Amie Thomasson on Ordinary Objects

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Amie Thomasson has won well-deserved praise for her book, *Ordinary Objects*. She defends a commonsense world view and gives us "reason to think that there are fundamental particles, plants and animals, sticks and stones, tables and chairs, and even marriages and mortgages." (p. 181) Ordinary objects comprise a vast array of things—natural objects both scientific and commonsensical, artifacts, organisms, abstract social objects.

In many ways, Thomasson's view and my own view (also recently published) are quite similar. We agree on a broad range of issues. Here is a sample of contested theses on which I think that Thomasson comes down on the right side: (1) Referring words fall under different sortal terms. (I put the point metaphysically by saying that concrete entities are of different primary kinds.) (2) Ordinary objects do not introduce causal redundancy. (3) Ordinary objects have vague boundaries. (4) Distinct ordinary objects can coincide spatially. (5) The special composition question is ill-formed. (6) We should recognize the existence of "social, cultural and institutional objects such as baseballs, statues and dollar bills."[1] (p. 182)

Despite this large area of agreement, Thomasson and I differ on how we support these theses. Her approach is linguistic: her central ideas concern reference and analyticity. Whereas Thomasson takes metaphysical problems to be dissolved by conceptual analysis and empirical discovery, I'll suggest that we still need good old-fashioned metaphysics.

Thomasson gives a unified response to a wide range of arguments against ordinary objects. The complaints that she rebuts include: the alleged causal redundancy of ordinary objects, the alleged rivalry with science, the so-called colocation problem, problems of vagueness, a problem of parsimony, and an argument inspired by the special-composition question. By anyone's standards, giving a unified response to this array of arguments against

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[1] I also agree with Thomasson when she says that there is no category-neutral use of 'object' that allows a meaningful answer to the question: "How many objects are there in this room?" We count by Fs—tables, trees, rocks, statues, etc. I use 'object' as short for ''tables' or 'trees'or 'rocks' or 'statues', ...and so on.'

ordinary objects is very impressive.

Thomasson argues that opposition to ordinary objects rests on *linguistic* mistakes; when these linguistic errors are corrected, she says, it follows trivially that ordinary objects exist. Although Thomasson's metaphysics is deflationary, it is still metaphysics—a claim about ontology, not just about what it's true or legitimate to say about reality. The metaphysical claim that Thomasson defends linguistically is realism about ordinary objects. (I am not going to discuss respects in which Thomasson's view does or does not deserve to be called 'realism' about ordinary objects.)

What I want to do here is, first, to sketch Thomasson's linguistic view, and then to raise questions about her use of the idea of analyticity. These questions suggest, I believe, that conceptual analysis and empirical discovery are not enough to solve or dissolve metaphysical problems. Then, after invoking the so-called colocation problem to illustrate the insufficiency of linguistic considerations to settle metaphysical questions, I conclude with a suggestion about how to evaluate ontological claims.

Thomasson's Linguistic View

Thomasson begins with a claim about reference: terms have determinate reference only to the extent that they are associated with "frame-level" conditions of application and of coapplication. (Coapplication conditions "specify under what conditions the term would be applied again to one and the same entity." (p. 40)) Frame-level application and coapplication conditions are so-called because "they involve conditions that are *conceptually* relevant to whether or not reference is established." (pp. 39-40)

Thomasson offers a single thesis as a basis for a commonsense view of ordinary objects. It is "the thesis that our singular and general nominative terms have a basic conceptual content in the form of frame-level conditions of application and coapplication collectively established by competent speakers." (p. 180) Indeed, this thesis leads to the conclusion that "the most basic claims about existence conditions, identity conditions, and persistence conditions, as well as the most basic modal claims, are analytic." (p. 6)

For example, the word 'house' is associated with a higher-level sortal 'building.' So, 'X

bought a house' analytically entails 'X bought a building'. One of Thomasson's characterizations of analytic entailment is as follows: "A analytically entails B just in case competent reasoners may infer the truth of B simply by knowing the truth of A and understanding the relevant terms." (p. 36) Analytic entailments are the key to Thomasson's defense of ordinary objects.[2]

Thomasson initially speaks of analytic claims as illustrations—rather than as descriptive reports—of linguistic rules. (pp. 59-60) Since rules are "disguised (and generalized) commands...analytic claims should not be understood as reports of or assertions about anything, and thus as not expressions apt for truth or falsehood." (p. 69) But analytic claims *must* be true in order to make sense of the idea of analytic entailment. And Thomasson says that in another sense, analytic claims *are* expressions apt for truth or falsehood. They are not about the world, and their "truth does not depend on any empirical fact's obtaining," but they are apt for truth. In this latter sense, 'All bachelors are unmarried men' would be true even if there were no bachelors or men. It is the sense in which analytic claims may be true that is important for her key notion of analytic entailments.

