

EVE KITSIK

Revisionary Ontology:
Improving Concepts to
Improve Beliefs



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Main questions, claims, and contributions

This is a thesis in metaontology. Ontology involves philosophical discussions that are or at least appear to be about what there is, what exists or what is real, or about whether *F*s are there, exist, or are real. The typical *F*s in question include abstract objects, such as numbers and sets; fictional characters, such as Sherlock Holmes and Pegasus; arbitrary sums of existing objects, such as the sum of my nose and Jupiter; ordinary objects, such as chairs, tables, sticks, and stones; (merely) possible worlds and things, such as a world in which donkeys can talk or the talking donkey itself; impossible worlds and things, such as the world in which squares are round or the round square itself; and social kinds, such as races and genders. Metaontology asks questions *about* those discussions: what the discussions are really about or what the participants are really doing (the interpretation question), whether the discussions are worthwhile (the evaluation question), and whether they should proceed as they currently do, be modified, or end altogether (the recommendation question). My focus is on the interpretation question.

As I look into the metaontological interpretation question, I specifically focus on the interpretation of *revisionary ontology*: discussions in which philosophers at least appear to be arguing that certain kinds or entities that are ordinarily thought to exist do not in fact exist or that certain entities or kinds that are ordinarily thought not to exist do in fact exist. Standard examples of revisionary ontology include van Inwagen (1990) and Merricks (2001), who argue that there are no non-organic macrophysical objects, such as chairs and tables; Horgan and Potrč (2008), who argue that there are also no persons and no subatomic particles and that there is indeed only one thing, the universe (or the “blobject”, as they call it); and Lewis (1986) who, on the contrary, argues for a baroque ontology that includes concrete (as opposed to abstract), real possible worlds. In addition to such examples of “mainstream” revisionary ontology, which most of my thesis is concerned with, I will also interpret certain revisionary proposals in what is sometimes called the “feminist metaphysics of gender”. This includes, for example, Haslanger’s (2000) and Sveinsdóttir’s (2013) constructivist accounts of “woman”. Haslanger and Sveinsdóttir do not make revisionary claims of the form “*F*s exist” or “*F*s do not exist”, but they propose revisionary (constructivist) accounts of who women are. Or that, in any case, is how their claims are sometimes interpreted – as metaphysical claims about the nature of women (Barnes 2014, 2017, Mikkola 2015). I will argue, however, that such feminist revisionary proposals about gender belong to a project that is importantly discontinuous with and independent from mainstream revisionary ontology. Although I will focus on the interpretation of “mainstream” revisionary ontology, I will also take feminist metaphysics into consideration because it will help show how my approach is useful for tackling a wide variety of examples that diverge in their methodological assumptions.

My general answer to the interpretation question, for both mainstream and feminist revisionary ontology, is that many of these revisionary proposals are best understood as proposals about how to revise the ordinary concepts that we use to form beliefs about the world. “Concepts”, on this account, are understood in accordance with what Machery calls the psychologists’ notion of “concept”: “A concept of x is a body of knowledge about x that is stored in long-term memory and that is used by default in the processes underlying most, if not all, higher cognitive competences when these processes result in judgments about x ” (Machery 2009, 12). (I will further elaborate on this in 3.4.3.) Concepts and conceptual schemes may have other roles as well, besides their role in belief formation. For example, shared concepts plausibly play a role in enabling communication. However, the central role of concepts that is relevant for revisionary ontology, I will suppose, is their role as the building blocks of beliefs.

This insight concerning the interpretation question helps us address the recommendation question. Again, the recommendation question is whether ontological discussions should take place at all, and if they should, then how. The “how” part concerns the methodology of ontology. Are the questions of revisionary ontology best addressed as they are currently addressed, namely, by appeal to intuitive judgments and theoretical virtues; or should these methods be replaced, for example, with conceptual analysis or deference to the natural sciences? Tahko writes: “A central, perhaps *the* central question of meta-metaphysics is: How do we acquire metaphysical knowledge?” (Tahko 2015, 3). I take him to be referring to what I call the “how” aspect of the recommendation question. The “whether” aspect, which seems likewise important in metametaphysics, could be expressed with the question: *can* we acquire metaphysical knowledge at all? Or, more broadly: *should* we do metaphysics? In order to make any progress with either of the recommendation questions (the “how” question or the “whether” question), however, we must address the question of what metaphysical knowledge is supposed to be knowledge about. And that is the interpretation question.

How then does my answer to the interpretation question help us make progress with the recommendation question? My answer to the interpretation question, again, is that certain ontological discussions are about which concepts we should use in belief formation. If the answer is correct, then this points towards a fundamental question that the revisionary ontologists must address, in order to rationally address the questions at stake in their discussions and in order to understand the import of the answers. That fundamental question is: what kind of beliefs should we have? Or in other words, what are beliefs supposed to do; what is their role in our lives; what are good beliefs like? The revisionary ontologists need to address this question, in order to properly understand and address the question of what concepts we should employ in belief formation.

More precisely, a fundamental question that needs to be asked is: should our beliefs help us achieve our practical, non-cognitive aims or should we design our beliefs so as to achieve epistemic excellence for its own sake? One way of

understanding the goal of “epistemic excellence for its own sake” is that our beliefs should reflect the world as it is, or “carve at the joints in nature”. As I will argue, drawing on Sider (2011), it makes sense to interpret mainstream revisionary ontologists as seeking the most theoretically virtuous conceptual scheme, in order to find the scheme that best reflects the objective structure, or the “natural joints” of the world. It is possible, however, that many or even most of our beliefs are not supposed to reflect the objective structure of the world (where this is understood as a way of achieving epistemic excellence for its own sake). Perhaps most of our beliefs are supposed to help us achieve ultimately non-cognitive aims. On that assumption about the aim of our beliefs, replacing the ordinary conceptual scheme with a more joint-carving one might not improve our beliefs. In other words, the conceptual revision might not make our beliefs better at what beliefs are supposed to do. Further, it is not just a possibility, but a plausible assumption that most of the time, we indeed form beliefs to achieve practical, non-cognitive aims. For example, we form beliefs about the dangerous or potentially enjoyable features of our surroundings, in order to react appropriately in light of those beliefs. Joint-carving concepts might not be the best concepts to use for forming such practically oriented beliefs; for instance, they might be inferior in terms of cognitive processing efficiency.

However, mainstream revisionary ontologists can still reasonably aim to improve beliefs, I will argue, by making the ordinary conceptual scheme more joint-carving. The ontologists can explicitly target the concepts that we use when we form theoretically oriented beliefs: beliefs that are formed merely for the sake of the intrinsically valuable achievement of excelling as an epistemic agent. I will call such beliefs “theoretical beliefs”. When we are choosing concepts for forming theoretical beliefs, it is sensible to focus on the desideratum of joint-carvingness and to ignore potentially conflicting desiderata, such as cognitive processing efficiency.

I will draw a distinction, then, between the more mundane, practically oriented beliefs and the special class of theoretically oriented beliefs. This distinction is not supposed to be a sharp one, such that all beliefs fall into exactly one of the two kinds; and it is also not supposed to be distinction concerning the ultimate metaphysics of mind. Much about the taxonomy and metaphysics of beliefs is left open when I draw this rough distinction. However, rough as it is, the distinction contributes to a better understanding of revisionary ontology as a project of improving concepts to improve beliefs. First, the distinction between the two kinds of beliefs allows us to identify the proper ambitions of mainstream revisionary ontology – to identify the kind of significance it can and cannot claim for itself. In particular, once we draw the distinction between practically oriented beliefs and theoretically oriented beliefs, it is reasonable for mainstream revisionary ontologists to maintain that their project can improve their audience’s theoretical beliefs, but not their audience’s practical beliefs. The ontologists can claim this, as long as their audience acknowledges that they (the audience) are in the business of forming

theoretical beliefs as well as practical beliefs and that it is consequently good for them to have good theoretical beliefs as well good practical beliefs. Secondly, the distinction between theoretical and practical beliefs helps us understand what is peculiar about the feminist revisionary ontology of gender, in comparison with mainstream revisionary ontology. I will argue that the feminist revisionary ontology of gender is primarily about which gender concepts, if any, we should use in forming practically oriented beliefs, whereas mainstream revisionary ontology, again, is about improving the concepts that we use to form theoretical beliefs.

The general aim of my thesis is thus to address the metaontological interpretation question by defending an account of revisionary ontology as a project of improving concepts to improve beliefs. In fleshing out this account, I will draw the aforementioned distinction between theoretical and practical beliefs. As explained above, this distinction helps us understand the (limited) epistemic significance of mainstream revisionary ontology and how the feminist revisionary ontology of gender relates to mainstream revisionary ontology.

To sum up, the main claims that I will seek to establish in this thesis are the following.

- (1) Many central discussions in both “mainstream” and “feminist” revisionary ontology are about how to improve the concepts used in belief formation.
- (2) Given this account of revisionary ontology, our understanding of the project(s) would benefit from inquiry into the roles and kinds of beliefs.
- (3) A relevant distinction that should be drawn is that between theoretically and practically oriented beliefs (“theoretical beliefs” and “practical beliefs”, for short).
- (4) Mainstream revisionary ontology is about how to improve the concepts that are used in forming theoretical beliefs.
- (5) Given (4), mainstream revisionary ontology has limited epistemic significance: it can claim to improve the audience’s theoretical beliefs, but not their practical beliefs.
- (6) Feminist revisionary ontology of gender is primarily about how to improve the concepts that are used in forming practical beliefs.
- (7) Given (4) and (6), mainstream and feminist revisionary ontology are importantly independent of one another.

I take the most important contributions of this thesis to be (1) the systematic defence of an account of revisionary ontology as a project of improving concepts to improve beliefs; (2) a novel proposal about the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology (or in other words, a novel proposal about how the project can improve our beliefs); and (3) a new and potentially illuminating proposal about the relationship between feminist and mainstream metaphysics (or some parts thereof).

1.2. Motivation

Why do we need to interpret revisionary ontology? One reason to engage in metametaphysical projects such as this one is to justify one's pre-existing evaluative attitudes towards metaphysics or some part of it: "Just as with any kind of attitude, if you hold a metametaphysical attitude you ought to be able to justify *why* it is that you hold it" (Tahko 2015, 1). This is not quite the motivation that guides the current work, since the thesis is not aimed at justifying a particular evaluative attitude about revisionary ontology. Nevertheless, this work could be useful for those who have views about the value of revisionary ontology and wish to defend those views. The metaontological interpretation question, which this thesis focuses upon, is the natural starting point for any attempt to answer the evaluation question, that is, any defence or criticism of revisionary ontology. Although I do not answer the evaluation question in the thesis, I answer the interpretation question in a way that leaves certain avenues for debating the value of revisionary ontology open and closes others.

For example, when one accepts the interpretive account of mainstream revisionary ontology proposed in this thesis, one could further argue that mainstream revisionary ontology is an impossible enterprise, since it relies on the false idea that conceptual schemes can reflect the structure of reality to a lesser or greater extent. (Of course, one would then also need to show that this idea about conceptual schemes is indeed false – I do not argue for this in the thesis.) This is an example of an avenue for criticising of revisionary ontology that remains open here. On the other hand, my answer to the interpretation question closes the door to certain deflationist accounts, such as those that take ontologists to be disputing endlessly over questions that should be resolved by drawing simple inferences that are warranted by linguistic competence. (Such a deflationary account is most prominently defended by Thomasson (2015).) This thesis, then, is not itself the justification of an evaluative attitude towards revisionary ontology; but it does have implications for how one can defend or criticize revisionary ontology. The aim of the thesis, again, is not to justify a pre-existing evaluative attitude towards ontology, but instead to prepare the way for the work of settling upon such an attitude. The inquiry into the interpretation question is to some extent motivated by an interest in the evaluation question, but the thesis does not reach a definite answer to the evaluation question itself.

