exists’, we thereby also change the analyticities for ‘exist’, and so, to that extent, effect a (slight) change of meaning for ‘exists’.

But this sort of trivial change in the meaning of the quantifier is not what Hirsch and Putnam had in mind, nor what van Inwagen and other serious ontologists argue against. First, it clearly doesn’t involve denying van Inwagen’s view that ‘affirmation of existence is denial of the number zero’ (2009, 483); on the contrary, it is quite consistent with the view that ‘exists’ is a formal term governed by core rules of use (connecting it with rules for the quantifier, for number claims, and for disjunction) that *do not vary* even when we add new material terms to the language.[[15]](#footnote-15) Indeed we need only propose a small shift—to count the meaning of a term as given by certain *core* rules of use (bringing us close to something like Horwich’s (1999) view) rather than as tied to *all* analytic claims involving that term—to license us to say that the meaning of the quantifier doesn’t vary across these different frameworks that differ in adopting additional material terms.

Second, it is clear that this is not the sense of ‘quantifier variance’ that Hirsch uses as a way of trying to undermine serious metaphysics. For Hirsch is concerned not with the trivial changes in analyticities involving the quantifier that may be introduced when we introduce new terms to a linguistic framework, but rather with *changes in the truth-conditions* for (all) quantified statements, an implicit raising or lowering of standards for existence. So, for example, Hirsch treats the paradigm of quantifier variance as a change in the truth-conditions for quantified statements (2002, 54) that makes existence statements that are true in one language, e.g. ‘The mereological sum of my nose and the Eiffel Tower exists’, which is true in Hirsch’s ‘M-use’ [mereologist’s use] come out as false in another language (Hirsch’s ‘A-use’ [the anti-mereologist’s use]) (2002, 55-56)). The two languages, as Hirsch presents them, don’t differ in that one accepts and the other rejects the *terminology* of ‘mereological sum’: both are apparently accepting (using) this terminology in making their declarations that there is or is not a mereological sum of nose and tower. Instead, they differ in the standards they require for something to exist: those employing the A-use count ‘there exists something composed of the F-thing and the G-thing’ as true only if those expressions refer to things that are united in some special ways; those employing the M-use count that sentence as true no matter how the F-thing and G-thing are connected (2002a, 55-6).

The position of quantifier variance to which Sider thinks the deflationist must be committed (and against which he argues, in defense of serious metaphysics) is the Hirschian position. Sider initially describes deflationism as the view that:

[1]…something is wrong with ontological questions themselves. Other than questions of conceptual analysis, there are no sensible questions of (philosophical) ontology. Certainly there are no questions that are fit to debate in the manner of the ontologists. To return to the case at hand: when some particles are arranged tablewise, there is no ‘substantive’ question of whether there also exists a table composed of those particles, they say. [2] They are simply different—and equally good—ways to talk. (2009, 385-6; inserted numbers mine)

And he attributes this view to Carnap, Hirsch, Putnam, and me alike (2009, 386 n. 10). But one thing the above discussion should make clear is that there is a crucial difference between [1] and [2]. The Carnapian deflationist of course accepts [1] that something is wrong with ontological positions, and that there are no questions that are fit to debate in the manner of the ontologists. But she or he does not accept [2], that when one ontologist asserts that there are tables, and another denies this, they are both speaking truths in their own language (with the variance amounting to a matter of how each chooses the meaning of the quantifier). Instead, the Carnapian deflationist holds that the table-denier *is not* *making any theoretic claim we can make sense of*—since if he accepted the term ‘table’ with its customary rules of use, it would be an obvious truth that there are tables. And so there is no need for the Carnapian deflationist to accept that the disputants “mean different things by the quantifiers” (Sider 2009, 391) to make sense of the idea that both speak truly (for in fact the Carnapian denies that they both speak truly!). There is a way of deflating ontological debates that does not rely on quantifier variance in Hirsch’s sense at all. That way is Carnap’s.

