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I 3 Common Sense and Ontological Commitment

Chris Ranalli and Jeroen de Ridder

[Wittgenstein] once greeted me with the question: 'Why do people say that it was natural to think that the sun went round the earth rather than that the earth turned on its axis?' I replied: 'I suppose, because it looked as if the sun went round the earth.' 'Well,' he asked, 'what would it have looked like if it had looked as if the earth turned on its axis?' This question brought it out that I had hitherto given no relevant meaning to 'it looks as if' in 'it looks as if the sun goes round the earth'. My reply was to hold out my hands with the palms upward, and raise them from my knees in a circular sweep, at the same time leaning backwards and assuming a dizzy expression. 'Exactly!' he said.

G. E. M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus'*

INTRODUCTION

How ontologically committal is common sense? Is the common-sense philosopher beholden to a florid ontology in which all manner of objects, substances, and processes exist and are as they appear to be to common sense, or can she remain neutral on questions about the existence and nature of many things because common sense is largely non-committal? The task of this chapter is to sketch different answers to this question and to offer a provisional assessment of their strengths and weaknesses.

The question is important for a number of reasons. First, common sense is often considered to be a central touchstone for philosophical theorizing, especially in metaphysics (cf. Nolan 2016). To show that a proposed metaphysical theory violates common sense is typically considered a strike against it. Although philosophers differ in their assessment of exactly how bad it is for a theory to go against common sense, most agree that it is strongly preferable for theories to respect common sense.¹ In fact, philosophers proposing metaphysical

theories that appear to violate common sense often go to great lengths to show that, contrary to appearances, their theory is compatible with common sense after all, or else that it violates common sense only in minor and insignificant ways.² But of course, in order to determine whether a metaphysical theory goes against common sense, it needs to be clear what exactly common sense is committed to. If a theory is committed to the existence of objects constituted by random mereological sums such as this volume and the leaning tower of Pisa, that surely seems to go against common sense, but as long as it's unclear whether common sense is committed to the non-existence of such objects, we can't really tell whether there is a conflict.

Second, the ontological commitments of common sense are also important for claims about (alleged) conflicts between science and common sense. Science has been claimed to debunk common-sense convictions about ordinary physical objects. Sir Arthur Eddington's famous discussion of the two tables eloquently expresses the thought:

Yes; there are duplicates of every object about me – two tables, two chairs, two pens . . . One of them has been familiar to me from earliest years. It is a commonplace object of that environment which I call the world . . . It has extension; it is comparatively permanent; it is colored; above all it is substantial . . .

Table No. 2 is my scientific table. It is a more recent acquaintance and I do not feel so familiar with it. It does not belong to the world previously mentioned . . . My scientific table is mostly emptiness. Sparsely scattered in that emptiness are numerous electric charges rushing about with great speed; but their combined bulk amounts to less than a billionth of the bulk of the table itself. (Eddington 1928: ix–x)

More recently it has also been maintained that science undermines common-sense convictions about the nature of human beings, free will, rationality, and morality (cf. Peels et al. 2020). Assessing the

merits of these debunking claims requires a clear view of what common sense is committed to.

Third, getting clear about the ontological commitments of common sense is important for common-sense philosophy itself. It is, quite simply, a part of its self-understanding. And while much has been said about the epistemological commitments and implications of common-sense philosophy (see several other contributions to this volume, especially Chapters 9, 11, 12, 14, and 15), it appears that its ontology has received significantly less attention.

TAKING COMMON SENSE AT FACE VALUE

We introduce two initially plausible lines of thought about the ontological commitments of common sense. The first, explored in this section, naturally leads to the conclusion that common sense is substantially ontologically committed; the other, discussed in the next section, to the opposite conclusion, namely, that common sense bears very little ontological commitment.

The first line of thought starts from the idea that common sense is a container for the collective wisdom of ages. It has been shaped and moulded by human biological and cultural evolution and by the collective experience of many people over long periods of time. Even though common sense isn't the outcome of sustained systematic scientific inquiry, it has been tried and tested over time through everyday experience and hence there is extensive confirmation and broad evidence for its correctness. Hence, we ought to put a lot of stock in what common sense affirms and denies.³ Moreover, we don't have anywhere else to start – it's not as if we can just decide to put common sense aside, assume nothing, and begin with a blank slate. If common sense tells us that an external world exists, that tables and chairs exist, that people have free will, that you are the same person you were ten years ago, etc., then we should take those claims at face value and conclude that common sense is ontologically committed to an external world, to tables and chairs, to free will, to identity over time, etc. When philosophy or science clash with common sense, this

is a strike against them. Occasionally, when the scientific evidence is overwhelming or the force of the philosophical argument irresistible, there might be *ultima facie* reason to revise our commonsensical commitments, but we shouldn't do so easily. In short:

Common-sense commitment principle: if common sense says that there are entities E or things or events of kind K, then one is *prima facie* entitled to believe that there are Es/Ks.