Further, the inquiry into the interpretation question is also motivated by an interest in the recommendation question: the question of whether and how revisionary ontology should proceed. The "whether" part of the recommendation question again hangs on the further work that is also required to answer the evaluation question – work that is not done in this thesis. For example, the question of whether the project of mainstream revisionary ontology should proceed at all depends on whether human concepts are even the kinds of things that can reflect the objective structure of reality and whether there even *is* an objective structure of reality. The contribution of the thesis toward answering the "whether" part of the recommendation question is its identification of more

specific questions on which the answer depends, leaving those specific questions themselves unaddressed. Regarding the “how” part of the recommendation question, the thesis does have some more direct implications. For one, mainstream revisionary ontology should revise its self-conception, to the extent that it is not in line with the account defended here. This would allow us to proceed with the discussions within and about revisionary ontology in a more enlightened way, without supposing, for example, that mainstream revisionary ontology can aspire to revise ordinary practical beliefs about what there is. Further, if I am right in arguing that mainstream and feminist revisionary ontology are distinct projects of conceptual engineering (targeting different kinds of beliefs), then this implies that we should keep the distinct characters of these projects in mind and allow both sides to ignore certain kinds of challenges.

In general terms, then, the motivation for pursuing the metaontological interpretation question, here, is to make progress with the evaluation and recommendation questions.

1.3. Method

My overall method is to look for an interpretation that best meets the adequacy criteria that obtain in a particular interpretive situation. The “interpretive situation” is defined by the interpreter’s interests, commitments, and the data available. I hold that there are various relevant interpretive situations to consider, when we ask the interpretation question about revisionary ontology. The interpretation question, again, is: what are the discussions in revisionary ontology about? The question can also be posed as follows: what are revisionary ontologists doing? This question calls for an interpretive account, an explanatory story on what revisionary ontology is about or what the revisionary ontologists are doing. The more specific requirements for this account, however, depend on the interpretive situation.

I will consider three interpretive situations, that is, I will interpret revisionary ontology from three points of view. First, I will take up the “quizzical observer’s” point of view; then, the point of view of mainstream revisionary ontologists themselves, as they explain the nature and value of their project to their audience; and finally, the point of view of feminist revisionary ontologists of gender, as they try to understand the nature of their project in relation to mainstream revisionary ontology. These are all important points of view from which the interpretation, evaluation, and recommendation questions arise.

The “quizzical observer” is a fellow philosopher who has a good level of familiarity with the ontological disputes in question (disputes that appear to be about whether certain revisionary theses about ontology are true), but still feels a sense of pointlessness upon observing or thinking about these disputes. Such an observer wants an account that would help her understand why the disputes between her peers, whose relevant capacities can be presumed to be roughly equal to hers, give rise to this sense of pointlessness and what to think about the

value and the prospects of the disputes in this light. The quizzical observer might understandably worry that if there is something deeply wrong with the project of revisionary ontology, as her quizzical phenomenology suggests, then limited intellectual and material resources should not be spent on this project.

The mainstream revisionary ontologists themselves might have a similar worry, seeing that their audience, while puzzled and to an extent drawn in by the arguments, is nevertheless systematically uncompelled to revise the beliefs that the arguments seem to challenge (such as the belief that there are tables). Furthermore, the audience not only fails to revise the beliefs, but the audience apparently even continues to feel entitled to these beliefs, in spite of the arguments. For the ontologists, the worry, in this situation, is not that somebody else might be wasting resources, but that they themselves need to figure out whether and how they can explain and justify the project of revisionary ontology to their audience.

Finally, the feminist philosophers putting forth revisionary theses about gender are motivated by different concerns once again. They find themselves pursuing a project that has at least superficial similarity to mainstream revisionary ontology, but it is unclear whether this similarity is deceptive or not. In this case, there are no looming suspicions that feminist revisionary ontology might be a waste of resources – its social significance is thought to be evident enough. The motivation for tackling the interpretation question, here, is rather the “how” aspect of the recommendation question (and not the “whether” aspect of the recommendation question, or the evaluation question). More specifically, the question is about whether and how feminist revisionary ontologists (and/or mainstream revisionary ontologists) should revise their self-conception or their approach to their questions, in light of reflection upon the relationship between feminist and mainstream revisionary ontology.

So then, different interests guide the inquiry in each interpretive situation. The quizzical observer is interested in why disputes between her presumed epistemic peers (i.e. mainstream revisionary ontologists) give rise to a peculiar sense of pointlessness, and whether that sense of pointlessness indicates that there is indeed something deeply wrong with the disputes. Mainstream revisionary ontologists themselves are interested in explaining the nature and significance of their project to others, especially in light of the limited capacity of their arguments to change their audience’s minds about the relevant matters (e.g. about whether there are tables). Feminist revisionary ontologists are interested in interpreting their project in relation to mainstream revisionary ontology; for example, whether they ought to think of themselves as prospective allies, competitors or as simply engaged in different projects. These different interests lead to somewhat different adequacy conditions for a satisfactory account. My strategy is to establish the central adequacy conditions for each interpretive situation and in that light to assess the competing interpretive hypotheses that are already present in the literature, combining and building on these hypotheses, as needed.

A peculiarity of my method, then, is that I address the interpretation question from particular points of view: the points of view of interpreters with particular explanatory needs to meet and data to account for. However, I do not think that this peculiarity is, in fact, so peculiar. After all, whenever we interpret some exchange, we do so from a particular point of view, guided by particular interests. The interpretation question appears to be incomplete and ambiguous, until we specify some such interpretive situation. Perhaps an “interpretation from nowhere” is possible for some exchanges and perhaps even for those engaged in revisionary ontology, but I would not know how to go about seeking such an interpretation from nowhere. The three interpretive situations that I consider – the quizzical observer trying to explain her sense of pointlessness; the mainstream ontologists trying to explain themselves to their audience; and the feminist ontologists trying to understand the relationship between their project and that of mainstream revisionary ontology – are salient in the current meta-ontological discussion. Further, these points of view are salient for a good reason: they reflect important interests that motivate addressing the interpretation question.

There might be other points of view, where still other desiderata are relevant. For example, a perspective that I am not considering here is that of someone who is not motivated by an interest in actual discussions within revisionary ontology, but instead by a more general interest in whether there *could* be any interesting philosophical discussions about existence questions, and what such possible discussions would then really be about. E.g. Eklund (2016, 179) distinguishes between the question of (1) whether the *actual* disputes between nihilists and commonsensists about ordinary objects are merely verbal and the question of (2) whether most or all *possible* disputes on this subject matter are merely verbal. Eklund seems to consider the second question an especially important one for metaontology; but I am limiting my attention to the interpretation of actual discussions within revisionary ontology and discussions that are relevantly similar, in terms of the discussants’ understanding both of their subject matter and of the proper way of addressing that subject matter. The answer to the broader interpretive question about all or most possible philosophical discussions on existence questions need not have all that much to do with what is going on in current, actual discussions. I will further justify my focus on the narrower interpretive question in chapter 2, where I elaborate on what I take to be the relevant object of interpretation. Here, it should suffice to say that I do not claim that all or most possible discussions (or even all or most possible discussions between philosophers) that appear to be, for example, about whether chairs exist are really about how to improve concepts in order to improve beliefs. I am limiting myself to the three interpretive situations that I consider and I remain silent on what is the best account of revisionary ontology in other interpretive situations, where the object of interpretation or the desiderata for the account might be differently specified.

1.4. Contextualization

1.4.1. Sub-disciplinary contextualization

In order to understand where this thesis is located in the philosophical landscape and what falls in and out of its scope, some further clarification of the terms “metaphysics”, “metametaphysics”, “ontology” and “metaontology” is in order.

When a distinction is made between ontology and metaphysics, then “ontology” is generally taken to be the inquiry into what exists or what there is, whereas “metaphysics” is taken to be the inquiry into reality more generally. For example, Berto and Plebani (2015, 4) give such a narrower characterization of ontology: “What we want from ontology is a list of *all* there is, and ontology gets the list right insofar as it misses nothing that is there, and includes nothing that isn’t there” (Berto and Plebani 2015, 1). Let us call this the “Quinean” notion of ontology, as Berto and Plebani do. When a distinction is made between ontology, in this Quinean sense, and metaphysics more broadly, then the field of metaphysics is thought to contain ontology and also something else besides it. Those who make the distinction between metaphysics and the sub-discipline of ontology hold that for a full description of reality, it is not enough to say just what there is. One reason to think that it is not enough to say just what there is, is that reality might not be “flat”, but structured. In order to understand structured reality, we need to know how the existents relate to one another – what grounds what – and not just what there is (Schaffer 2009). By contrast, those who equate metaphysics with ontology, in the Quinean sense, tend to think that the complete list of existents (fully described, perhaps including certain relations to other existents in the description) would amount to a full description of reality.

I will assume, as a matter of stipulation, that ontology is the sub-discipline of metaphysics that is concerned with (or at least appears to be concerned with) existence or existents in one way or another; but I do not assume anything about whether this subject matter, properly conceived, exhausts the subject matter of metaphysics. Further, I do not fully subscribe to the Quinean characterization of ontology given above, i.e. the view that ontology seeks a list of everything that there is. First, this view excludes the ontologists who argue that there are different “ways” or “modes” of being or existence – as opposed to kinds of beings or existents – and who think that studying such ways or modes is an issue in ontology; for example, McDaniel (2009). Second, not every ontological proposal aims to give a complete list of what there is. For example, philosophers may discuss whether there are numbers or whether Sherlock Holmes exists and call these “ontological” disputes. In fact, much of contemporary metaontological criticism is directed at disputes that do not appear to be about which list of all existents is the correct one, but rather about whether some *F*s exist or not. These are indeed the sorts of discussions that I will be interpreting in the thesis. One might respond, on behalf of the Quinean characterization of ontology, that these discussions that appear to be about whether there are *F*s are

all contributions to the general project of putting together the complete list of existents. However, this is to assume too much about the motivations of those involved in the discussions. For example, those who work on the ontology of race and gender would presumably not say that their aim is to contribute to the compiling of the inventory of things (or people or kinds) that exist. Likewise, philosophers of mathematics might be interested in whether there are numbers, not because they want to do their share in completing the list of all existents, but because they are worried about the status of mathematics, in so far as mathematics seems to presuppose that there are numbers. More generally, philosophers can and do pursue questions about whether there are *F*s, not as a contribution to the list of existents, but because they are interested in whether there are *F*s, for independent reasons.

One might also suggest that ontology aims to identify the most fundamental constituents of reality. This is much too restrictive, for my purposes at least. I am interested in a broader range of discussions, not just those where it is common ground that the interest is in the fundamental constituents of reality. For example, feminist revisionary ontologists would not agree that they are studying the fundamental constituents of reality. For another example, the debate on whether tables exist should not be understood as a debate on whether tables are fundamental, since all parties would presumably agree that they are not.¹

Again, I focus on philosophical discussions that are “ontological” in the sense that they at least appear to be about whether *F*s exist, whether they are real or they are there. I will have more to say about the kinds of discussions that I have in mind when I pose the interpretation question, in chapter 2. In any case, in relation to how I understand “ontology”, an important matter to note is that I do not assume that all discussions between philosophers that appear to be about whether there are *F*s really form or should form a sub-discipline, characterized by shared methods and assumptions. In fact, I will argue that there are at least two importantly different projects within ontology, thus understood: the “mainstream” and the “feminist” project.