So the crucial point here is that Carnap was not committed to quantifier variance in anything like Hirsch’s sense, or the sense serious metaphysicians such as van Inwagen and Sider have argued against, and that he does not make use of the idea of quantifier variance in his way of deflating ontological debates. Carnap does not say that ontological debates turn out to be merely *verbal* debates *because the disputants are using the quantifier in different senses*.

His diagnosis is quite different: the difference between the Platonist and the nominalist doesn’t lie in the truth-conditions they associate with quantified sentences, but rather in what *material* terms the disputants have introduced and accept (with what rules of use). The nominalist must be understood as implicitly refusing to admit noun terms for numbers (and refusing to quantify over numbers), or refusing to accept or make use of the general predicate *number* (though she will use number terms in their role as determiners—i.e. she will allow ‘there are four books on the table’ but not ‘four is an even number’) or for properties (she will say ‘the phone is red and the shirt is red’ but not ‘there is some property that the phone and shirt have in common’).

As a result, the nominalist employs a different framework from the Platonist about numbers or properties, and will not accept sentences such as ‘numbers exist’ or ‘properties exist’. But the point is not that ‘exists’ is being used in a different sense by the nominalist and Platonist, but rather that the second accepts while the first rejects the linguistic framework that includes the relevant material concepts of property or number. As Richard Creath puts it, “To Carnap, this insistence [from nominalists] that we avoid talking of abstracta is just a prohibition on certain linguistic forms and a dogmatic one at that” (this volume, 12). For if the nominalist accepted those concepts (or the corresponding noun terms) with the same rules of use shared by the Platonist, she would also have to embrace truths like “there are numbers”, as that would follow trivially from the rules that help constitute the framework. In Creath’s words “Carnap’s nominalist lacks the resources even to say that there are no numbers” (this volume, 13). In short, there is no way to make sense of the nominalist’s position as both making use of the familiar concept of *number* and of denying that there are numbers.[[16]](#footnote-16) The best way to understand the dispute is as a pragmatic dispute about whether to accept the number framework: one which differs from the thing framework not in using ‘there is’ with a different meaning, but rather in introducing new nouns, predicates of higher order to apply to them, and variables for which they can be substituted.

As a result, all the discussion of quantifier variance that has been the focal point of metametaphysical discussions turns out to be a sidetrack from the core issues between Carnapian deflationists and serious neo-Quinean ontologists. And the serious ontologist’s defenses of the idea that there is a single (actual or available) meaning for the quantifier, however successful they may be, do nothing to defeat Carnapian deflationism. The truer legacy of Carnap’s metaontological approach lies not in Putnam, but in those inspired by Carnap’s own teacher, Frege: the neo-Fregeans in the philosophy of mathematics.

**5. The Easy approach to Ontology**

I have argued that despite its prominent origins, a Carnapian deflationary position has been largely missed in recent metaontological debates. On the interpretation of a Carnapian view developed above, we get what might be called an “easy” approach to those existence questions *that can be meaningfully stated and asked.* If we ask a general existence question such as ‘are there numbers?’, ‘are there properties’, ‘are there propositions’, using those terms *in the only sense they have—using the rules by which they are introduced into the language,* the answer is a straightforward, easy ‘yes’. If we are spoiling for a debate, we must undertake it on other territory: regarding whether we should use these terms, along with their customary rules of use, at all. I.e., regarding whether we should adopt the relevant linguistic framework.