By 'prima facie entitled to believe that there are Es/Ks' if common sense says that there are Es/Ks, we mean that one can reasonably accept that there are Es/Ks independently of having a justifying argument in favour of believing that there are Es/Ks. As long as one lacks reasons to believe there are no Es/Ks, one is thereby *prima facie* entitled to accept that there are Es/Ks if common sense says that there are Es/Ks. For example, if common sense says that people have free will, one can reasonably accept that there are some actions which are free even if one lacks a good argument for believing it. All one needs is to lack justification for believing that there are no such actions. This common-sense principle is a restricted form of epistemic conservatism and is thus far more moderate than unrestricted varieties of epistemic conservatism. Epistemic conservatism says that if you believe that *p* and there are no salient defeaters for your belief, then you are *prima facie* justified in retaining your belief that *p*. In this case, the principle is restricted to the ontological commitment claims of common sense.⁴

To explore this first line of thought further, suppose we accept that common sense bears significant epistemic weight and that its ontological commitments should not easily be put aside. What, then, are its ontological commitments? And how do we find out?

The literature contains a number of proposals. Let's begin by looking at three key ideas about what ontological commitment is. Our first stop is the quantifier account of ontological commitment, as famously defended by Quine (1953):

Quantifier account: a theory T is ontologically committed to all and only those entities to which the variables of the quantified sentences of T range over if T is to be true.

The quantifier account looks to the values of the variables of the sentences that compose the theory to tell us what its ontological commitments are. For example, consider the following statement:

(1) The hydrogen failed to bond with the oxygen.

We can state this sentence in first-order predicate logic as follows:

(2) $\exists x \exists y \text{ Hydrogen}(x) \ \& \ \text{Oxygen}(y) \ \& \ \sim \text{Bonded}(x, y)$.

From (2) it follows that:

(3) $\exists x \text{ Hydrogen}(x)$.

According to the quantifier account of ontological commitment, (3) is ontologically committed to hydrogen because the variable in (3) ranges over hydrogen. The quantifier account implies that a sentence like (3) is ontologically committed to *only* what the bound variable x ranges over in order for that sentence to be true. Since (3) doesn't have any variable which explicitly ranges over *electrons* or even *physical objects*, (3) is not ontologically committed to an electron or a physical object. For (3) to be ontologically committed to an electron or a physical object, the broader theory which embeds or implies (3) would need to contain other sentences which explicitly quantify over electrons or physical objects.

Indeed, one challenge for the quantifier account is that theories often have implicit ontological commitments. For example, while (3) explicitly quantifies over hydrogen, hydrogen is a physical object with one proton and one electron, so one might naturally think that any theory which includes (3) ought to be committed to the existence of at least one proton and at least one electron. The quantifier account, however, doesn't predict this. For the theory which includes (3) might not explicitly mention protons

or electrons and thus will fail to explicitly state $\exists z \text{ Proton}(z)$ and $\exists v \text{ Electron}(v)$ as sentences of the theory. This challenge is perhaps most pronounced in the case of atomic predicates which convey extrinsic properties, such as *child*. Consider a theory which contains (4) $\exists f \text{ Child}(f)$. Since there are no (absolutely) parentless children, the truth of (4) requires that the world contain parents. Yet parents don't need to be counted among the values of the bound variables of (4) for (4) to be true.⁵ So one unintuitive consequence for the quantifier account with respect to (4) is that it would turn out to be *not* ontologically committed to parents. Since this sort of problem will arise for any theory which contains atomic predicates expressing extrinsic properties, the proponent of the quantifier account will need to explain why the appearance of additional ontological commitment in cases like (4) are misleading or else explain how we can account for implicit ontological commitments using the quantifier account.⁶

Our next stop is the entailment account of ontological commitment. The entailment account says that the ontological commitment of a theory consists in what the theory entails exists. For example, if atomic theory entails that there are protons, then atomic theory is ontologically committed to protons. It needn't be that protons are explicitly bound to the variables of the quantified sentences of the theory. It is enough that the sentences which compose the theory *entail* that there are protons. We can summarize the account as follows:

Entailment account: a theory T is ontologically committed to an entity E or entities of kind K if and only if T entails that there are Es/Ks.⁷

The entailment account allows one to distinguish between the sentences which compose a theory – some of which might explicitly feature quantified sentences ranging over certain objects – and the ontological commitments of those sentences. For example, intuitively the sentence 'There is a birch tree' is ontologically committed

not just to a birch tree simpliciter, but also to organic entities, to physical objects, to bark, and so forth.