For brevity, I have so far said that “ontological” discussions appear to be about whether *F*s exist or are there, and these are indeed the kinds of discussions that most of my thesis concerns. However, in the chapter of feminist revisionary ontology, I will also take up discussions that may well appear to be

¹ Relatedly, one might propose that ontology is about identifying constituents of reality that are “fundamental” in the sense of being irreducible to more fundamental constituents. While everyone agrees (I suppose) that tables and genders are not the most basic layer of reality, there might be meaningful debate on whether tables and genders are reducible to atoms, for example. However, then another problem arises: it is difficult to make sense of how the typical arguments brought up in ontological debates are supposed to support or undermine the conclusion that *F*s are reducible (as opposed to the conclusion that there are no *F*s). Many of the arguments, on the face of it at least, do not seem to pertain to reducibility. I will return to this point later on in the thesis, when I have introduced the typical arguments in question.

about the *nature* of *Fs*, namely the nature of women: what (who) women are, or what the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman are. It is often difficult to clearly set apart discussions on whether *Fs* exist and discussions on what *Fs* are. This is because the discussions that appear to be about whether *Fs* exist can often be re-described as discussions about what *Fs* are, and vice versa. As Berto and Plebani notice (and I agree), “ontological issues ... naturally tend to shade into metaphysical ones” (Berto and Plebani 2015, 4). They describe the following frequently occurring situation: philosophers disagree on the nature of some kind that they both take to exist. For example, the philosophers agree that there are possible worlds, but disagree on whether they are concrete physical entities just like the actual world or abstract objects. We can re-cast this disagreement on the nature of possible worlds as a disagreement on whether certain kinds of things exist: the philosophers disagree on whether possible worlds *qua* concrete physical entities exist and on whether possible worlds *qua* abstract objects exist. Likewise, we can re-cast a discussion on whether being a woman depends on social designation or self-identification or both, as a discussion on whether those who are women in virtue of social designation (could) exist or whether those who are women in virtue of self-identification (could) exist or both.

This issue, of the relationship between “existence questions” and “nature questions”, is apparently not very relevant for the discussion on ordinary objects (in contrast with its relevance for the discussions on possible worlds or gender). Hofweber’s (2016b, 183) typical-enough characterization of ordinary objects is that they are “the midsize objects that we commonly interact with like rocks, houses, bottles, people, and so on”; ordinary objects “have a location, they are reasonably large, but not too large, and they have parts which together somehow make up the object”. Most philosophers seem to agree that if there are ordinary objects, then they are physical visible things ultimately made of very small, physical, but non-visible things. The central philosophical discussions about the existence of ordinary objects, it seems, cannot be re-cast as discussions about the nature of ordinary objects.

With numbers as well, there seems to be a consensus about what they would be if they existed; namely, abstract objects. However, there are also differences of opinion here. Schaffer (2009, 360), for example, suggests (as an alternative way of interpreting eliminativist proposals like that of Field’s (1980)) that numbers might be concrete things or grounded in concrete things. This would also be a proposal in revisionary ontology, in my view: not because of the claim that numbers exist (this is something that I consider to be neither obviously in opposition to folk belief, nor obviously consistent with it), but because of the claim that numbers *qua* (*ultimately*) *concrete things* exist.

Although existence questions do not *always* blur into questions about the natures of things (for example, there seems to be no such blurring in the case of the central debates on ordinary objects), there is nevertheless an intimate connection between discussions on the nature of *Fs* and discussions on whether *Fs* exist, as illustrated above. Therefore, I include discussions on the nature of

*F*s in “ontology” along with discussions on whether *F*s exist. If there are any other remaining philosophical discussions about reality, then these are not included in “ontology” and belong to the rest of metaphysics; but I do not take a stand on whether there are any such remaining discussions. My focus, in any case, is on ontology, so defined.

However, I will be concerned with the general term “metaphysics”, to some extent, since the question arises whether the feminist variety of revisionary ontology, interpreted as a project of conceptual engineering, is properly thought of as *metaphysics*. The term “metaphysics” has recently become subject to a somewhat political debate. Authors like Barnes (2014) and Mikkola (2015) have objected to characterizations of metaphysics, provided by Sider (2011), Schaffer (2009) and others, that allegedly exclude feminist metaphysics or more generally the metaphysics of social kinds and institutions. Sider and Schaffer have since then responded (Sider 2017, Schaffer 2017). I will discuss this controversy regarding “metaphysics” towards the end of my thesis, in the chapter on feminist metaphysics. I take the least controversial idea about “metaphysics” to be that a necessary (but not a sufficient) condition for a project to be “metaphysics” is that the project centrally aims at investigating reality. On this basis, I am inclined to deny the label “metaphysics” to the kind of feminist revisionary ontology of gender that I focus on. On my interpretation of the feminist project, its central aim is not to investigate reality (as it is), but to transform it.

I have explained what I mean by “ontology” and (to some extent) “metaphysics”. What happens if we add “meta-” to “ontology” or “metaphysics”? Tahko defines metametaphysics as “the study of the foundations and methodology of metaphysics” (Tahko 2015, 5). One might object, however, that this does not quite capture the real motivation and central aspirations of metametaphysics or metaontology. The aim, typically, is not to describe the methodology and assumptions characteristic of the philosophical subdiscipline, but to justify some pro-attitude or contra-attitude towards metaphysics and to determine whether metaphysical discussions, in their current form, should continue or not. Metametaphysical discussions take place in the context of suspicions that there is something terribly problematic or misguided about metaphysics and the denials of and responses to those suspicions. This context should not be ignored when we explain what metametaphysics is. In other words, a proper characterization of metametaphysics would emphasize the role of the evaluation and recommendation questions as motivating the metametaphysical inquiry.

Eklund, in contrast to Tahko, does emphasize the evaluative focus of metaontology: “the contemporary metaontological debate mainly concerns the question of whether ontological questions, questions about what there is, are genuine questions deep enough to be worthy of philosophical attention” (Eklund 2013, 229). Eklund’s concern, it must be noted, is with *metaontology*, which is arguably a subfield of metametaphysics; but the broader field likewise seems to be motivated by the evaluation question. Further, the evaluation question seems to be largely motivated by the recommendation question: the

interest in continuing, reforming or ending the relevant discussions, as may be required. I would rather define “metaontology”, then, as the study of the interpretation, evaluation, and recommendation questions as applied to ontological discussions, that is motivated by an interest in the evaluation and recommendation questions. Again, ontological discussions include both those philosophical discussions that appear to be about whether *F*s exist, are real, or are there, and those philosophical discussions that appear to be about what *F*s are.

In Eklund’s characterization of metaontology (quoted above) the objects of evaluation, in metaontology, are ontological *questions*. I prefer to talk about ontological “discussions”, instead of “questions”, as the objects of interpretation, evaluation, and recommendation in metaontology. This formulation better captures the main object of concern in contemporary metaontology. The concern is not (for the most part) with the meaning of questions of the form “Do *F*s exist?” (and other relevant forms), but with actual discussions between actual philosophers. Many of these discussions are *disputes*, in the sense that the exchanges appear to express disagreements about the matters at hand. I do not limit my attention solely to disputes, however, since ontologists may and do sometimes put forward and defend their ontological views without vocal opposition, for example, when their work is not much noticed at all; and there is no apparent reason to exclude such oppositionless discussions from the purview of metaontology. However, I do focus on disputes, as a special case of discussions, in chapter 3, where I interpret revisionary ontology from the quizzical observer’s point of view.

In chapter 2, I will further elaborate upon which ontological discussions I identify as the objects of interpretation, evaluation and recommendation for my metaontological project.

1.4.2. Historical contextualization

Having looked into the disciplinary context of this thesis, I will also briefly describe the historical context. The standard point from which to start telling the history of metaontology is the debate between Quine and Carnap. For example, Blatti and Lapointe (2016, 1) write that this was “[t]he single most significant episode in the brief history of metaontological inquiry”. In my historical contextualization, I will focus on how my project relates to this debate that has shaped so much of the contemporary metaontological landscape. In particular, I will focus on how my project relates to Carnap’s view, which – as the new consensus seems to be – is not seriously undermined by Quine’s criticism. However, there is no clear consensus on what “Carnap’s view” is. I will myself not take a stand on how to best interpret Carnap, but I think it is not too much of a stretch to call my view “Carnapian”, in a sense.

A motivation for the debate between Quine and Carnap was the worry that science, including mathematics and physics, was apparently committed to the

existence of numbers (as well as other abstract objects). Numbers and the like, however, seemed to be strange entities, with no place in the physical or mental world. Much of Quine's "On What There Is" (1948) is about how to get rid of undesirable ontological commitments (including, potentially, commitment to various abstract entities) by paraphrasing one's statements into first-order predicate logic in the appropriate way. Carnap's "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology" (1950b), in response, was meant to undermine the significance of commitment to entities, such as numbers, through using (or having to use) certain linguistic forms. Essentially, Carnap's response was that the apparent commitment is *nothing other* than the acceptance of a linguistic form. Further, to ask whether *F*s (e.g. numbers) exist is just to ask whether the rules of our language – the set of linguistic forms that we have accepted – allow us to say that *F*s exist; or else it is to ask whether we should accept these linguistic forms. The former reading of the existence question is the "framework-internal" reading and the latter is the "framework-external" pragmatic reading. The only way in which there could be something spooky and undesirable about mathematics' commitment to numbers is if we would take mathematics to answer affirmatively to the framework-external *factual* reading of the question: are there *really* numbers? But according to Carnap, this is just a meaningless question that should not and cannot be raised at all. Moreover, we need not suspect scientists of tacitly assuming an affirmative answer to this meaningless question. (However, Carnap seemed to suspect philosophers of undue interest in the meaningless external question.)

Quine responded in turn with "On Carnap's Views on Ontology" (1951), where he elaborated upon why Carnap's supposed "subclass" and "category" distinction, underlying the internal and external question distinction, is problematic; he then suggested that Carnap could instead rely on the analytic/synthetic distinction; but of course, Quine also rejected this distinction. Somehow, following that, the consensus came to be that Quine had won the debate and rehabilitated philosophical ontology in the process. For example, Putnam wrote:

If we ask when Ontology became a respectable subject for an analytic philosopher to pursue, the mystery disappears. It became respectable in 1948, when Quine published a famous paper titled "On What There Is." It was Quine who single handedly made Ontology a respectable subject. (Putnam 2004, 78–79)

This consensus has recently been re-assessed (Price 2009, Eklund 2013, Thomasson 2015) and now the consensus rather seems to be that Quine's response, in so far as he disagreed with Carnap, was largely irrelevant to the thrust of Carnap's argument and the two actually had quite similar views on ontology. I will not be concerned with the details of this debate, because I find that the interpretive question that I am concerned with can be pursued effectively without delving into Quine's criticism. My approach is, however, somewhat influenced by Carnap, as is much of contemporary metaontology. One of my

central claims (viz. that ontological discussions should be understood as discussions about how to improve our language) can well be understood as a Carnapian claim. This recognition of Carnap's influence might give the impression that the account will be a deflationist one; but I do not in fact take it to be such.

The impression that this will be a deflationist account may arise because most contemporary deflationist accounts are explicitly or implicitly "Carnapian" in one way or another, drawing on that same 1950 paper. At the same time, there are hardly any sightings of "Carnapian" realist accounts – the realists rather tend to call themselves "Quineans". One important variety of contemporary Carnapian deflationism is Hirsch's (2011). Hirsch argues for the thesis of "quantifier variance" (roughly, that there can be different equally good existence-concepts) and the related idea that many ontological disputes are merely verbal (the parties speak different languages with different equally good existence-concepts). In Carnap's terms, the disputants employ different equally good (linguistic) frameworks. Another variety of contemporary Carnapian deflationism is Thomasson's (2015). She argues that ontological questions should be understood as framework-internal questions and as such, they are answerable by conceptual analysis and/or empirical inquiries, but not by the sorts of methods employed by ontologists (such as appeal to parsimony or other theoretical virtues). More recently, Thomasson (2017) has defended a different Carnapian view. She interprets many ontological and metaphysical discussions as discussions of the framework-external pragmatic question about how we ought to use terms or concepts. However, apparently she remains deflationist about those ontological discussions wherein the linguistic choices at stake make no practical difference to our lives.