This is the basic outline of the view to follow—the so-called ‘easy approach’ to ontology.[[17]](#footnote-17) The sense in which existence questions turn out to be ‘easy’ on this model must be understood carefully, however. The idea, coherent with Carnap, is that existence questions (that are fully meaningful—internal—questions) can be answered straightforwardly, using just conceptual and (often, but not always) empirical methods. But to say that existence questions can be answered straightforwardly by conceptual and/or empirical means, of course, is not to say that they can always be answered without much thought in a minute or two—though often they can be, for example in those cases where they may be answered by undertaking trivial inferences from uncontested truths. Nonetheless, it is perfectly coherent with the easy approach to allow that sometimes the empirical work may be difficult (consider, for example, questions about the existence of living members of a reclusive endangered species), or even that the conceptual work may be difficult (for example, if it is difficult to work out what our conception of ‘freedom’ amounts to, it may be difficult to answer the question of whether we have free will). What is significant about the ‘easy’ approach is that existence questions are treated as ‘easy’—and non-mysterious—*methodologically.* In so doing, it squeezes out room for the ‘serious’ metaphysics so commonly pursued—in which practitioners commonly think of themselves as answering questions that are, in Ted Sider’s phrase, ‘epistemically metaphysical’ in the sense that they “resist direct empirical methods but are nevertheless not answerable by conceptual analysis” (2011, 187)—and thus enables us to substantially demystify the epistemology of metaphysics. Nor does the fan of ‘easy ontology’, in contrast with the neo-Quinean, treat the ontologist’s typical existence questions as to be answered by inference to the best explanation.[[18]](#footnote-18) The question, say, of whether properties exist is (on the easy ontological view) misrepresented if we think of it (on analogy with scientific existence questions) as a question of what ‘positing’ properties may ‘explain’, rather than as a descriptive question that can be straightforwardly answered by making use of our conceptual competence.

What difference might reviving the easy approach make to contemporary metaontological debates? It could make a big difference, as it makes available an approach to deflating ontological questions that does not rely on quantifier variance and thus which has been largely untouched in recent defenses of serious ontology. It may be the deflationist’s best hope, and the serious metaphysician’s biggest concern.

There are three important features of the view that follows:

1. It treats the quantifier as a formal notion with a single core rule of use
2. It holds that, given the rules of use for the quantifier and for the material terms introduced, well-formed existence questions are straightforward to answer by analytic or empirical means, and makes many ontological debates easy to resolve via inferences from uncontroversial truths
3. It thus squeezes out room for serious metaphysics, construed as an attempt to answer deeper factual questions about what ‘really exists’ via ‘epistemically metaphysical’ means.

We can begin from the idea that our terms in the English language we use in conducting ontological debates are governed by rules of use—rules that may take different forms, but that must be in place if that that very term is being used at all (to that extent, they may be considered ‘constitutive’ rules). Given a certain understanding of the rules of use for the quantifier and for sortal nouns, those existence questions that are asked *using* the relevant terms become (in the above sense) easy to answer.

**Rule of use for the quantifier:**

First, to make it clear that this approach does not presuppose quantifier variance, we may begin with a hypothesis about a core rule of use for the quantifier both in ordinary English and in typical ontological debates: Following Horwich (1999) in using \* quotes as a way of picking out terms that preserves their meaning, we can express the fundamental, formal rule of use for ‘exists’ as follows: *supposing we have a well-formed sortal term \*K*\*:

E: Ks exist iff \*K\* refers.

Where this is not to say that the two assertions are *equivalent*: the first is in the object language, and thus about the world; the second is in the meta-language, and so is about language. The view is merely that E expresses the fundamental rule of use for ‘exists’, a rule that enables us to move up and down the semantic slide, from talk about existence to talk about reference and back. Claims of existence are in turn interchangeable with quantified claims: Ks exist iff ∃x(Kx).[[19]](#footnote-19) Given these licensed transformations, existence questions (and quantificational questions about what there is) may be answered as easily as reference questions involving sortal terms may be.

**Rules of use for sortal nouns in the thing language:**

Noun terms—here for simplicity I will only discuss sortals—also are governed by rules that determine (among other things) under what conditions they refer. Let me begin with those basic sortal terms found in what Carnap calls the ‘thing language’, which we naturally accept “early in our life as a matter of course” (1947/1956, 207). A term like ‘table’ or ‘paper’ would be part of this ‘thing language’, and Carnap held that speakers who mastered the use of these terms could then, if using them, easily resolve questions like ‘is there a table in that classroom?’ or ‘is there a piece of paper on my desk’ empirically by ordinary means like going and looking.