One upshot of the entailment account is that implicit ontological commitments of a theory are made visible, for it will count these entities as ontological commitments insofar as the theory entails that they exist. The ontological commitments of the theory don't need to be those which are bound to variables of the quantified statements of the theory. For example, if every cell must have ribosomes, then even if cell theory doesn't explicitly contain a quantification sentence which binds *ribosomes* to a variable, it would still be among the ontological commitments of the theory. Likewise with extrinsic properties such as *being a child*. Suppose there is a single sentence theory consisting of $\exists x \text{ daughter}(x)$. Since the existence of children is entailed by the existence of parents, a theory which is ontologically committed to parents would thereby be ontologically committed to children as well.

While the entailment account does much better on implicit ontological commitments than the quantifier account, it seems to overgenerate ontological commitments. Consider some traditionally metaphysically problematic entities, such as God, or numbers, or universals. These sorts of entities are taken to exist necessarily if they exist at all. Now consider two theories which disagree over the existence of God – theism and atheism. If theism is true, then God necessarily exists. By the entailment account of ontological commitment, however, God will be among the ontological commitments of atheism as well. After all, necessary truths are entailed by any statement, and since 'God exists' would be a necessarily true statement if theism is true, it would be an entailment of atheism as well. But that God might turn out to be an *ontological commitment* of atheism is absurd. The problem naturally extends to other cases as well. For it would be absurd to think that, if Platonism turned out to be correct, numbers (considered as non-spatiotemporal abstracta) would be an ontological commitment of fictionalism, or that, if

realism about universals turned out to be correct, universals would be an ontological commitment of nominalism.⁸

The final stop on our tour is the truthmaker account of ontological commitment. According to the truthmaker account, the ontological commitments of a theory are the truthmakers of the theory:

Truthmaker account: a theory T is ontologically committed to an entity E or entities of kind K if and only if Es/Ks are among the truthmakers of T.⁹

For example, consider the theory that there are other minds. The authors of this chapter – being two people – are truthmakers for this theory. The readers of this chapter are also truthmakers for this theory, as well as the editors of this volume. In this way, the truthmaker account of ontological commitment predicts that the theory that there are other minds is ontologically committed to (among other candidates) the authors, the editors, and the readers as truthmakers.

One virtue of the truthmaker account of ontological commitment is that, like the entailment account, it can explain the implicit ontological commitments of a theory. For example, recall that one problem facing the quantifier account was that a theory can have implicit ontological commitments in the sense that the existence of some entity might be necessary for the explicit quantified statements of the theory to be true but there is no explicit quantification over the relevant entity by any sentence of the theory. This is so in the case of extrinsic properties, such as *daughter* or *grandfather*, as well as for parts of objects which are themselves objects, such as protons and electrons for hydrogen in the case of ‘There is hydrogen’. But unlike the entailment account, it doesn’t seem liable to the charge of overgenerating ontological commitments. To see this, consider the theist and atheist dispute again. Theists accept the existence of God as a part of their theory whereas atheists deny the existence of God as a part of their theory. The truthmaker account rightly predicts both that God is an ontological commitment of theism and that God is not an ontological commitment of atheism, because God is needed to make theism true but God is not

needed to make atheism true. If theism turned out to be true so that 'God exists' is necessarily true, it would be an entailment of any theory – including atheism – that God exists, but, crucially, it wouldn't be an *ontological commitment* of those theories.

A worry for each of these accounts is that they saddle common sense with plenty of heavyweight ontological commitments. This is most clearly so for entailment and truthmaker accounts, but quantifier accounts, too, cannot easily escape commitment to whatever is needed for existentially quantified sentences to come out as true. To see this, consider the following set of propositions:

- (1) Common sense is ontologically committed to free actions.
- (2) Necessarily, free actions are undetermined agent-caused events.
- (3) Common sense is not ontologically committed to undetermined agent-caused events.