The main historical backdrop for my account is also Carnap's (1950b) account. As with Hirsch and Thomasson, the general background idea that I get from Carnap is that ontology is somehow about linguistic choices: choices that the participants to these discussions have made or want others to make. If we look at the Carnapian accounts above, my own view is closest to Thomasson's more recent account (Thomasson 2017). Like Thomasson in her recent account, I take many ontological discussions to be potentially sensible and important discussions about how to improve our concepts. However, unlike Thomasson, I do not limit this verdict to discussions where the conceptual choices have practical import. Instead, I develop the idea that ontology is about conceptual choice in a manner that is along the lines suggested by Sider (2011). Against both Carnap and Thomasson and in agreement with Sider (and possibly, Quine), I find that the framework-external question about how best to revise the linguistic framework (or conceptual system) need not be a mere practical question; it can also be a factual one. It can be a factual question if we allow that different conceptual schemes can reflect the structure of reality to different degrees and we can compare how well the conceptual schemes do that, by comparing their theoretical virtues, such as coherence, simplicity and elegance. Then, we can at once ask the practical question about concept choice (which

conceptual scheme should we use?) and the factual question about the world (which conceptual scheme best reflects the objective structure of the world?).

Beyond metaontology, the background literature that is most relevant for my thesis concerns the method of “explication”, “conceptual engineering” or “ameliorative analysis”. Whatever we call it precisely, the idea is that philosophers should not just analyse concepts descriptively, reporting on how expressions are used by particular communities; they should also propose norms governing the use of the concepts, while keeping in mind the role played by the relevant expression/concept in a theoretical framework or in social practices. Here as well, important contributions have been made by Carnap (Carnap 1950a, 1963). Recently, Burgess and Plunkett (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a, b) have called the field concerned with normative (as opposed to descriptive) issues about concepts “conceptual ethics”. Plunkett and Sundell (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, Plunkett 2015) have done important work in laying out a framework for analysing apparently object-level disputes (e.g. a dispute on whether a certain bottle of water displayed in a museum is art) as covert metalinguistic negotiations (e.g. on how we should use the term “art”). Both Thomasson and I (as well as Belleri (2017)) make use of Plunkett and Sundell’s framework and apply it in the interpretation of ontological disputes. We propose that although such disputes appear to be about object-level issues (e.g. whether there are chairs), they are in fact covert metalinguistic negotiations (e.g. on whether we should quantify over chairs or use the predicate “chair”).

1.5. Outline of the thesis

In the rest of my thesis, I will first further clarify how I understand and address the interpretation question about revisionary ontology (in chapter 2). Then, I will defend my answer to the interpretation question – the answer that I call the “theoretical metalinguistic account” – from the “quizzical observer’s” point of view (in chapter 3). Then I will defend the same account and elaborate upon it from the revisionary ontologists’ point of view (in chapter 4). Finally, since my discussion so far will have focused on “mainstream” revisionary ontology, I will show how my account applies to a project that does not seem to fit the characterization of revisionary ontology provided up to this point – namely, the project of “feminist” revisionary ontology (in chapter 5).

In more detail, the structure of the thesis, excluding the introduction and the conclusion, is the following.

Chapter 2. “Interpreting the interpretation question”

I will begin by seeking a better understanding of the central question of the thesis: the interpretation question about revisionary ontology. First, what is the object of interpretation? Are metaontological inquirers supposed to interpret “existence questions” as such or a particular practice of asking existence questions? On my approach, we should focus on a particular practice of asking

existence questions. I will defend this approach, in chapter 2. I will also characterize the practice in question, by laying out the participants' shared assumptions about the subject matter (its nature and significance) and the proper methods for addressing that subject matter. I will give examples of the relevant discussions in revisionary ontology (to which, in this thesis, I will restrict the interpretation question): Unger's problem of the many (1980), van Inwagen's (1990) argument from composition, Merricks' (2001) causal over-determination argument, and Unger's (1979) and Horgan and Potrč's (2008) sorites arguments.

I will then ask: what does it mean to *interpret* this practice of asking existence questions? Presumably, it means trying to understand what the participants to the practice are *doing*. But what does this mean? In particular, why not just ask the ontologists what they are trying to do? I will explain why simply asking is not enough (or in other words, why the conscious aims of the ontologists may need to be disregarded), given the interpretive points of view taken up in this thesis. I will also characterize the main options for interpreting revisionary ontology.

Chapter 3. "Interpreting revisionary ontology from the quizzical observer's point of view"

Having clarified the interpretation question, I will begin to defend and elaborate a certain answer to it. The answer is that revisionary ontology is a project of conceptual engineering: it seeks to improve the concepts that we use to form our beliefs.

In chapter 3, I will defend this answer to the interpretation question with the "quizzical observer's" interpretive situation in mind. A "quizzical observer" is a philosopher, but an outsider to ontological disputes in the sense that she does not engage in such disputes herself. However, she is not just any outsider: she is sufficiently familiar with the discussion, not to be epistemically required to dismiss her misgivings about the discussions as probably caused by her own incompetence, rather than by some problem with the disputes. Sufficient familiarity, more precisely, means that the quizzical observer has heard all the main arguments and possesses all the standard philosophical training that might be required for understanding them, to the relevant degree (a degree such that the observer is not required to dismiss her sense of pointlessness as arising from her own incompetence). It would not be surprising if an outsider "from the street" was confused about a fairly technical philosophical dispute. For such an outsider, it would be most reasonable to practice some humility and assume that the discussion makes sense, although it is inaccessible to her. The interesting case, however, is one where a philosophically competent observer who has observed these disputes for quite a while, and is sufficiently familiar with the arguments, remains confused. "Remaining confused", here, means a particular phenomenology that I will call the "quizzical phenomenology": the feeling of pointlessness, mild annoyance, perhaps even frustration.

In this interpretive situation, the audience of the interpretation is also the provider of the interpretation: the quizzical observer is looking for an account to satisfy her own need for explanation. The interpretation should explain both the quizzical phenomenology and the fact that this phenomenology is caused by disputes between her presumed epistemic peers. I suppose that deflationist accounts like Thomasson's (2015) and Hirsch's (2009) are motivated by the need to explain their quizzical phenomenology. However, such accounts often fail to take note of the other datum that needs to be explained: namely, that this apparently pointless dispute is going on between one's presumed epistemic peers. I will argue that a particular metalinguistic account of revisionary ontology (as conceptual engineering for theoretical purposes) can satisfy both adequacy conditions: it can explain the quizzical phenomenology, while respecting the presumption that the disputants are roughly the observer's epistemic peers. The metalinguistic account that I propose combines elements from Plunkett and Sundell (2013), Sider (2011), and Bennett (2009). I will also defend it as superior to the existing metalinguistic accounts (Thomasson 2017, Belleri 2017).

Chapter 4. "Interpreting revisionary ontology from the ontologists' point of view"

This chapter is perhaps the "meat" of the thesis. Here, I will take up a different kind of interpretive situation, one that obtains when the (mainstream) revisionary ontologists themselves need to give an account of what they are doing. There are several ways in which this could happen and, accordingly, several kinds of audiences that they might need to explain themselves to. For example, ontologists might need to explain what they do for popularizing purposes, to outsiders from philosophy. This is not the interpretive situation that I will take up in the thesis. When I look for an account of revisionary ontology from the revisionary ontologists' own point of view, I mean an account that is intended for a relatively well-informed philosophical audience. Further, it is an audience that is even to some extent sympathetic: they feel the pull of the ontologists' arguments. In the quizzical observer's case, I did not assume this, because I have not seen the prototypes for the "quizzical observer" – deflationists such as Thomasson (2015) or Hirsch (2009) – admitting that they feel such a pull. However, there are those who do feel the pull; I would even go as far as to call it a typical reaction to the arguments. I will call this feeling of pull the "sense of destabilization".

Further, I will be interested in an audience who not only feels the pull, but also a certain counter-reaction to the pull: the feeling that despite the arguments, the audience remains entitled to their ordinary beliefs about what there is. For example, they remain entitled to the belief that there are chairs or that there are no talking donkeys. This entitlement seems to have something to do with what the audience can see or, more generally, perceive. I will call this counter-reaction the "sense of (perception-based) entitlement". The revisionary ontologists, then, need to explain what they are doing in a way that makes sense of this dual reaction: the sense of destabilization (or pull) and the sense of

entitlement. Further, they also need to explain how what they are doing is worthwhile: they need to give a *defensive* account of revisionary ontology. The account should be “defensive” in the sense that it should serve to defend, or demonstrate the value of, revisionary ontology. (Of course, it should not be “defensive” in the sense of failing to take in appropriate criticism.) The reason why the account needs to be defensive, in this sense, is not because the revisionary ontologists know themselves to be intelligent people who would not engage in a pointless activity – the reason is not that there is such higher order evidence about their own discussion. Although it is not an entirely silly idea for the revisionary ontologists to consider such evidence concerning their own competence as well, I will leave it aside here. So I do not consider the need for a defensive account to be an *evidential* consideration that constrains the account. I instead consider this need to be a *strategic* constraint on the account. Of course, the defensive account that the ontologists seek must still fit the data; so the ontologists are not free to tell whatever story they like.

Since the account sought is a defensive one and there seems to be no non-epistemic value to the (mainstream) revisionary ontologists’ project, the account must explain how the revisionary ontologists’ project improves the audience’s epistemic standing. This would be easy enough if the ontologists could give what I will call a “simple incompatibilist account” of revisionary ontology. According to the simple incompatibilist account, ontologists are showing that many of our ordinary beliefs about what there is are false and the ontologists are trying to make us revise those beliefs. This revision would be an improvement in beliefs because beliefs are good when they are true and bad when they are false. For reasons that I will seek to make clearer, ontologists should not be satisfied with this simple incompatibilist account. Briefly, this is because the simple incompatibilist account fails to properly account for the sense of perception-based entitlement that I have described above. Instead of the simple incompatibilist account, I will argue, ontologists should also not provide one of the standard compatibilist accounts (accounts that say that there is no conflict between what the ontologists argue and what most people believe). They should rather provide my proposed account, according to which the ontologists are improving the ordinary conceptual scheme that we use to form beliefs. On this alternative account, revisionary ontology is supposed to improve our concepts in their capacity as the building blocks of beliefs; and the ultimate aim is to improve our beliefs.

This, of course, raises the question about what good beliefs are like; are the ontologists’ proposed conceptual revisions really improvements, in light of what beliefs are supposed to do? I will criticise Sider’s (2011) suggestion that all beliefs aim to conform fully to the world and should thus be cast in joint-carving concepts. Then, I will introduce my distinction between two kinds of beliefs: the theoretical and practical ones. It makes sense for ontologists to maintain that their project only seeks to improve our theoretical beliefs (by making the concepts used in forming them more joint-carving). Maintaining

this, however, does imply that the epistemic significance of their project is importantly limited.