With this linguistic apparatus in place, it is but a small step to the conclusion that tables, dogs, rocks, etc.—call them 'ordinary objects'—exist. After associating a term ('chair' or 'tree', say) with "frame-level" application and coapplication conditions, we can check to see whether these conditions are fulfilled. If they are, then it follows trivially that there exist, say, chairs and trees. More generally, what appear to be metaphysical questions turn out to be matters of conceptual analysis or matters of empirical discovery. Conceptual analysis reveals the application conditions for sortal terms, and empirical inquiry reveals whether or not the application conditions for a term are fulfilled.

Thomasson responds to the charge that she is providing linguistic solutions to metaphysical problems. Her response is, no: Rather, she has shown that "what appear as

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[2] Indeed, "the most basic claims about modality and about conditions of existence, identity and persistence are analytic, and do not require any bottom-up worldly truth-makers." (p. 180) Moreover, the "most basic conditions of existence, identity, and persistence for the objects we refer to are discoverable by a kind of conceptual analysis." (p. 54) [Modal truths are "either analytic truths or based on combining an analytic truth with an empirical truth." (pp.62-3)]

problems for a particular metaphysical view (the view that there are ordinary objects) are in fact no problems at all, resulting as they do only from misunderstandings bred in misuses of language." (p. 180)   Since the misuses of language, if that is what they are, concern analyticity, I want to ask some questions about Thomasson's appeal to analytic entailments.

Some Questions About Analytic Entailment

Thomasson introduces the expression 'analytically entails' by saying:

[A] sentence (or set of sentences) Φ analytically entails a sentence Ψ just in case, given only logical principles and the meanings of the terms involved, the truth of Φ guarantees with truth of Ψ. Thus, where Φ analytically entails Ψ, given knowledge of the truth of Φ, as well as grasp of the meanings of the terms and reasoning abilities, a competent speaker may legitimately infer the truth of Ψ on that basis alone. (p. 16)

It is obvious in this passage, that Φ and Ψ must be apt for truth. According to this passage, there are two necessary conditions for Φ to analytically entail Ψ: (i) The truth of Φ guarantees the truth of Ψ on the basis of logical principles and meanings alone. And (ii) a competent reasoner and speaker can infer Ψ from Φ on the basis of logical principles and meanings alone. I want to offer three examples that I hope prompt further clarification of Thomasson's use of the idea of analytic entailment.

(1) First, here is what seems to be a case of an analytic entailment in which a competent reasoner and speaker cannot infer the Ψ-sentence from the Φ-sentence on the basis of logical principles and meanings alone:

 'Oscar is a whale' seems to analytically entails 'Oscar is a mammal', and not 'Oscar is a fish'. Indeed, 'whale' and 'mammal' exemplify just the sort of species/genus hierarchy of sortals that Thomasson discusses. But it seems that a child today, and whole populations of yesteryear, could understand the words 'whale' and 'mammal', be competent reasoners and mistakenly believe that if Oscar is a whale, then Oscar is a fish, but not believe that if Oscar is a whale, then Oscar is a mammal.

However, if Thomasson is right, then the person who asserts, 'A whale is a big fish' either does not understand the word 'whale' or is an incompetent reasoner. Logic and language alone should inform the speaker that whales are not fish. But it seems to me that the knowledge lacked by a person who asserts, "A whale is a big fish" concerns not the meanings of words, but the nature of whales.

So, my question is this: Are analytic entailments relative to the state of empirical knowledge? If so—if 'Oscar is a whale' did not analytically entail 'Oscar is a mammal' until certain empirical discoveries were made—then how can the relation between 'Oscar is a whale' and 'Oscar is a mammal' be one of analytic entailment at all (since the relation between whales and mammals is not time-bound)? But if not—if 'Oscar is a whale' always entailed 'Oscar is a mammal'—then how can the entailment be known on the basis of meanings alone, without empirical knowledge?

(2) My second question about analyticity is related to the whale/mammal example. One of Thomasson's theses is that all modal truths are ultimately based on analytic truths. The term 'ultimately' is important here, because it allows that "while the most *general* principles of individuation are analytic, these may appeal to actual empirical facts to fill them out in detail." (p. 62) This seems to leave the door open for analytic truths to depend on empirical facts.