Consider (1) first. Free action certainly seems to be part of common sense's ontological commitments. It also seems to be the case that common sense is *not* ontologically committed to undetermined agent-caused events. Common sense just doesn't say anything about these types of events. So (3) seems to be true as well. If the entailment account of ontological commitment is correct, however, then common sense is ontologically committed to whatever is entailed by the sentences which compose common-sense theory. For example, since 'There are free actions' is part of common sense – and thereby common sense is ontologically committed to free actions – it follows that if free actions are essentially undetermined agent-caused events, as (2) suggests, then it is entailed by 'There are free actions' that there are undetermined agent-caused actions. Likewise for the truthmaker account. For if free actions are essentially undetermined agent-caused events, then a truthmaker for 'There are free actions' would be that there are undetermined agent-caused events. Hence, it would follow that undetermined agent-caused actions are ontological commitments of common sense. But that seems absurd.

The puzzle also arises for the quantifier account, although matters are less straightforward here. On one reading of the quantifier account, a theory is ontologically committed to only what is bound to the variables of the quantified sentences of the theory. Since 'There are undetermined agent-caused events' is *not* plausibly a sentence that is part of common sense, undetermined agent-caused events won't be referred to by any sentence of common sense. However, there are other readings of the quantifier account on which it may well turn out to be within the range of the quantified sentences that are part of common sense. For example, one version of the quantifier account is the so-called modal criterion:

Modal quantifier account: a theory T is ontologically committed to entities E or entities of kind K if and only if for every world W, T is true at W only if the domain of W contains at least one E or entity of kind K.

For example, common sense says that ordinary objects like tables and chairs exist. So, common sense is ontologically committed to ordinary objects if and only if for every world W, common sense – or this part of common sense, anyway – is true at W only if the domain of W contains at least one ordinary object, like a chair or table. If to be an ordinary object just is to be a composite material object, then any world at which there is at least one ordinary object will be a world at which there is at least one composite material object. Hence, common sense would also be ontologically committed to composite material objects by virtue of its commitment to ordinary objects. The same holds for free actions. Common sense is ontologically committed to the type of action *free action* if and only if for every world W, common sense is true at W only if the domain of W contains at least one event type falling under *free action*. If free actions are essentially undetermined agent-caused events, then every world at which there is a free action is a world at which there is an agent-caused event. Indeed, since we are supposing that free actions are identical to undetermined agent-caused events, there are no worlds

at which there is the former but not the latter and vice versa. So here, too, common sense's ontological commitment to free action would carry an ontological commitment to undetermined agent-caused events if the two are identical, for then W will be the same world at which common sense is true whether or not it explicitly stated 'There are free actions' versus 'There are undetermined agent-caused events'.

Of course, (2) is a philosophically controversial view. But the point is that *whatever* theory of free action turns out to be the correct one, it's hard to see how common sense could be said to be ontologically committed to the type of event which the target philosophical theory requires in order for that theory to be true. Even if one believes that common-sense ontological commitments carry significant evidential weight in disputes within science and philosophy, it seems like overreach to maintain that common sense can straightforwardly adjudicate between sophisticated competing metaphysical theories. Recalling the second line of thought discussed above, common sense didn't evolve to capture the underlying reality behind everyday appearances, so using it to settle heavyweight metaphysical controversies seems misguided. The problem here is that common sense, since it has certain philosophically controversial ontological commitments – namely, free actions, beliefs, knowledge, and persons and their persistence over time – would be able to lay claim to whichever philosophical theory of the nature of these actions, entities, or events turned out to be true since it would be ontologically committed to whatever would need to exist for common-sense ontology to be true. This provides motivation to look for alternative ways of thinking about the ontological commitments of common sense, which is what we'll do in the next section.

THE SUPERFICIALITY AND LOCALITY OF COMMON SENSE

The second line of thought we wish to explore also grants that common sense receives extensive support from collective experience and history, but qualifies the import of this in two significant ways. First, strong and extensive confirmation of common sense only extends to

superficial claims; that is, claims about surface-level appearances and everyday functioning and operation of the entities, things, and events we encounter. The experience crystallized in common sense is, after all, everyday experience and doesn't include systematic scrutiny of underlying natures, microstructures, macrodevelopments, controlled interventions, and all the other deep and non-obvious phenomena that science and philosophy try to unearth. What common sense is committed to, then, is nothing more than things looking and behaving in certain ways on the outside. For example, common sense appears to be ontologically committed to certain objects, kinds, and events, such as trees, parents, air, ageing, and so on. That these sorts of things exist or occur is uncontroversial. But common sense doesn't tell us anything about the underlying *nature* or the *essence* of trees or of air. This attitude is captured nicely in the Wittgenstein anecdote Elizabeth Anscombe recounts, which we cited at the beginning of the chapter.