Chapter 5. "Applying the account to the metaphysics of gender"

Finally, I will take up the point of view of the feminist ontologists of gender. In contrast to the previous interpretive situations, it is not clear here whether the interpreters are "insiders" or "outsiders" to (mainstream) revisionary ontology. They are insiders to feminist revisionary ontology, of course; and what interests them is precisely whether this puts them in the same basket with mainstream revisionary ontology. Are the two projects ultimately the same project or not, and whether and how should the self-conceptions and methods of the participants to these projects be modified, in light of whether they are? This is the interest guiding the interpretive inquiry here. From my point of view, the question about feminist revisionary ontology arises also because certain features of feminist revisionary ontology do not fit in well with my previously defended account of revisionary ontology as improving concepts to improve theoretical beliefs. Drawing on the distinction between two kinds of beliefs that I have introduced previously, I will argue that the two projects, mainstream and feminist revisionary ontology, are importantly independent of one another. Both aim to improve the concepts that we use to form beliefs; but feminist revisionary ontology of gender primarily aims to improve the concepts that we use to form practical beliefs, whereas mainstream revisionary ontology aims to improve the concepts that we use to form theoretical beliefs.

2. INTERPRETING THE INTERPRETATION QUESTION

2.1. Chapter introduction

As I stated in the introduction, this is mostly a thesis in metaontology: the thesis aims to answer the interpretation question *about* ontology (the question “How should we interpret ontology?”), and not any question *within* ontology. This chapter, however, is rather one in metametaontology. It aims to answer a question *about* the interpretation question about ontology. And this question about the interpretation question is itself also an interpretation question, namely: how should we interpret the interpretation question about ontology? The interpretation question about ontology has two central terms in need of interpretation: “ontology” and “interpret”. I will take these up in turn.

I will devote the majority of this chapter to clarifying what I mean by “ontology” in this thesis, or in other words, what I take the object of interpretation to be when I ask how we shall interpret ontology. Are we interpreting ontological questions, disputes, discussions or something else? I will defend my approach according to which we are interpreting what I call “ontological discussions”: discussions between philosophers, where (what at least look like) existence questions are addressed and where the participants share certain assumptions about their subject matter and the appropriate way for addressing it. In the first part of the chapter, I will also explain my focus on *revisionary* ontology and give examples of arguments in revisionary ontology (Horgan and Potrč 2008, Merricks 2001, Unger 1979, 1980, van Inwagen 1990).

I will then ask what it means to “interpret” ontological discussions, thus specified. Interpretation, here, means giving an account of what the discussants are doing. The account may, but need not contradict appearances: it may turn out that ontologists are doing exactly what they appear to be doing, but it may also turn out that they are doing something else. For instance, it may turn out that while ontologists appear to be debating factual matters, they are actually debating how to use words. I will argue that it is important to look into the *purpose(s)* of interpretation: who needs to interpret ontological discussions and why? Although the primary purpose of interpreting ontology is to make progress with the evaluation and recommendation questions, more specific interpretive aims can influence the adequacy conditions for the account. In particular, for the purposes that will be relevant in this thesis, the account may need to disregard the ontologists’ conscious aims, to some extent. I will end the chapter by listing the main options for interpretive accounts of revisionary ontology.

2.2. “(Revisionary) ontology”: the object of interpretation

2.2.1. Are we interpreting questions, disputes, or discussions?

What are metaontologists interpreting, evaluating and making recommendations about? Or what should they be interpreting, evaluating and making recommendations about? In other words, what is the (proper) object, or the subject matter, of metaontology? It is “ontology”, of course; but what is “ontology”?

One might propose that metaontology should focus on *existence questions*, understood as questions of the form “Are there *F*s?” or “Do *F*s exist?”, “What exists?” or “What is there?”. The job of metaontology, then, would be to ascertain what such questions really mean (the interpretation question), whether discussing these questions is worthwhile (the evaluation question), and how the questions are to be addressed (the recommendation question). According to such a view, metaontologists are not concerned with any actual ontological discussions, but rather with the meaning, value, and proper method of discussing questions like “Are there (really) chairs and tables?”. Blatti and Lapointe seem to exemplify this approach to the object of metaontology, writing that in metaontology, “One may ask how, for instance, are ontological questions to be understood, and what really is at stake in raising and attempting to answer them” (Blatti and Lapointe 2016, 1). Similarly, van Inwagen writes of the question of metaontology: “What are we asking when we ask ‘What is there?’” (van Inwagen 1999, 233). Balaguer also exemplifies the view. He devalues the project of diagnosing actual ontological disputes, as opposed to all possible disputes on a given existence question, as merely verbal:

But actual-literature verbalist views are only interesting in an exegetical, history-of-philosophy sort of way. They’re not *metametaphysically* interesting because they don’t imply that there’s something wrong with the relevant metaphysical questions *themselves*; they imply only that there’s something wrong with the way that certain people have debated those questions. (Balaguer 2017, 2)

The *metametaphysically* interesting question, according to Balaguer, is whether there is a non-verbal dispute to be had about the relevant existence question. Eklund (2016, 179) makes a similar suggestion. I disagree: I find the question about the actual discussions (and relevantly similar discussions) to be at least *an* interesting question for metaontologists, if not *the* interesting question. The evaluation question about all possible disputes on a subject matter appears to be the question of whether there can be a valuable dispute on a question that can be formulated in a certain way in English (for example, “Are there tables and chairs?”). I think that such a general characterization of metaontology, as concerned with questions of a certain form, is misguided. This is for two reasons: first, this approach makes the scope of metaontology unreasonably broad; and second, it is not in line with metaontologists’ central guiding interests in asking the evaluation and recommendation questions, which motivate asking the interpretation question. I will elaborate on these reasons in turn.

First, it would be odd to centre a research effort, such as the research effort of metaontologists, around questions of a certain form, rather than questions with a certain content. This is especially so, when the questions of a certain form make up a rather diverse cluster, as we find with questions of the form “Are there *F*s?” and “Do *F*s exist?”. For example, consider “Are there (really) bigfoots?”, as asked by a naïve tourist, “Are there nuclear weapons in North Korea?”, as asked by a concerned politician, and “Are there tables?”, as asked by van Inwagen (1990). These are questions of the same, supposedly relevant form; but there seems to be little reason to think that the answers to the interpretation, evaluation and recommendation question about these questions would be the same or that these answers should be pursued in the same way. The naïve tourist and the politician seem to be involved in projects or inquiries that are rather different from that of van Inwagen, and we probably should not interpret and evaluate all these projects and inquiries similarly, nor should we make similar recommendations about them. To introduce all these different projects and inquiries into the metaontologists’ domain, simply because of the form of the questions addressed in these projects and inquiries, seems like an unwarranted manoeuvre. It would make the subject matter of metaontology unreasonably diverse.

This consideration – the unreasonable diversity of the subject matter, if defined by the form of the questions – could be overridden if we had reason to believe that those doing metaontology indeed focus their attention on questions of the specified forms, without having in mind any special context for asking these questions. Metaontologists might be focusing on questions of these specific forms either unreasonably or for some good, unobvious reason. Either way, if we had independent reason to believe that this is what metaontologists are interested in, based on how they frame and motivate their work, it would make sense to consider questions of this form the object of metaontology. However, based on how those putting forth metaontological views actually frame and motivate their work, we have reason to believe the opposite: they focus on existence questions as asked and answered in a specific kind of context. We may call this the “ontological” context, although this will not illuminate much, of course. By “ontological context”, I mean the context of discussions between philosophers who generally, but not always, identify as metaphysicians and who have certain sorts of assumptions about their subject matter and how it is to be addressed. (I will come to these assumptions shortly.) In so far as metaontologists seem to be interested in all existence questions of the relevant form, as used in any context, this is because they are interested in whether and how what is going on in the ontological context is different from what is going on in other contexts where questions of this form are raised.

It is with good reason that metaontologists are not just concerned with questions of a certain linguistic form. The question about the meaning, importance, and proper way of addressing questions of a certain linguistic form would be detached from the concerns that typically motivate metaontology. When philosophers ask metaontological questions about ontology, they are

concerned with issues like whether a sub-field of philosophy, as it currently operates, is devoid of value or in need of reformation, or whether certain kinds of intellectual projects (those characteristic of the field in question) should be pursued or not. These questions can arise both from the outsider's perspective (the quizzical observer's perspective) or the insider's perspective (the revisionary ontologists' own perspective). The issue, then, is not about what certain kinds of *questions* (individuated by linguistic forms) mean or whether they deserve to be addressed or how they should be addressed; the issue, instead, is tied closely to the current assumptions and practices of actual ontologists who are either concerned to provide an account of their own practices or whom outsiders are trying to understand and evaluate.

The relevant discussions of existence questions between and among ontologists are sometimes, but not necessarily, *disputes*. Disputes, in the philosophical literature, are usually taken to be linguistic exchanges where the parties, by means of their behaviour (such as shaking heads) or the expressions they use (such as "No!"), show signs of disagreement.² "Disagreement", in philosophical parlance, means that there is a rational conflict between the parties' attitudes. For example, the parties' beliefs on a matter cannot both be true, or their desires cannot both be satisfied.³ Not all disputes in fact express disagreements: a dispute can take place without the parties actually disagreeing about the subject matter of the putative disagreement, for example, when a dispute is merely verbal. Notably, Hirsch (2009) has diagnosed many ontological disputes as merely verbal. This has contributed to the impression that metaontology is and should be concerned with ontological disputes, rather than ontological discussions more generally. The dispute character of many ontological discussions does give rise to certain sorts of metaontological issues that do not arise with respect to non-dispute ontological discussions. For example, the metaontological inquirer might ask: do the parties to ontological disputes really disagree (or do they just appear to)? Is there a rational resolution to the dispute, or in other words, is there a right answer to the question at stake? Are the parties able to arrive at this resolution in practice, by mutually agreeable methods? Since these questions are what intrigue many metaontological inquirers about ontological discussions, and since these questions only seem to apply to disputes and not to other kinds of discussions, there is some reason to say that metaontology is particularly concerned with ontological disputes.

² For example, Plunkett defines a "dispute" as "a linguistic exchange that appears to express a disagreement" (Plunkett 2015, 835). Jenkins, similarly, writes: "[W]hether or not you are disputing with someone depends at least partly on whether you are doing things like shaking your head, saying 'No, you've got it all wrong', banging the table, and so on (or polite alternatives)." (Jenkins 2014, 13)

³ This again follows how Plunkett and Sundell use the terms "dispute" and "disagreement". For example, "we can take a *disagreement* ... to be something that involves a kind of *rational conflict* in mental states" (Plunkett 2015, 835). Jenkins, similarly, writes that disagreement "has everything to do with belief and nothing (or almost nothing) to do with behaviour" (Jenkins 2014, 13).

However, while some criticisms of ontological enterprises pertain specifically to ontological disputes, and not to other kinds of discussions, not all criticisms are thus constrained. For example, Thomasson (2015), in her criticism of ontology, objects to the inadequate methods by which ontologists address existence questions. The ontologists should address their issues by conceptual analysis and/or empirical investigations, according to her, but instead they appeal to considerations like the “simplicity” or “elegance” of the competing theories. Thomasson’s criticism does not require the targeted philosophers to be involved in a dispute: a philosopher who is not in a discussion with anyone else and hence does not give off the appearance of disagreement can still address the ontological issues via misguided methods. Further, the suspicions that ontological discussions of existence questions might involve a semantically defective pseudo-concept of existence (Chalmers 2009) apply likewise to disputes and other kinds of ontological discussion of existence questions.

What are *discussions*, however (of which disputes are a special case)? I take discussions to be linguistically mediated attempts to resolve a (theoretical or practical) problem. A person may conduct a discussion alone, as long as she uses language to do so. A discussion may in principle occur only in someone’s mind. There are various options for individuating discussions. For example, one may individuate them by the time and space in which they take place; or one may say instead that all linguistically mediated attempts to resolve the same problem belong to the same discussion. I talk about discussions rather in the latter sense, but I further suppose the following: all linguistically mediated attempts to address *what is taken by the participants to be* the same problem, *with the same assumptions about its nature and the proper methods for addressing it*, belong to the same discussion. Understanding discussions in this way makes sense, given the aims of metaontology, because metaontology is directed at answering the evaluation and recommendation questions about certain discussions. It would not make sense to take this evaluative and prescriptive concern to be directed at discussions taking place in a particular place and at a particular time; it makes sense to evaluate and make recommendations about discussions that are conducted and understood by the participants in a particular way.