One way to put this idea is that such terms come governed by application conditions that speakers master in learning under what circumstances the term is properly applied and refused. They may then answer such existence questions (expressed using the terms) straightforwardly by evaluating whether the application conditions are met. (Note that application conditions mustn’t be understood as: “\*K\* applies if a K exists, as that would be circular. They also needn’t be identified with verification conditions, and needn’t be stateable at all, as long as they are learnable. For further discussion see my (2015, Chapter 2).

Given mastery of these basic rules of use for our terms (in the form of mastering the term’s application conditions) we can answer such existence questions framed *using* terms of the thing language. For speakers who have mastered the application conditions for the term ‘paper’ are in a position to determine whether they have been fulfilled (e.g. by looking on my desk), and thus can easily answer the relevant existence question.

Another way to see how the recognition of these rules makes resolving existence questions ‘easy’ is that any existence debates that arise (and are expressed using the thing language (e.g. ‘are there tables’)) may be resolved easily by way of trivial inferences from uncontroversial truths accepted by all disputants. Suppose someone accepts that there are particles arranged tablewise but denies that there are tables. Competent speakers can make use of their linguistic mastery to judge that any situation that makes it true that there are particles arranged tablewise is a situation in which the application conditions for ‘table’ are fulfilled. And so, from the uncontroversial truth ‘there are particles arranged tablewise in my dining room’, competent speakers are licensed to infer ‘there is a table in my dining room’, thus easily resolving this debate—provided the debate is considered as regarding an *internal* question *using* the term ‘table’ in accord with its standard rules (which provide that a situation in which particles are arranged tablewise is sufficient for ‘table’ to apply and, thus, for there to be tables).

**Introducing nouns in other frameworks**

New sortals may be introduced on the basis of a previous framework. So, e.g., on Carnap’s view we can initially use numerals like ‘five’ in the determiner position, as in “there are five books on the table”. But we can go from there to introduce a general noun term “number” and sentences in which it appears, as in ‘Five is a number’, and then introduce variables to range over the numbers in quantified sentences (1947/1956, 208). Similarly, adjectival words like ‘red’, ‘hard’, and the like may be used in describing concrete objects, but we can go on to introduce a general term ‘property’ and variables ranging over property terms, and new rules for forming sentences with these terms in the nominative position, e.g. ‘Red is a color’ and quantified sentences like ‘These two pieces of paper have a color in common’, from which we may infer the (internal) statement that there is a color—and thus that there is a property (1947/1956, 211-212).

Given the rules of use that introduce such new terms, existence questions formulated *using* those terms are also easy to answer, for the rules of use for the terms enable us to make easy inferences from basic, uncontroversial truths to the existence of the abstracta in question. This basic idea has been developed by neo-Fregeans in philosophy of mathematics, who point out that the rules governing introduction of number terms license us to make an inference from an uncontroversial claim like: ‘The cups and saucers are equinumerous’ to ‘The number of cups=the number of saucers’ to ‘There is an number’. Stephen Schiffer develops a similar idea for other cases (events, properties, states, propositions), arguing that ‘something from nothing’ inferences take us from an uncontroversial claim like: ‘this shirt is red’ to ‘this shirt has the property of redness’, to ‘there is a property’.[[20]](#footnote-20)

So understood, the pleonastic approach developed by Schiffer and the neo-Fregean approach developed by Hale and Wright are ways of making evident how easily, typically trivially, existence questions may be resolved *if they are treated as internal questions: questions that involve \*using\* the terms of the language, according to established rules.* Such writers and their readers occasionally, however, make a mistake (e.g. Schiffer (1996)): presenting it as a *deflationary* *ontological* view about the entities in question (numbers, properties, *propositions*, etc.)—taking them to have a ‘minimal’ ‘pleonastic’ or ‘reduced’ ontological status (as compared with, say, Platonist rivals).