Second, common sense consists of a *patchwork of local claims* which function in specific contexts and circumstances. Common-sense claims don't aspire to universal validity and absolute objectivity; they aren't couched in scientifically or philosophically rigorous and regimented language that aims to cut nature at the joints. Rather, they help people in their practical and theoretical endeavours as they live their daily lives. Folk psychology, for instance, which ascribes beliefs, desires, and other mental states to people, has proven to be tremendously successful in helping people make sense of each other's actions, but was never meant to lay bare the internal workings and inventory of the brain, which may well be radically different. The commitments of common sense, then, are not only superficial, but also typically localized and relativized to various practical, social, or theoretical contexts.¹⁰ The upshot of this line of thought is that common sense is to a large extent neutral between different scientific or metaphysical accounts of the underlying natures of objects, processes, and persons as long as they predict the same surface-level appearances and behaviour in the relevant local contexts. We can summarize these ideas as follows:

Superficiality and locality of common-sense ontology principle: common sense is ontologically committed to surface-level claims about the objects or kinds affirmed by our ordinary beliefs, and not to facts about their essences or underlying natures. These commitments are, moreover, localized to specific contexts and don't necessarily hold universally, regardless of context.¹¹

Here's a worry about this principle: common sense also seems to have ontological commitments to entities or events the very *existence* of which (not just their nature or essence) is already philosophically controversial. After all, common sense appears committed to beliefs, persons, and free actions, while some philosophers have denied the existence of exactly these things. Hence, you might think that common sense in fact does have non-superficial ontological commitments by being committed to philosophically controversial entities. There are two ways to alleviate this worry. First, observe that what we mean by the superficiality of common sense's ontological commitments is that its ontological commitments do not extend beyond the *existence of something or other* that looks, behaves, or operates as the relevant entities, kinds, or events do. That is, common sense does not say much, if anything, about the nature or essence of these things. It doesn't say, for instance, that beliefs *are* mental representations and that there are mental representations; nor that persons *are* souls and that there are souls; nor that free actions *are* undetermined agent-caused events and that there are undetermined agent-caused events. Second, one might understand claims about the existence of philosophically controversial entities as relativized to local contexts. When someone says that Sue freely chose in what programme to enrol, this is a local 'folk-psychological' explanation of her behaviour in the context of our everyday interactions with other people, and not an attempt to state something scientifically or metaphysically universally true about the existence of free actions.

Of course, some common-sense philosophers, such as Thomas Reid, have argued that freedom of the will is undetermined agent-causation. Likewise, G. E. Moore argued that ordinary objects exist unperceived. So one might think that the views of card-carrying common-sense philosophers contradict the superficiality and locality principle. Indeed, one might worry that, since Reid and Moore are exemplary of common-sense philosophy and their views are *not* only about what exists but also about the nature of what exists (e.g., regarding freedom and ordinary objects), this makes it hard to see how the principle could be correct. Someone who buys into the superficiality and locality principle can respond, however, by claiming that Reid's account of freedom of the will, for example, is not born out of the idea that it's just common sense that free actions are undetermined agent-caused events. Rather, Reid offers first-order philosophical arguments for why we should think that free actions have that nature. It is never assumed or taken as part of the manifest image of reality that free action has that nature.

Moore is a trickier case. In 'A Defence of Common Sense', Moore begins with a list of 'obvious truisms', some of which are philosophically controversial ((1925) 1993: 106). He argues that some of them cannot be true 'unless some *material things* have existed' ((1925) 1993: 112). This seems like a claim about the nature of some of the things on his list. If one accepts the superficiality and locality principle, however, one can claim that Moore is in fact going beyond common sense here. His starting point is common sense – the 'obvious truisms' on his list – but he then makes controversial meta-physical claims about what's necessary for them to be true. That they are *true* is philosophically controversial *and* yet consistent with the principle concerning the superficiality and locality of common sense. What is *not* consistent with that principle is the view 'That there are material objects must be true if the propositions on Moore's list are to be true' in the sense intended by Moore (e.g., there need to be mind-independent spatiotemporal objects for the propositions on his list to be true). That sort of view goes beyond the principle, and in any case

doesn't seem to be part of what Moore strictly means by 'common sense'.

After seeing where it leads, a friend of common sense might feel uneasy about the superficiality and locality of the common-sense ontology principle. Emphasizing that common sense is only committed to superficial claims in specific local contexts might seem like a blanket strategy for avoiding any sort of serious ontological commitment. As long as the (superficial, local) phenomena are saved, common sense would be compatible with even the most abstruse and counter-intuitive underlying metaphysics. And that, the common-sense philosopher might insist, is a bridge too far.