In chapter 3, “Interpreting revisionary ontology from the quizzical observer’s point of view”, I will focus on interpreting *disputes* in revisionary ontology, rather than discussions more generally. This is because the quizzical observer’s interest in seeking an interpretation is sparked by the disputational character of the relevant discussions: why would people who are as competent as the quizzical observer engage in disputes that appear pointless to her? Also, at least one of the quizzical observer’s proposed explanations for the sense of pointlessness applies specifically to the disputes *qua* disputes: the sense of pointlessness may be explained by the fact that the disputes are merely verbal. However, in the later chapters, I will not assume that the discussions in question

are disputes, because the interpretative viewpoints in question do not require this.

2.2.2. Characteristic assumptions of ontological discussions

In this section, I will list the characteristic assumptions that set the *ontological* discussions of existence questions (i.e. discussions of existence questions in the “ontological context”, i.e. “ontological discussions”) apart from, for example, discussions of existence questions as they may take place in response to the naïve tourist’s question “Are there (really) bigfoots?” or the concerned politician’s question “Are there nuclear weapons in North Korea?”. I have argued that ontological discussions are at least *a* proper concern, if not *the* proper concern for metaontologists, when they pursue the interpretation, evaluation and recommendation questions. Therefore, it is important to get clearer about the nature of ontological discussions, as we try to interpret the interpretation question about ontology. I will do this by laying out the participants’ own characteristic assumptions about the subject matter of their discussion (its nature and significance) and about the proper methods for addressing this subject matter.

Sometimes, these assumptions about the subject matter and the proper methods are stated explicitly, for example, Merricks (2001, vii) begins his main work in revisionary ontology with the assertion that “Ontological discovery is not empirical”. More often, however, the assumptions are implicit in the way that the ontologists proceed with the questions. Without further ado, I take these assumptions to be the following.

Assumptions about the subject matter (its nature and significance)

(1) The discussion is about what there is, what exists, or what is real; or about whether a given entity or kind *F* is there, exists, or is real.

Consistent with this basic assumption, ontologists can further spell out the subject matter in different ways. Commonly, the relevant sense of “exists” is thought to be captured by the existential quantifier and the term is used interchangeably with “is there” (Lewis 1990, Sider 2011, van Inwagen 2009). This approach is rooted in Quine’s “On What There Is” (Quine 1948). There are also other approaches to “exist”, within ontological discussions; for example, Fine treats “exists”, in the metaphysical sense, as a predicate and prefers the term “real” to express the relevant property (Fine 2001, 2009). Further, there is disagreement within ontology about whether there are many relevant senses of “exist” or the quantifier, and accordingly, many ways of being (McDaniel 2009). Also, the relevant sense of the quantifier or the predicate “real” may be understood as the ordinary English sense of the relevant terms (Merricks 2001) or as some special sense of the terms (Dorr 2005, Sider 2011); there is no clear consensus on this among ontologists.

(2) The issues at stake are of high epistemic significance. Despite the slow progression (if any) of the field towards convergence, these matters must continue to be thought about.

(3) Relatedly, ontological answers to existence questions are somehow ultimate; ontologists inquire into what there *really* is. Those involved in the relevant ontological discussions would *not* say that the existence questions that they study are highly context-sensitive and that the answers depend on the interests at stake in a given project, with no context or project having objectively higher epistemic priority.

(4) The issues tend to be difficult, but are not ultimately out of reach for human minds. The difficulty of the questions helps explain the slow progress towards convergence; but the difficulty is not so great as to make continuing our efforts pointless.

Methodological assumptions

(1) The main negative methodological assumption is the following: the existence questions at stake *cannot* be addressed simply by empirical inquiry, conceptual analysis, or pragmatic conceptual revision. In other words, the ontologists in question reject the way Carnap (1950b) delimits the issues and methods relevant to answering existence questions. They insist that there is something more at stake and something more to do here. It is clear enough that ontologists do not take their questions to be addressed merely by empirical inquiry, because otherwise we would see ontologists engaging more in empirical inquiry and less in thinking and discussing. About the idea that metaphysics is all about conceptual analysis, Sider writes: “Most metaphysicians at least sometimes think of themselves as *not* being engaged in conceptual archaeology” (Sider 2011, 72). Regarding the idea that ontology is just pragmatic conceptual revision, Kraut mentions: “There is *something it’s like* to do ontology: one has the sense of engaging in *discovery* rather than *invention*” (Kraut 2016, 45).

(2) The main positive methodological assumptions are the following. The existence questions at stake are answerable by (a) recovering the commitments of our best general theory of the world (the best theory is determined by considering theoretical virtues, such as simplicity, consistency, elegance and explanatory power); or (b) appeal to existence criteria, such as causal powers or physicality. The first option, of course, is Quinean; and I suppose it is the more popular one among ontologists. It is in any case not easy to set these two approaches apart. For example, one may think that good theories should not posit entities that lack their own causal powers or are not physical, and so the appeals to existence criteria like causality or physicality are really appeals to theoretical virtues. Likewise, being a commitment of the best theory can be

viewed as an existence criterion, so the appeal to theoretical virtues would really be an appeal to an existence criterion.

Another relevant question here is to what extent “our best general theory of the world” should be determined by the current scientific consensus (which would perhaps be more in line with Quine’s own understanding of the methodology) and to what extent it is the work of metaphysicians to find out the best theory by their peculiar methods and criteria. Generally, ontologists take scientific findings, such as those of fundamental physics, to be relevant for their research; but they think that there is still some independent theorizing left for the ontologists to do. (See also assumption (4) below.)

(3) The theory should be informed by ordinary intuitions, or common sense, but should not be held hostage to common sense. For example, Lewis writes: “Common sense is a settled body of theory – unsystematic folk theory – which at any rate we do believe; and I presume that we are reasonable to believe it. (Most of it.)” (Lewis 1986, 134). Horgan and Potrč similarly write: “Serious metaphysical inquiry, we maintain, ought to pay great respect to deeply held commonsense beliefs and to reflectively compelling commonsense modes of reasoning” (Horgan and Potrč 2008, 4). Ontology tends to begin with reflection on the puzzles that arise in connection with common sense judgments and that demand moving beyond such judgments, perhaps dispensing with some of these in order to preserve others.

(4) The theory should be informed by state of the art science, but not be held hostage to it. Ontological discussions are somewhat autonomous from (other) scientific disciplines, such as physics, and other fields of philosophy, such as philosophy of language. Ontologists balk at the claim that what they do is *just* semantics, for example. On the other hand, they may sometimes seek the support of scientific theories for their views, and/or they may take the reality they study to be revealed or constructed by ordinary language and thought, entirely or to some extent. What they deny is total or nearly total deference to another field.

Note that these are all assumptions of what I call *mainstream* ontological discussions. In a later chapter, I will also discuss revisionary ontology of gender (as it might be called). None of the assumptions listed above unproblematically apply to the revisionary ontology of gender, as done by “feminist metaphysicians”, such as Haslanger (2000) or Sveinsdóttir (2013).

2.2.3. Revisionary ontological discussions

In this thesis, I further focus on certain kinds of ontological discussions, namely those in *revisionary* ontology. The label “revisionary ontology” is reminiscent of Strawson’s “revisionary metaphysics”, which he contrasted with “descriptive metaphysics”. As Strawson put it, “Descriptive metaphysics is content to

describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure” (Strawson 1959, 9). My use of “revisionary ontology” is importantly different from Strawson’s use of “revisionary metaphysics”, not just because ontology might not exhaust all there is to metaphysics. When I talk about revisionary ontology, I am concerned with ontology that *appears* to be revisionary, that is, in contradiction with ordinary belief, without assuming any real revisionary *intent* on its practitioners’ part or that the enterprise will indeed have a revisionary *impact*, if successful.

Revisionary ontological discussions, as the term will be used here, are ontological discussions (characterized by the assumptions specified in the previous section), where the participants *appear* to contradict ordinary beliefs about what there is. For example, van Inwagen (1990) appears to argue that there are no macroscopic non-living objects, and hence that there are no tables or chairs or sticks or stones. Assuming that this is indeed what he argues and that most people indeed believe that there are tables, chairs, sticks, and stones, what Inwagen argues contradicts what most people believe. However, as I characterize revisionary ontology, I do not take for granted either assumption when I say that van Inwagen is a revisionary ontologist. It might turn out that despite appearances, van Inwagen was actually not arguing that there are no chairs, at least not in the sense in which we would be most likely to understand this claim. I am also not taking it for granted that most people believe that there are chairs and other “ordinary” things.

In the revisionary ontological discussions in question, then, philosophers argue for claims of the form “*Fs* exist”, “*Fs* do not exist”, or “*Fs* are ...”, where these contentions appear to contradict the general opinion, or folk belief, on the relevant matters. Of course, it is not obvious which existence claims even *appear* to contradict the general opinion. For example, do the philosophers who deny the existence of numbers or those who affirm the existence of fictional characters *appear* to contradict the general opinion (distinguishing this from the question of whether these philosophers *really* contradict the general opinion)? To avoid such questions, I restrict my examples to philosophers who uncontroversially *appear* to contradict the general opinion, even if it is slightly controversial whether these views *really* contradict the general opinion. For example, the proposal that there are concrete possible worlds certainly *appears* to contradict folk opinion (even if it should turn out that, against appearances, there is really no such conflict). Thus Lewis’ (1986) arguments for the view that there are concrete possible worlds belong to revisionary ontology, on my way of using the term. On the other hand, the proposal that there are *abstract* possible worlds does not appear to conflict with folk opinion, at least not obviously so, and thus I do not count arguments for this view as arguments in revisionary ontology. I am, then, committed to certain views about what *appears* to go against folk belief, but I do not find this commitment particularly problematic, as long as we stick to the central case of “ordinary objects” (such as chairs and tables) and “extraordinary objects” (such as concrete possible worlds and arbitrary mereological sums).

In order to clarify what I mean by this appearance of conflict with ordinary belief, it is helpful to draw on Moltmann (forthcoming).⁴ She points out that there are two ways to understand *descriptive* metaphysics. On the one hand, it can be the study of what ordinary speakers explicitly, reflectively accept about what exists. On the other hand, it can be the study of the ontology that ordinary speakers implicitly accept by speaking a language. For example, it is plausible that English speakers are not reflectively committed to the existence of “the average American”, but such a commitment is inherent in their language use. We might be able to inquire into the explicit, reflective commitments by directly asking ordinary speakers about their judgments about ontological matters; but the implicit commitments are discoverable by a more indirect investigation, for example, into what sentences people think are grammatically acceptable and unacceptable. When I say that revisionary ontologists argue for claims that appear to contradict ordinary beliefs, folk belief, or general opinion, then by all these things I mean something rather similar to what Moltmann refers to as the “explicitly accepted ontology”, or the “reflective ontology” of ordinary speakers. In other words, revisionary ontologists’ views need not be in apparent conflict with the way we ordinarily *speak* about the world; they need to be in apparent conflict with the way we ordinarily *think* about the world. Hence, a philosopher who denies that the average American exists would not be a revisionary ontologist, on my account, even if the folk appear to implicitly accept the existence of the average American, in the way they speak.