But (as I argue more thoroughly elsewhere (forthcoming)) seen in the Carnapian context we can see that that move is mistaken: the right approach is to say that there are numbers, properties, propositions, *in the only sense these terms (‘number’, ‘property’, ‘proposition’) have.* The only sense these terms have is the sense used in asking the internal question, and so understood the answer is a simple (not qualified, reduced) ‘yes’. The fact that the same procedure, and possibility of a similarly easy answer to the existence question, is available whether it regards tables, properties, or numbers, again helps make it evident that the numbers, properties, and propositions to which we become committed are not ‘deflated’ or ‘reduced’ entities in some sense that can contrast them with more robust entities like tables. The neo-Carnapian *metaontology* may be deflationary (in that it deflates traditional ontological debates), but the resulting first-order *ontology* is not deflated: it is a simple descriptive realism that asserts that there are Xs in the only sense ‘X’ has.

This gives us one side of the Carnapian view: the idea that, given the rules of use for the terms involved (here, the quantifier and material terms), existence questions framed *using* the terms are straightforward to answer. The existence questions ‘are there tables’, ‘are there numbers’, ‘are there properties’ are here construed as highly general *internal* questions asked *using* the terms in question in accord with their extant rules of use; it is making use of those rules that makes the questions easy to answer and the debates easy to resolve.

Here, as on Carnap’s original view, we can see that (if these really are rules of use for the terms in question), the metaphysician’s ‘deeper’ questions cannot be understood as ‘theoretical’ or factual questions that *use* the terms in accord with their extant rules. For if they are, then they are easily answered in the affirmative—and the answers seem so easy to come by that it doesn’t seem that this can be what the serious metaphysicians are really engaged in debating.

That doesn’t mean there is no work to be done by metaphysicians, but it lies on the side of conceptual explication (in explicating the rules of our common language that may be made use of in answering the internal questions), conceptual choice on carefully considered pragmatic grounds, and what Carnap might have called ‘conceptual engineering’, in formulating new conceptual/linguistic systems for new purposes—not in deep theoretic inquiries into what *really* exists.

**6. Conclusion**

I have argued that the Carnapian approach to metaontology has been rejected and left behind for the wrong reasons, and that there is a clear way to understand it that is not subject to accusations of verificationism or anti-realism, and that is not tied to quantifier variance. As I have argued, the easy approach to ontological questions seen in neo-Fregean and Schifferian positions (and generalized in my work), not the internal realism of Putnam or quantifier variance of Hirsch, is the true heir to Carnapian ontological deflationism about ontology—or at least to his understanding ofthe only sense of those existence questions on which they are factual questions that make sense (the internal sense).

While this brand of meta-ontological deflationism faces challenges of its own (bad company objections,[[21]](#footnote-21) fictionalist objections,[[22]](#footnote-22) the problem of ‘too much content’,[[23]](#footnote-23) etc.) it clearly is not the least threatened by the prominent arguments that have been raised against quantifier variance, verificationism, and anti-realism—for it is tied to none of these positions. The prospects for such a neo-Carnapian deflationary approach, properly understood, so far seem rather promising.[[24]](#footnote-24)

**Works Cited:**

Azzouni, Jody (2004). *Deflating Existential Consequence.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Bennett, Karen. (2009). “Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology”, in Chalmers et al. *Metametaphysics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Boghossian, Paul (1997). “Analyticity”. In Bob Hale and Crispin Wright, eds. *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Boolos, George (1990). “The Standard equality of numbers” in Boolos, ed. *Meaning and Method: Essays in honor of Hilary Putnam.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 261-77.

Bricker, Phillip (forthcoming). “Realism without Parochialism”. *Modal Matters: Essays in Metaphysics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carnap, Rudolf (1947/1956). *Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Carnap, Rudolph. (1950). “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology”. Reprinted in *Meaning and Necessity,* Second edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (second edition 1956).