Thomasson cites an example from Alan Sidelle: Although it is not analytic that water is H_2O, "it is analytic that—if there is water—*whatever* water's chemical composition actually is, water is of that kind necessarily."[3] (p. 62) To say that it is *analytic* that *if there is water, whatever water's chemical composition actually is, water is of that kind necessarily* is to construe an analytic statement as dependent in part on an empirical fact (viz., that water has a chemical composition). This empirical fact (that water has some chemical composition) was unknown throughout most of human history. (Indeed, some ancients believed that water was one

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[3] My other question about Thomasson's view that all modal truths are ultimately based on analytic truths is this: How are we to understand the word 'necessarily' in the putative analytic truth 'If there is water, then whatever its chemical composition, water is of that kind necessarily'? Thomasson's example was to illustrate the view that all modal truth are ultimately based on analytic truths. I just don't see how the necessity conveyed by 'necessarily' in 'If there is water, then whatever its chemical composition, water is of that kind necessarily' could itself be ultimately based on analytic truths. I'm not saying that it can't be, I just don't understand how it can be. So, I don't see how all modal truths can be based on analytic truths.

of four basic elements.)

My question is this: How could a claim that presupposes empirical facts (about chemical composition) be analytic? How could a claim that presupposes facts that are not knowable until centuries later be "*conceptually* relevant to whether or not reference is established" by the term 'water'?

I see a *necessary* connection between water and a certain chemical composition, but I don't see how the connection is analytic. The ancients were competent reasoners and users of words meaning 'water'; but they were in no position to know the putative analytic truths that are supposed to be "*conceptually* relevant to whether or not reference is established." So, they seem not to have satisfied the conditions for successful reference to water. That conclusion seems overly harsh.

I believe that you and Odysseus, say, both successfully have referred to water. My suspicion, as I have already hinted, is that to understand how you both referred to water, we will need to appeal to what is necessary a posteriori, and not just to analyticity.

(3) I have a third and final example. This one is a case of a thesis that (it seems) ought to have analytic entailments, but I cannot think of them. What is known as 'Goldbach's conjecture' is the following thesis: 'Every even number greater than 2 is the sum of two primes.'

I realize that Thomasson is concerned with ordinary material objects, and not with mathematical objects, but I'm trying to understand the idea of analytic entailment. And Thomasson explicitly distinguishes logical analytic entailments ("knowable by competent speakers merely on the basis of their reasoning abilities") from substantive analytic entailments, and she says that what's at issue in her book are "substantive (not merely logical) analytic entailments" (p. 204, n. 11) Since the meanings of the terms expressing Goldbach's conjecture —for example, 'even number', 'greater than', '2', 'sum' and 'prime'—make a contribution to analytic entailments, I take it that Goldbach's conjecture has substantive analytic entailments— the kind that are at issue in Thomasson's book.

So, my question is this: Does Goldbach's conjecture have analytic entailments? If it has analytic entailments, then they ought to be apparent to anyone who understands the conjecture.

In that case, how can anyone who understands the conjecture be unable either to prove that it is true or to derive a contradiction from it? If Goldbach's Conjecture does not have analytic entailments, then how are mathematical statements related to each other if not by analytic entailments? [I am really looking for enlightenment here.]

I hope that these questions—arising from the whale/mammal example, from the water/chemical-composition example, and from the Goldbach's-conjecture example—elicit further explanation of the idea of analytic entailment. Meanwhile, let me suggest that conceptual analysis and empirical discovery alone cannot handle metaphysical questions about ordinary objects.

Are Linguistic Considerations Enough?

Thomasson uses analytic entailments to solve the so-called "colocation problem" for material objects but it seems to me that the so-called colocation problem is not really a linguistic problem.

Thomasson holds, "The fact that there's a statue analytically entails that there's a physical lump constituting it." (p. 79). Let me say first that I don't see how to parse that sentence as written: Analytic entailments relate two sentences, Φ and Ψ, but what could they be here? '$\exists x(Sx)$' analytically entails....what? Since the 'it' in "The fact that there's a statue analytically entails that there's a physical lump constituting *it*" is the existentially bound 'x,' I don't see any candidate to be the analytically entailed sentence. So, I do not think that the sentence expresses an analytic entailment. In any case, Thomasson can still make her point, not by speaking of analytic entailments, but by saying that the sentence '$\forall x[Sx \rightarrow \exists y(Ly \ \& \ Cyx)]$' is analytic. Her point (however expressed) is important, because she holds that analytic relations prevent there being rivalry for space between a lump and the statue it constitutes; and if this is so, the colocation problem dissolves. (p. 80)

But I think that the claim that there are analytic relations of any sort between 'statue' and 'lump' is just false. You don't need any lumps at all to make a statue. You could make a statue using only toilet paper rolls and some glue. (In fact, I saw such a piece once at the Smith

College Art Museum.) Call it "Man Walking." You don't need a lump.[4]   Indeed, I don't believe

that there are any true *analytic* statements about statues and what constitutes them.   So, I do not

think that the question of the relation between a statue and what constitutes it is solved by

analytic entailments.