I do not include among my examples of revisionary ontology discussions on any of the following: “past and future things, the dead who have ceased to be and those who are not yet even conceived; unactualized possibilities; universals, numbers, and classes; and Meinongian objects, incomplete or inconsistent or both” (Lewis 1990, 393). (Lewis lists these as entities that are “controversial” among philosophers, in the sense that there are varying views as to their existence.) I am also not *excluding* these discussions from revisionary ontology, but I cautiously operate with a more limited set of examples. One may doubt how broad a range of metaontological conclusions I can draw on this basis. I am happy, however, to draw limited conclusions. The focus on the debates on things like chairs and tables does appear to be characteristic of contemporary metaontology and in this regard, I am covering just as much ground as most metaontologists. In fact, since I discuss how my approach applies to discussions in the revisionary ontology of gender, I am covering some ground not covered by many metaontologists.

However, in another respect, I do limit the object of interpretation quite narrowly. I am not trying to interpret all past, future and conceivable discussions where philosophers argue for apparently eccentric views about what there is or what exists and the discussion is characterized by the assumptions

⁴ Moltmann, Friederike (forthcoming). “Natural Language and Its Ontology”. To appear in *Metaphysics and Cognitive Science*, edited by A. Goldman and B. McLaughlin, Oxford University Press.

described in the previous section. I am focusing on a cluster of actual discussions and relevantly similar discussions. The analysis may plausibly generalize to more cases, but I recognize that in the future, quite different strategies may be taken to argue against the existence of putative “ordinary” objects or for the existence of “extraordinary” objects, even within the space defined by the assumptions described in the previous section. I do not aim to cover all such cases with my interpretive account. I will fix the cluster of actual discussions and the “relevantly similar” discussions in revisionary ontology by describing some examples, in the next subsection.

2.2.4. Samples of arguments and preliminary analysis

The following are some central examples of revisionary ontology. These examples should help to fix the object of interpretation for this metaontological inquiry.

(1) *The problem of the many* (Unger 1980)

Unger’s argument has roughly the following structure.

- P1. If there are tables, then they are such that a table minus an atom is a table.
- P2. If tables are such that a table minus an atom is a table, then there are millions of tables in each situation where there is at least one table.
- C1. If there are tables, then there are millions of tables in each situation where there is at least one table. [Hypothetical syllogism, P1, P2]
- C2. Either there are no tables or there are millions of tables in each situation where there is at least one table. [Logical equivalence, C1]

The first, crucial premise is essentially a semantic claim about the vague predicate “table”: if such a predicate applies to some object *a*, and some object *b* only differs from *a* in a minuscule way (e.g. by a single atom), then the predicate also applies to *b*. (Unger also calls this principle “the principle of minute differences”.)

The reasoning behind P2 is roughly the following. Suppose that there is a situation that contains at least one table. Let us call that table that we know to be there “John”. Now consider a big part of John that contains all of John except for just one atom on the surface; let us call that part of John “Judy”. Since Judy only differs from John by one atom, then if tables are such that a table minus an atom is a table, and John is a table, then Judy must also be a table. There are also many others like Judy in the situation: parts of John that contain all of John except for a single atom. There are millions of such things there, in fact. And given the antecedent of P2, they would all be tables. The same would apply to any situation containing one table (not just the situation with John): such situations would all contain millions of objects that only differ from that table by a single atom. And if tables are such that a table minus an atom is a table, then all those portions of the original table are also tables. Thus we have P2: If

tables are such that a table minus an atom is a table, then there are millions of tables in each situation where there is at least one table.

The argument, if sound, leaves us with a dilemma, i.e. a choice between two kinds of revisionary ontology: one containing no tables and one containing many more tables than people apparently think there are. Both disjuncts seem to contradict ordinary belief. Further, the argument does not only concern the number of tables; the same argument could be made for any “ordinary object”. Not just tables, but also chairs, apples, cars, stones, and so on seem to be such that anything that only differs from one by a single atom is also (respectively) a chair, an apple, a car, a stone, and so on.

Here, the relevant theoretical virtue underlying the argument seems to be, first and foremost, logical consistency. Since we accept that tables, if they existed, would be subject to the principle of minute differences, described in P1, and since we cannot help but accept the reasoning behind P2, we must then accept the surprising conclusion: Either there are no tables or there are millions of tables in each situation where there is at least one table. Of course, we can only accept this conclusion at the expense of denying the ordinary judgment that there are tables and that there are not *that* many of them. In this argument, consistency ultimately trumps ordinary judgment. At the same time, ordinary judgment certainly plays a role in the argument, since this is what grants our assent to the crucial P1, or more generally, the principle of minute differences. (Ordinary judgment, in this case, consists in ordinary judgments about ordinary concepts, such as the concept of table.) We are asked to accept what follows from ordinary judgment, even if what follows is itself at odds with ordinary judgment. So the argument assumes, methodologically, that we are not to be held hostage to ordinary judgment, although we begin our reasoning from premises that are at least partly supported by ordinary judgment.

(2) *Sorites arguments* (Unger 1979, Horgan and Potrč 2008)

Sorites arguments exploit – in a way that is similar to the problem of the many – the vagueness of the predicates designating ordinary objects. The arguments have roughly the following structure.

- P1. If there are tables, then they are such that a table minus an atom is a table.
- P2. If tables are such that a table minus an atom is a table, then a very small number of atoms (e.g. 10 atoms) can be a table.
- C1. If there are tables, then a very small number of atoms (e.g. 10) can be a table. [Hypothetical syllogism, P1, P2]
- P3. A very small number of atoms (e.g. 10) cannot be a table.
- C2. There are no tables. [*Modus Tollens*, C1, P3]

As with the other arguments in revisionary ontology that are considered here, this argument can be and sometimes is stated in somewhat different terms. For example, Horgan and Potrč (2008) explain what vagueness is by asking us to envision a sequence of entities, such that each one differs in some very small way from the next, and in a way that is relevant to the predicate (e.g. by only

one atom, in the case of “table”, or by only one strand of hair, in the case of “bald”). We can imagine, for instance, a line-up that begins with something that is uncontroversially a table and ends with a collection of ten atoms. The problem, then, is that we want to say that there is no sharp cut-off point in the line (e.g. where tables end and non-tables begin), but we also want to say that we do not have tables all the way or non-tables all the way. Assuming that there is no contradiction-free way to grant both claims, the ordinary way of thinking of the world (as containing objects satisfied by the vague predicates) hosts contradictions and needs to be dispensed with. Horgan and Potrč dispense with it in favour of an ontology containing only one object, the whole universe itself. In choosing this view (“existence monism”, or “bobjectivism”, as they also call it) over alternatives (such as the view that there are only simples) they appeal to the theoretical virtue of parsimony. As with the problem of the many, the sorites arguments begin with ordinary judgment; and by appeal to theoretical virtues like consistency and parsimony, they end up with ontologies that appear to be in stark opposition to ordinary judgment.

(3) *The argument from composition* (van Inwagen 1990)

Since this is both a particularly salient example of metaontological discussion and a complex argument, I will dedicate more space to it than the other sample arguments.

Van Inwagen’s argument can be reconstructed roughly as follows.

- P1. There is no “principle of composition” (i.e. no principle governing when some objects compose a further object) that is both unified (the principle is the same for different kinds of thing) and complies with ordinary judgment on particular cases of purported composition.
- P2. If there is no principle of the kind described in P1, then compliance with ordinary judgment is less important than the unity of the principle, in ascertaining the correct principle of composition.
- P3. If compliance with ordinary judgment is less important than the unity of the principle, in ascertaining the correct principle of composition, then van Inwagen’s principle of composition (some objects compose an object iff they constitute a life) is correct.
- C1. Van Inwagen’s principle of composition is correct.
- P4. If van Inwagen’s principle of composition is correct, then there are no ordinary objects like tables and chairs.
- C2. There are no ordinary objects like tables and chairs.

P1 says that a principle of composition satisfying certain constraints (unity and compliance with judgments on particular cases) cannot be found. But why was van Inwagen concerned with ascertaining the correct principle of composition? A clue can be found in one of van Inwagen’s more recent writings, where he discusses what the ontological context of utterance (also known as the

“ontology room”) is all about.⁵ He says that in the ontology room, the discussants will not utter a sentence like “There are paintings”, unless they are prepared to “answer any serious metaphysical question about the properties of paintings”. For example: “Must a painting actually have been *painted* – or could a painting come about as the result of the random collisions of molecules? If a painting is vaporized, is the resulting cloud of atoms a thing that *used to be*, but is no longer, a painting?” (van Inwagen 2014, 3). Similarly, then, if one wants to say, in the ontology room, that there are material things made of other material things – that there are ordinary composite objects like tables and chairs – then one must be prepared to answer various questions about such things. And one of these questions concerns the conditions under which some objects (presumably, smaller objects) make up a composite object.

Van Inwagen seeks to establish P1 (that there is no principle of composition satisfying both the desideratum of unity and the desideratum of compliance with ordinary judgment) by rejecting various candidate principles. For example, “Contact” is the view that “To get the *xs* to compose something, one need only bring them into contact” (van Inwagen 1990, 33). A problem with this answer, for van Inwagen, is that the elementary particles that material objects are ultimately composed of are not in contact. So, contact is not necessary for composition. Further, it seems that not just any two random objects brought into contact thereby compose an object: I can carry my bed from my old flat to my new one, put it next to a wall again, but this will only be a rearrangement of furniture, and not the creation of a new bed-wall. So contact is not sufficient for composition.

Another candidate principle that van Inwagen considers is “Fastening”: “To get the *xs* to compose something, one need only cause them to be fastened to one another” (van Inwagen 1990, 57). Fastening is a more stable variety of contact. For example, a watch’s parts are fastened to one another, whereas those of a house of blocks are not (ibid., 58). Like contact, fastening is not sufficient for composition. For example, if two people shake hands and their fingers become paralyzed, so that they are unable to let go of each other, no object made of the two people is formed.

According to the “Cohesion” principle, “one need only cause them [the putative parts of the composite object] to cohere” (ibid., 58). For example, cohesion is brought about by welding two pieces of metal together. Even such

⁵ I am not certain about the origins of the term “ontology room”, in the sense of ontological context of utterance, but an earlier use occurs in Dorr, who writes, for example: “What we debate in the ontology room is the question what there is *strictly speaking* – what there *really, ultimately* is – what there is *in the most fundamental sense*” (Dorr 2005, 250). Sometimes, the idea of the ontology room goes hand in hand with the idea that there is a special language, different from, say, ordinary English, that is used in the ontology room. However, “ontology room” may also be used to mean the ontological context of utterance more broadly, allowing for the view that it is a special context for speaking a natural language, e.g. English. Van Inwagen is apparently using “ontology room” in this broader sense, without taking on board the idea of “Ontologese” as a distinct language; and so am I.

extra-strong fastening, according to van Inwagen, would not bring about a new object. He uses the example of a handshake again, this time with instant skin-bonding glue.

A further principle is “Fusion”: “one need only cause the [the putative parts of the composite object] to fuse” (ibid.: 58). Fusion, here, means seamless, boundariless cohesion. To reject this criterion, van Inwagen uses the case of identical twins whose arms have been joined together by a mad surgeon, producing a set of seamlessly joined “artificial Siamese twins”. Again, van Inwagen submits that a new being has not been created, and thus fusion is not sufficient for composition (van Inwagen 1990, 59).

Several of the counter-examples concern human beings, and indeed van Inwagen seems to hold that it is never possible to put two or more human beings together and compose (a further) one. This led him to the idea: what if the required relation that gives rise to composition is something different for different types of things, for example, humans and non-human material entities? This is the “Series” answer: “ $(\exists y \text{ the } xs \text{ compose } y)$ if and only if the xs are $F1$ and stand in R , or the xs are $F2$ and stand in $R2$, or ... , or the xs are F_n and stand in R_n ” (van Inwagen 1990, 63). The “series” principle is attractive, according to van Inwagen, because plausibly, Lego parts may compose something in virtue of being fastened to one another, but human beings may not (van Inwagen 1990, 65). However, while this “series” principle respects ordinary judgment about particular cases of composition, the principle fails because it is not unified: it is not the same for different kinds of things.