REVISITING ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENT

Both lines of thought we've explored so far lead to unattractive consequences. What if there was a way of giving serious weight to the apparent ontological commitments of common sense, while avoiding heavyweight ontological commitments that seem to stretch common sense beyond its intuitive limits? One thing one might do is reconsider what is at stake with ontological commitment as such. In the present section, we discuss accounts of quantifier variance and ontological deflationism. Each in their own way, they maintain that ontological commitment is cheap and that very little is at stake.

Quantifier Variance

So far we've been implicitly assuming that the existential quantifier has a single meaning, or at least that it has a single meaning when it is used in ontology.¹² Because of this, the thought went, it is possible to read off ontological commitment of (suitably cleaned-up and regimented) uses of the existential quantifier. But this claim – that the existential quantifier has a single meaning – is exactly what is denied by those who propose quantifier variance. Eli Hirsch has defended this idea at great length (Hirsch (2011) collects his central papers on the topic). The basic view is that the meaning of the existential quantifier,

and hence that of 'existence', varies between different languages, where different languages include variants of English articulating different ontological theories. When an adherent of ontological nihilism asserts 'There are no tables', she's speaking a different language than the common-sense metaphysician who claims 'There are tables'. Since, Hirsch takes it, they probably mean the same thing by 'table', they must mean something different by 'there are'. It follows that the disputants are asserting different propositions and hence aren't in genuine disagreement. Their dispute is merely verbal. Similarly for other ontological disputes about the existence of fusions, numbers, statues, etc.

The mere fact that the existential quantifier can mean different things doesn't yet show that there is no uniquely correct way of determining ontological commitment. It might be that, when it comes to ontological commitment, we ought to look at one particular use of 'existence'. But another component of Hirsch's view denies that this is so: no single language is privileged. We don't have reason to prefer the language of the ontological nihilist over that of the common-sense philosopher or that of any other metaphysical theory. This is because, for Hirsch, reality itself is unstructured and there are many, equally good languages that can be used to describe it (Bricker 2016). Hence, no language is metaphysically privileged because it makes for a better fit with the objective structure of reality than another.

This has rather surprising consequences for ontological commitment. Even though different languages may appear to have very different ontological commitments – one is committed to the existence of tables, another isn't, etc. – they are all really only committed to one and the same unstructured underlying reality. So while quantifier variance initially seems to offer a way of salvaging the ontological commitments of common sense by making commonsensical claims about what exists come out as true, on closer inspection it does have counter-intuitive consequences in terms of what it says about underlying reality. Common sense might not be committed to any

very specific claims about the structure of reality, but it certainly does seem to run counter to common sense that reality is wholly unstructured.¹³

Deflationism

Amie Thomasson's deflationist 'easy approach to ontology' (Thomasson 2007; 2015) presents another way of accepting common-sense ontological commitments while rejecting the idea that they are metaphysically deep. Common sense seems ontologically committed to tables, statues, lumps of clay, symphonies, holes, mental states, persons, numbers, and what have you, but that is no big deal, since ontological commitment is 'cheap'. On Thomasson's view, ontological questions typically either have easy answers or are unanswerable. Answering ontological questions takes conceptual and empirical work, but no sophisticated metaphysical theorizing. Questions about whether Xs exist can be answered by getting clear about the application conditions of the concept of X and then doing some empirical work to verify whether these application conditions have indeed been satisfied in the actual world. For instance, when we want to know whether tables exist, all we need to do is get clear on the application conditions of our concept of table – an easy task for competent speakers – and look around us to see whether these conditions are satisfied. In this case, as in most others, the answer is an easy yes. When it comes to witches or phlogiston, on the other hand, the application conditions for these concepts are also relatively clear, but they aren't satisfied. Hence, they do not exist.

In other cases, however, particularly when very general or abstract terms such as 'object', 'thing', or 'entity' are used, existence questions and questions about quantity may be ill-formed or ambiguous because 'object' or similarly general terms are used with unclear application conditions. Thomasson (2007: chapter 6; 2015: 218–19) points out that 'object' can be used in a covering sense, so that whenever a more concrete sortal term with clear application

conditions applies ('table', 'kangaroo', 'symphony', etc.), 'object' automatically applies too. In such cases, we can give easy answers again. Alternatively, 'object' can be used as a sortal term with application conditions of its own, the satisfaction of which can be checked without referring to more concrete sortal terms. On this usage, Thomasson takes nihilists and universalists about material composition to disagree about the application conditions of 'object'. Whereas the nihilist denies that there is an object composed of particles arranged table-wise, the universalist affirms this (and many other existence claims besides). For Thomasson, however, this shows that the disagreement between universalists and nihilists is a merely verbal dispute: they just employ different senses of 'object'. Once the application conditions are made fully explicit, we can again give easy answers. When 'object' isn't used in its covering or sortal senses, it's unclear how it is used, and questions about the existence or quantity of objects become unanswerable.¹⁴