Chalmers, David J., David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, eds. (2009) *Metametaphysics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Creath, Richard. 2004. “Quine on the Intelligibility and Relevance of Analyticity”. In Gibson, Roger F., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Quine.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eklund, Matti (2009). “Carnap and Ontological Pluralism” in Chalmers et al.

Eklund, Matti (2006). “Neo-Fregean Ontology”. *Philosophical Perspectives*  20: 95-121.

Field, Hartry (1984). ‘Critical Notice of Wright’s *Frege’s Conception of Numbers as Objects. Canadian Journal of Philosophy,* 14: 637-62.

Fine, Kit (2009). “The Question of Ontology”. In Chalmers, et al.

Gallois, Andre (1998). “Does Ontology rest on a Mistake?”, *Aristotelian Society Supplement* 72 (1): 263-283.

Hale, Bob and Crispin Wright (2001). The Reason’s Proper Study: Essays towards a Neo-Fregean Philosophy of Mathematics. Oxford: Clarendon.

Horwich, Paul (1999). *Meaning.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Harman, Gilbert (1999). “The Death of Meaning”, in *Reasoning, Meaning and Mind.* Oxford: Clarendon Press: 119-137.

Heck, Richard (1992). “On the Consistency of Second-Order Contextual Definitions”, *Nous* 26:491-5.

Hilpinen, Risto (1996). “On Some Formulatons of Realism, or How Many Objects are there in the World?” in R. S. Cohen, R. Hilpinen, and Qui Renzong, eds. *Realism and Anti-realism in the Philosophy of Science.* Netherlands: Kluwer.

Hirsch, Eli (2002). “Quantifier Variance and Realism”. In Ernest Sosa and Enrique Villanueva, eds. *Realism and Relativism. Philosophical Issues* 12. Oxford: Blackwell: 51-73.

Hirsch, Eli (2009). “Ontology and Alternatve Languages”. In Chalmers et. al.

Kriegel, Uriah (2013). “The Epistemological Challenge of Revisionary Metaphysics”. *Philosopher’s Imprint* 13, No. 12: 1-30.

Linnebo, Oystein (2009). “Introduction”. *Synthese* 170 (3): 321-329.

McGinn, Colin (2011). *Truth By Analysis: Names, Games and Philosophy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Price, Huw (2009). “Metaphysics after Carnap: the Ghost who Walks?” in Chalmers, et. al.

Putnam, Hilary. (1987). *The Many Faces of Realism.* La Salle, IL: Open Court.

Putnam, Hilary (1990). *Realism with a Human Face.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Quine, W.V.O (1951) “On Carnap’s Views on Ontology”, reprinted in *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays* (1966/1976)Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press: 203-211.

Quine, W. V. O. (1948/2001). “On What there Is”, in *From a Logical Point of View*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Quine, W. V. O. (1951/2001). “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”. In *From a Logical Point of View*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Quine, W.V.O. (1991). “Two Dogmas in Retrospect”. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21: 265-74.

Russell, Gillian. (2008). *Truth in Virtue of Meaning: A Defence of the Analytic/Synthetic Distinction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schiffer, Stephen (1994). “A Paradox of Meaning”. *Nous* 28: 279-324.

Schiffer, Stephen (1996). “Language-Created Language-Independent Entities”. *Philosophical Topics* 24:1, 149-167.

Schiffer, Stephen (2003). *The Things we Mean.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sider, Theodore (2007). “Neo-Fregeanism and Quantifier Variance”, *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*  81: 201-32.

Sider, Theodore (2009). “Ontological Realism”. In Chalmers et. al.

Strawson, P. F. and H. P. Grice. (1956.) “In Defense of a Dogma”. *Philosophical Review* 65, 2: 141-58.