The point applies generally. Constitution relations cannot be inferred from the meanings

of words. 200 years ago children's toy blocks were made of wood; now some still are, but others

are made of plastic. The constitution relations even of natural objects like a piece of Earth

cannot be inferred from linguistic meanings: a piece of Earth may be constituted by a chunk of

mud, a piece of loam, a sum of dust particles, and so on. In many cases, the analytic entailments

(or relations) are just not there.

If the so-called colocation problem is a problem at all, it is a problem for all material

objects (modulo simples).   So, if the problem cannot be solved by analytic entailments, then

how should it be treated?

I have an alternative. In great detail and with replies to numerous objections, I have

worked out a relation of unity-without-identity that I call 'constitution'.   If the Constitution

View is correct, then there is no colocation problem. If there are objects, x and y, place p and

time t such that: x is at place p at time t & y is a place p at time t & x ≠ y, it follows that either x

constitutes y at t or y constitutes x at t. If the best account of ordinary objects has this

consequence, then we should just live with it.

The Constitution View also answers Katherine Hawley's question, Why do we tend to

say that there's just one thing there—not a statue and a piece of gold? Well, we don't say

"there's just one thing there." We say that there's a statue there, or a table, or whatever. We

typically identify things by the highest-level constituted entity. (y is the highest constituted

entity at a place and time iff $\exists x$(x constitutes y at t & $\sim\exists z$(y constitutes z at t).) In normal

contexts, the 'thing in the center of the room' refers to the constituted object—a table, say—and

not to the sum of a top and legs that constitutes it. And the reason for this is obvious: It's the

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[4] Thomasson does say in a footnote that the "details of application conditions for 'statue'
and 'lump' may be left for another occasion." (p. 214, n. 15). But she clearly says that there is
an analytic relation between them.

table that serves our purposes (of being a place for dinner, say), not the sum of top and legs. The same sum of top and legs would still exist but would no longer serve our usual purposes if it didn't constititute a table.[5]

In short, I think that linguistic considerations are not enough to vindicate our commonsense worldview of ordinary objects. We need a more robust metaphysics.

A Question of Existence

Standard metaphysicians traffic only in mind-independent entities. According to them, genuine reality is confined to what would be here if we had never existed. Both Thomasson and I reject such metaphysics. But Thomasson seems to me to go too far in the other direction. On her deflationary view of metaphysics, questions about what exists are either questions of conceptual analysis (about what the application conditions of sortal terms are) or empirical questions (about whether the application conditions are in fact fulfilled).

If Thomasson is correct, I can make anything exist by proposing a term and giving it application conditions that are satisfied. As Thomasson herself says,

> So I accept...that there are gollyswoggles, sums and referents of whatever other terms may be introduced in a way that...genuinely guarantees that their application conditions are met, provided the truth of other sentences is accepted (E.g., there is clay shaped in the following way; there is the Eiffel Tower and my nose).[6] (pp. 184-5)

So, we can bring things into existence just by stipulation. All we have to do is to provide a name and give it application conditions that are fulfilled. This consequence of Thomasson's view seems to make ontology, not only amenable to novelty, but altogether unstable.

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[5] In some contexts—say, we want to know how much firewood we can get out of the table—the focus may be on the constituter. But typically, our concern is with the highest constituted object.

[6] She continues: "Indeed, wherever we have a sortal with coherent application and coapplication conditions, and the application conditions are fulfilled, we may then, if we use 'object' in a covering sense, say that there is an object of that sort."   She asks: "Is this then a ridiculously profligate, bloated ontology?" But her answer is to go back to what she has already said—and what she has already says does not get to basic worry behind the question.

I now see that I was mistaken. Gollyswoggles were already in existence before anyone named them; they existed, but they just weren't called 'gollyswoggles.' However, I can reformulate the point: ontology becomes not unstable, but wildly unconstrained. [I read this paragraph, which I added after sending Amie the comments.]

Let me suggest an alternative to both the Scylla of exclusively mind-independent metaphysics, and the Charybdis of Thomasson's "Anything goes" ontology. Construe metaphysics as the effort to make sense of the world that we encounter—the world that contains cars, microscopes, roses, people, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and so on—in short, the world that we actually live in and interact with.   Ontology includes entities of all the primary kinds there are (some mind-independent, some not). As far as I can see, the only validation of metaphysics (aside from "internal" standards like coherence and elegance, etc) is pragmatic: Does it make the world that we interact with more intelligible?   At any rate, that's the bar at which I rest my case.

So, despite our differences in approach to the debate about the reality of ordinary objects, Thomasson and I share the goal. As Thomasson put it, "Showing how, reflectively, we can make sense of our unreflective common sense worldview is arguably one of the chief tasks of philosophy." (p. 3)   I could not agree more.