Thomasson's easy approach to ontology results in a wide variety of ontological commitments to the entities, events, and kinds of common sense. For most of the concepts used to refer to commonsensical entities, events, and kinds, it will be true and easily verifiable that their application conditions are satisfied. Thus they all exist and common sense is ontologically committed to them.¹⁵ Is this bad? Some metaphysicians have thought so (Sidelle 2008; Schaffer 2009; Sider 2009): a plenitudinous metaphysics violates parsimony and runs into well-known problems about co-location, double-counting, ubiquitous overdetermination, etc. Thomasson's basic line of response is the same in all cases: the aforementioned problems are illusory because, on her approach, being ontologically committed is nothing more than just granting that the application conditions of certain concepts are satisfied. It doesn't introduce any additional metaphysical 'stuff' into the world. So even though both tables and particles arranged table-wise exist (as do table legs and a table top), nothing of any deep metaphysical import is at stake. Whenever there are particles arranged table-wise it follows analytically that the application

conditions for 'table' are also satisfied, so that we can conclude that a table exists. But the table doesn't take up additional space, doesn't have extra causal powers 'over and above' the particles, and doesn't instantiate some mysterious composition relation not instantiated by the relevant collection of particles.¹⁶

On Thomasson's approach, then, determining the ontological commitments of common sense is easy. We just need to attend to the application conditions of our common-sense concepts – something competent speakers of a language are able to do – and check whether they are satisfied. Moreover, ontological commitment and existence aren't weighty affairs; the mere fact that an ontology contains many items isn't as such a reason to reject that ontology, as long as there are analytical entailments between claims about co-located objects and objects composing one another.

Thomasson's view appears to have considerable appeal in light of the two lines of thought we explored above. It grants serious authority to common sense and its commitments, without running the risk of making common sense do deep metaphysical work it was never meant to do (because there simply is no such work). As always, however, the view comes at a cost. One needs to be willing to reject neo-Quinean metaphysical orthodoxy of several decades, according to which metaphysics is in the business of discovering deep truths about the world by employing broadly scientific methods – that is, by developing theories that strike an optimal balance between the traditional criteria for theory choice, such as simplicity and explanatory scope.¹⁷ In other words, one needs to be willing to discard much of the contemporary literature in metaphysics as being deeply misguided – engaged in verbal disputes or employing the wrong methods to settle easy questions – and, basically, a waste of time. Determining whether this cost is ultimately worth it falls outside the scope of our chapter.

CONCLUSION

Common sense takes a stand on ontology – that claim itself seems part of common sense. This gives rise to a puzzle when combined

with mainstream theories of ontological commitment. On these theories, accepting relatively innocuous ontological commonsensical commitments – medium-sized dry goods, but also free action, knowledge, persons, and beliefs, as well as rightness and wrongness – leads to the conclusion that common sense is ontologically committed to much more than innocuous entities, events, properties, and phenomena. It appears to be ontologically committed to whatever the final philosophical analysis will tell us is identical with those events, states, objects, or properties. That common sense would really carry such metaphysically deep ontological commitments seems highly counter-intuitive.

An alternative approach, however, on which the ontological commitments of common sense are limited to surface-level and local phenomenology, seems unbearably lightweight. On this approach, it looks like common sense can be made compatible with any ontology whatsoever, no matter how abstruse, austere, or florid. Any apparent commonsensical ontological commitments can always be explained away by emphasizing its superficiality or locality. This, too, seems wrong.

This motivated looking for a third way. If ontological commitment isn't a weighty affair – as Amie Thomasson's easy approach to ontology tells us – there is no harm in granting whatever entities, events, phenomena, etc. one's favourite theory of ontological commitment predicts common sense is committed to. On this approach, then, we can happily embrace most commonsensical ontological commitments. At the same time, common sense isn't implausibly made to do metaphysical heavy lifting, simply because there is no need for it. Settling metaphysical disputes is easy and typically requires nothing more than verifying whether the application conditions for our concepts are satisfied. The attractions of Thomasson's view come at a cost, however, for it requires a radical rejection of much work in contemporary analytic metaphysics.¹⁸ We leave it to readers to decide whether such a rejection would or would not be in line with common sense.