Thomasson, Amie L. (2007 a). *Ordinary Objects.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Thomasson, Amie L. (2008). “Existence Questions”. *Philosophical Studies.* 141: 63-78.

Thomasson, Amie L. (2009). “The Easy Approach to Ontology”. *Axiomathes* 19 (1): 1-15.

Thomasson, Amie L. (2013). “Fictionalism versus Deflationism”, Mind (October), doi.10.1093/mind/fzt055.

Thomasson, Amie L. (2015). *Ontology made Easy.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Thomasson, Amie L. (Forthcoming). [“Easy Ontology and its Consequences”](http://media.wix.com/ugd/63fc8a_4e16121b2d7c4865b060ae80469de2db.docx?dn=%22Schiffer%20paper.docx%22" \t "_blank), in Gary Ostertag, ed. Meanings and Other Things (Essays on the work of Stephen Schiffer). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Van Inwagen, Peter (1998). “Metaontology”. *Erkenntnis* 48: 233-50.

Van Inwagen, Peter (2009). “Being, Existence and Ontological Commitment”. In Chalmers et. al.

Williamson, Timothy (2007). *The Philosophy of Philosophy.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Yablo, Stephen (2000). “A Paradox of Existence”. In Anthony Everett and Thomas Hofweber, eds. *Empty Names, Fiction, and the Puzzles of Non-Existence.* Palo Alto: CSLI Publications: 275-312.

Yablo, Stephen (2001). “Go Figure: A Path through Fictionalism”. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 25: 72-102.

1. In this vein, Biggs and Wilson (this volume) characterize Carnap as holding that “metaphysical claims are either trivial or meaningless, since lacking any means of substantive confirmation” (1), and as treating external claims as never making sense since they “do not have associated verification conditions” (17). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thus I disagree with Kraut’s claim (this volume, p. 10) that if we take Carnap to be recommending the elimination of traditional ontological debates in favor of more explicitly pragmatic disputes, we end up with an ‘expressive impoverishment’ of language. We can still make all the usual claims of (and express our commitments to) the existence of things of various sorts—taken in an internal sense. Also, I think it is clear that Carnap would reject the notion that examining whether adopting a linguistic framework is warranted would require ‘reference to things that exist and the best way to deal with them’. For Carnap explicitly argues against the view that a question ‘concerning the existence or reality’ of a certain sort of entity ‘must be raised and answered *before* the introduction of new language forms” (1950, 214). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Price (2009, 342) likewise argues that it is a mistake to think of Carnapians as putting existence claims in the context of a ‘disowning preface’ such as ‘according to the story’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Eklund (this volume, 6) apparently misses the connection between Carnap’s acceptance of analyticity and his internal/external distinction, saying that “analyticism” is “entirely separable from any appeal to an external/internal distinction”. But on my reading there is a crucial connection: if we take linguistic frameworks to involve constitutive rules of use introducing key terms (and thus to give the basis for a view on which there are analytic truths), then that explains why internal questions are easily answerable (by analytic and/or empirical means), and why external questions—that attempt to sever the key terms from their governing rules—are pseudo-questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Though Carnap does occasionally appeal to verificationism, the point here is that his deflationary position may be understood in a way that does not rely on it. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Eklund objects to this interpretation of Carnap, saying that its ‘sticking point’ concerns “what justifies taking metaphysicians to purport to ask external questions in the sense now at issue. Do metaphysicians really not aim to respect the rules of language when asking their questions?” (this volume, p. 7) But this misunderstands the point—which is not to give an interpretation of what metaphysicians *think* they are up to or how they would characterize their aims in ways they would accept. Instead, the point is to see what (if any) sense can be made of their debates (an analysis that may involve regarding them as misguided about what they can be doing). Indeed as Creath (this volume, p. 9, 15) argues, Carnap may best be seen as making a *proposal* of a clearer and more productive way of understanding what we can legitimately be up to in such debates. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On the role of analyticity in Carnap’s system, see also Creath (this volume, 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Of course later philosophers have also raised other arguments against analyticity—see, e.g., Harman (1999), and Williamson (2007). For responses to Quine’s attacks, see Strawson and Grice (1956), Boghossian (1997), Russell (2008) and my (2007, Chapter 2). For responses to Williamson, see my (2015, Chapter 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Price (2009, 344). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Where the capital ‘R’ signifies this is realism on Putnam’s reading of it as committed to three theses:

    1. The world consists in a fixed totality of mind-independent objects
    2. There is exactly one true and complete description of the way the world is
    3. Truth involves correspondence between our description and the way the world is.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This Putnamian reading comes close to what Eklund labels the ‘relativist’ understanding of Carnap’s frameworks (this volume, 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I have also addressed a related point extensively elsewhere (2007, Chapter 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I say *may* here because I don’t want to say that the deflationist must be committed to that—on that, see below for more. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. He attributes the argument to Carnap but says he hasn’t been able to locate it in his writings (2009, 484). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This of course is not to deny that there are differences between van Inwagen’s and Carnap’s views: Carnap treats existence claims as implicitly second order; van Inwagen rejects this (2009, 483-4). Van Inwagen also clearly would reject the Carnapian way of introducing new linguistic frameworks, holding instead that one must be justified in introducing new terms by thinking that there are things for them to refer to (2009, 491), a viewpoint Carnap clearly rejects (1950, 214). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Thus I reject Eklund’s thought that the ‘language pluralist’ interpretation of Carnap (which is otherwise close to mine) may stress that sentences like “There are numbers” will “come out as true in some possible language and false in another” (3). Of course the relevant string of symbols or sounds might be given different meanings such that it expresses a true sentence in one language and a false one in another. But this won’t be a situation in which we are saying that the same *sentence* (with the same terms, governed by the same rules) has a different truth-value in different languages. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Unfortunately there is only room here to present it in outline form. For a fuller development see my (2015), as well as the earlier work by Schiffer (1994, 1996, 2003) and Hale and Wright (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This is a conception of ontology we have independent reason to regard with suspicion. For unlike the scientific case, there is seldom any difference in empirical adequacy among competing *ontological* ‘theories’, and competing ontological views typically simply trade one theoretical virtue for another (see Bennett 2009 and Kriegel 2013). Moreover, as Bricker (forthcoming) points out, it is hard to see the remaining theoretic virtues as giving more than a parochial, pragmatic reason for preferring one theory to another (e.g. that it is easier for us to use)—not as giving reason to think this theory is really the true one (as the serious ontologist needs). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Thus those undertaking easy ontology, like neo-Quineans, embrace a traditional view that treats the quantifier as an existential quantifier, making quantified equivalent to existence claims. This, of course, is an assumption rejected by others, including neo-Meinongians, and (more recently) Jody Azzouni (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. There are, however, also important differences between their views, e.g. that the neo-Fregean’s conceptual truths are bi-conditionals, whereas Schiffer makes use of only one-way entailments from the uncontroversial claim to the ontological claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Versions of the bad company objection have been raised by Field (1984), Boolos (1990) and Heck (1992), and applied to the easy approach by Eklund (2006 and 2009). For a useful overview of the literature, see Linnebo 2009. For responses to bad company objections, see Schiffer (2003) and my (2015, 253-271). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The fictionalist objection is (roughly) that the conclusions of easy arguments should be read as implicitly in the scope of a pretense operator and so not be taken ontologically seriously. This has been most prominently raised by Stephen Yablo (2000, 2001). For a response to the fictionalist objection, see my (2013 and 2015, 177-207). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Evnine (this volume) develops this objection—raising doubts that the easy approach to existence questions can ensure the existence of entities with the properties supposed to be definitive of them. For a reply to this objection, see my (2015, 221-230). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Many thanks to Richard Creath, Matti Eklund, and two anonymous referees for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)