NOTES

- 1 Lewis famously thought that we are ontologically committed to the entities quantified over by the best total theory, where the best total theory includes what common sense says exists. Indeed, textbooks in metaphysics often note how common sense constrains the explanatory demands on a metaphysical theory. Consider, for example, how Loux (2006: 240) takes it that perdurantists need to explain why their ontology exceeds what common sense says exists: 'What gives this task the philosophical urgency it has for perdurantists is the fact that common sense recognizes only a handful of the material objects perdurantists tell us there are; and perdurantists owe us an account of why this is so.'
- 2 For example, van Inwagen (1990) argues that ordinary assertions about material objects, such as 'There are three chairs in the room', can be true consistently with the thesis that there are no composite material objects.
- 3 One way to resist this line of argument is to argue that common sense has only developed to give us beliefs that are *useful* for various purposes, not beliefs that are *true*. Korman (2014) explores such debunking arguments against ordinary perceptual beliefs.
- 4 The common-sense commitment principle doesn't prevent philosophical arguments from undermining common sense. A view which is much stronger than ours is offered by Kit Fine (2001: 2): 'In this age of post-Moorean modesty, many of us are inclined to doubt that philosophy is in possession of arguments that might genuinely serve to undermine what we ordinarily believe.' Adapting this to ontological issues, Fine's principle would be: if the existence of Es/Ks is part of common sense and you believe that there are Es/Ks, then a philosophical argument for the view that there are no Es/Ks rationally should not undermine your belief that there are Es/Ks. This is much stronger than our principle, which only says that we are *prima facie* entitled to believe what common sense says exists. It could be that especially strong philosophical arguments against the existence of Es/Ks should *undermine* our beliefs. For further discussion of this issue, see Kelly (2008) and Rinard (2013).
- 5 See Rayo (2007: § 2.1) for this challenge.
- 6 See Bricker (2016: § 1.7.4) for further discussion.
- 7 This view is defended by Peacock (2011) as 'implicit' ontological commitment. A variation of this theory is explicitly modal: a theory T is ontologically committed to an entity E or entities of kind K if and only if

T necessarily entails that there are Es/Ks. See Bricker (2016: § 2.2) for discussion.

- 8 See Jackson (1989) for this general worry.
- 9 This view is suggested by Armstrong (2004). See Cameron (2008) and Rettler (2016) for explicit defences.
- 10 This feature may not be unique to common sense. John Dupré (1993) and Nancy Cartwright (1999) have argued that the same holds for science: scientific theories and explanations, too, give us a patchwork of claims and not a grand unified account of reality.
- 11 One way of thinking about this principle is that common sense is only committed to whatever is part of the manifest image of reality: with the way that reality appears to us to be. See Sellars (1962) for the distinction between the manifest and scientific images of reality, and Lawson's chapter in this volume for the idea of a commonsensical metaphysical theory as one which 'matches up' with the manifest image of reality.
- 12 It might be that we use it in different senses outside philosophy, but that wouldn't undercut the idea that there is a privileged univocal use within the discipline of ontology (cf. Sider 2009: 397).
- 13 This concern is also behind Ted Sider's central objection to quantifier variance. For Sider, as for many others, it is a given that reality does have its own structure. The point of ontology, and of quantification specifically, is to carve reality at the joints. The meaning of the existential quantifier that does this best is the uniquely privileged one (cf. Sider 2011).
- 14 For an argument to think Thomasson is wrong that there are only two uses of 'object', see Korman (2019).
- 15 Note, however, that Thomasson's view must be distinguished from radical conventionalism, according to which there are no mind-independent constraints on what objects there are. Determining what objects exist and where their boundaries are is all a matter of conventions, and there are no natural mind-independent boundaries that must be recognized – see Varzi (2011) and Tahko (2016: 76–83) for discussion of such a view. Thomasson is perfectly happy to grant mind-independent structure in reality to which our concepts and quantifiers are supposed to latch on, even though she might deny that there is any one privileged way in which they can do so (see Thomasson 2015: chapter 10).
- 16 Space is lacking here to attend to her treatment of all these and other problems, but see Thomasson (2007: chapters 3–7) for this.

- 17 See van Inwagen (2009); Sider (2009; 2011) for defences of this approach to metaphysics.
- 18 Such a radical rejection wouldn't be entirely unique. Ladyman and Ross (2007) also argue that most contemporary analytic metaphysics is pointless, albeit on very different grounds than Thomasson's.