Thus, we have our justification for P1: the candidate answers all either fail the criterion of compliance with ordinary judgment or they fail the criterion of unity.

P2 (i.e. that compliance with ordinary judgment is less important than the unity of the principle) just seems to be justified by van Inwagen’s view of the proper method for doing metaphysics. Here, once again, we find the view that metaphysics, though it begins with ordinary judgment, is not to be held hostage to ordinary judgment. Theoretical virtues such as consistency or simplicity are to be given more weight. In particular, the virtue of elegance seems to motivate the view that the principle of composition must be the same for all things. Van Inwagen says that an answer of the “series” style would be “disgracefully messy” (van Inwagen 1990, 67).

An alternative interpretation of the motivation for P2 would be that van Inwagen’s preference of unity over compliance with judgments on particular cases is itself justified by appeal to ordinary judgment. He writes: “Isn’t there a great deal of plausibility in this principle: If there are xs that compose something just in virtue of the fact that they stand in R , then, for any ys , if the ys stand in R , the ys compose something?” (van Inwagen 1990, 69). Now, “great deal of plausibility” might mean conformity with ordinary judgment, but it might also mean that the principle appeals to the scientist or the philosopher in van Inwagen and (presumably) in the reader: it is essentially the principle that we should look for an elegant principle of composition. I find the latter option

more plausible: van Inwagen appeals to theoretical virtue, not ordinary judgment, in justifying P2. However, it must be said that, in any case, there is no sharp division between an appeal to ordinary judgment and theoretical virtue: consistency, elegance, simplicity and so on can all be said to appeal to the common mindset, rather than just to that of philosophers or scientists. And perhaps the common mindset sometimes even prioritizes such virtues over compliance with judgments on particular cases. This difficulty – of distinguishing between ordinary judgment and theoretical virtue as constraints on metaphysical theories – unfortunately only illustrates the host of conundrums about the methodology of metaphysics that I cannot properly address in this thesis. Concerning this particular issue, however, it should be noted that while theoretical virtue has appeal outside metaphysics and, furthermore, constrains our thinking when we are not theorizing about the world as philosophers or scientists, metaphysicians characteristically pursue theoretical virtues in a particularly insistent manner, and are willing to give up many other things (e.g. convenience of speaking) in this pursuit.

So this was the justification for P2: the unity of the principle of composition is more important than compliance with judgments on particular cases, because in doing metaphysics, we must prioritize theoretical virtues over such ordinary judgments on particular cases. (Whether the appeal to theoretical virtue is itself ultimately an appeal to ordinary judgment, I leave open here.) Now: the next step, P3, is about showing that, out of the candidate principles of composition that prioritize theoretical virtue over judgments on cases, van Inwagen's is the best. Van Inwagen's principle, again, is that some things compose a further thing iff they constitute a life. Van Inwagen considers two competitors to this principle that similarly prioritize theoretical virtue over compliance with judgments on particular cases. These are the "extreme answers" to the composition question: Nihilism and Universalism. According to Nihilism, "It is impossible for one to bring it about that something is such that the *xs* compose it, because, necessarily (if the *xs* are two or more), nothing is such that the *xs* compose it" (ibid., 72). According to Universalism, "It is impossible for one to bring it about that something is such that the *xs* compose it, because, necessarily (if the *xs* are disjoint), something is such that the *xs* compose it" (ibid., 74). Against Nihilism, van Inwagen says that it "would appear to be false, for you and I exist and we are composite objects" (ibid., 73). Against Universalism, van Inwagen says that it "does not seem to force itself upon the mind as true" (ibid., 74) and it is in conflict with the plausible idea that persons exist and persist through time, while changing their parts, that is, the atoms that they are composed of (ibid., 75).

Van Inwagen's proposed principle of composition, in his own phrasing, is that " $(\exists y$ the *xs* compose *y*) if and only if the activity of the *xs* constitutes a life (or there is only one of the *xs*)" (ibid., 82). I will not elaborate on how he further justifies this answer, beyond eliminating the alternatives (as outlined above).

Horgan and Potrč analyse van Inwagen's implicit methodology as follows:

An adequate metaphysical theory, like an adequate scientific theory, should be systematic and general and should keep to a minimum the unexplained facts that it posits. In particular, a good metaphysical or scientific theory should avoid positing a plethora of quite specific, disconnected, *sui generis*, compositional facts. (Horgan and Potrč 2008, 18–19)

Sider, on the other hand, writes that “van Inwagen seeks the simplest theory that accommodates the ‘data’, which in his case are his intuitive judgments plus a range of theoretical presuppositions” (Sider 2011, 170). Horgan and Potrč, then, seem to think that van Inwagen appeals to the theoretical virtues of systematicity and generality and avoiding unexplained primitives, whereas Sider emphasizes simplicity and compliance with intuitions and theoretical assumptions. I have myself mentioned the virtue of “elegance” above. Since there are no clear-cut distinctions between the different virtues, it is plausible that the relevant theoretical virtues underlying arguments in revisionary ontology can be elucidated in different ways. For present purposes (giving an idea of how arguments in revisionary ontology work), choosing between these options is not necessary.

(4) The argument from causal over-determination (Merricks 2001)

Like van Inwagen, Merricks leaves out of his ontology things like chairs and tables, but preserves some macroscopic objects. In Merricks’ case, these are persons, rather than living organisms more generally. Merricks’ argument against ordinary objects also differs from van Inwagen’s.

The essence of Merricks’ argument from causal over-determination is put forth in the following passage:

If there were baseballs, they would break windows, they would injure batters, they would cause visual sensations (and so be seen), and they would cause tactile sensations (and so be felt). ... But given the Overdetermination Argument ... if there were such objects, they would not have causal powers, so there are no such objects. (Merricks 2001, 81)

I reconstruct the basic argument as follows.

- P1. If there are baseballs (or other ordinary objects), then there are things that are baseballs (or other ordinary objects) and that can cause events.
- P2. There are no things that are baseballs (or other ordinary objects) and that can cause events.
- C. There are no baseballs (or other ordinary objects). [*Modus tollens*]

P1 apparently draws on our concept of baseballs: baseballs, if they existed, would be the sorts of things that could cause events. So P1, as I understand it, is not an appeal to the idea that to be real is to have causal powers (Alexander’s dictum). I take the former to be the more plausible interpretation because the premise is more appealing on this reading.

P2 is justified by the following Overdetermination Argument (Merricks 2001, 57):

- (1) The baseball – if it exists – is causally irrelevant to whether its constituent atoms, acting in concert, cause the shattering of the window.
 - (2) The shattering of the window is caused by those atoms, acting in concert.
 - (3) The shattering of the window is not overdetermined.
- Therefore,
- (4) If the baseball exists, it does not cause the shattering of the window.

The premises of the Overdetermination Argument mostly seem to be supported by ordinary judgment, but (3) in particular seems to get support from an appeal to the theoretical virtue of simplicity or elegance. The picture that accepts overdetermined events would be “an ugly picture”, especially when the case with the baseball generalizes so that causal overdetermination would be ubiquitous (Merricks 2001, 67).

Thomasson represents Merricks’ argument in a slightly different way from the reconstruction above: “Since positing the existence of baseballs would force one to conclude that they both have and do not have causal powers, we can conclude that there are no baseballs” (Thomasson 2007, 10). Merricks’ argument would then have the form of a *reductio*, beginning from the supposition (for *reductio*) that there are baseballs. I have reconstructed the argument as a straightforward *modus tollens* inference to the conclusion that there are no baseballs. I take this to be just another example of how essentially the same argument in revisionary ontology can be reconstructed in different ways. Again, the choice between such options is not crucial for current purposes (i.e. for presenting the gist of the relevant arguments). Likewise, it is not important to dwell on the details of how Merricks takes each premise to be supported. It should suffice to say that appeal to ordinary judgment and theoretical virtue again have a central methodological role.

The arguments recapitulated above were some of the better known arguments in revisionary ontology. We saw how they appeal to ordinary judgment (including conceptual competence with terms like “baseball”) and theoretical virtues (including e.g. simplicity and elegance). Revisionary ontological theses are often put forth as the best solutions to puzzles, not as conclusions of deductive arguments. To this extent, the reconstructions above might be misleading. Nevertheless, hopefully they help one grasp the gist of the arguments. There are more puzzles and arguments like these than have been stated above. For example, revisionary ontological theses are motivated by their supposed capacity to provide solutions to problems like the Ship of Theseus. In that puzzle, the question is which of the two candidate ships is the Ship of Theseus: is it the one that sailed through the Ship of Theseus’ usual trajectory or the one that was made from the planks that were removed from the former, one by one, over the course of the trip? Once we admit that there are no composite objects like the Ship of Theseus, the question is resolved by denying the question’s

assumption that there *is* a Ship of Theseus: neither candidate is the Ship of Theseus, because there is no Ship of Theseus, nor any other ship. Another prominent puzzle in revisionary ontology concerns the identity of a lump of clay with the statue made of it. Again it is sometimes thought that the best solution is to deny that there are statues made of lumps of clay. I will not go into the details of other puzzles here. The rest of the thesis will only presume familiarity with the arguments outlined in this chapter.

There are also other types of arguments with apparently anti-common-sensical ontological conclusions, arguments that will not be given the time of day at all, in this thesis. In those arguments, the arguer relies heavily on some metaphysical principle that does not have broad appeal among philosophers, let alone the folk, and derives a revisionary ontological conclusion on that basis. Examples include appeals to the principle that anything that exists must have causal powers (Alexander's dictum), or that what is real must be physical. Perhaps the arguments proceeding from such principles may be subsumed under the analysis to follow. In any case, I will not assume that they can be. I am interested in arguments with premises that can be expected to appeal to anyone who is willing to rely on ordinary judgment (including e.g. conceptual judgment) and theoretical virtues (including e.g. simplicity or elegance), in order to find out what the world is like.

In this section, I have not given examples of arguments in feminist revisionary ontology of gender, which will be discussed in chapter 5. Those arguments also seem to have conclusions that stand opposed to common sense or folk opinion: for example, that there are no men and women, or that to be a woman is to be oppressed for a certain kind of reason. However, those arguments differ in the considerations they appeal to from the arguments considered in this chapter. In particular, ethical and pragmatic issues play a much bigger role than they typically do in the arguments of "mainstream revisionary ontology" that I have exemplified in this section. I will elaborate on this difference and its implications for understanding the two projects, when I take up the relationship between mainstream and feminist revisionary ontology in chapter 5. For now, I will turn away from the interpretation of the object of interpretation, "ontology" (or more precisely, "revisionary ontology"), to the interpretation of "interpretation".

2.3. Interpreting "interpretation"

As has emerged in our discussion of the sample arguments, there is room for interpretation in the case of several, if not all, arguments in revisionary ontology. However, the interpretive work undertaken in this thesis is not that of establishing, for each argument, how to best reconstruct it and to establish which methodological considerations, precisely, are in play – for example, whether the author supports a premise by appeal to ordinary judgment or theoretical virtue, and if the latter, then which theoretical virtue. Instead, my

aim is to interpret the enterprise itself, the practice of providing such arguments in support of what appear to be unorthodox views about what there is. In this section, I will further explain how I understand this interpretive work.

First, I will address what might be called a paradox of interpretation: how can one interpret a practice at all, without being able to say what the practice is, to begin with? One might suspect that in the previous part of this chapter (2.2), I have unavoidably already engaged in interpretation, and perhaps even that I have done all the interpretation that there is to do. In response, I will distinguish fixing the object of interpretation (which I did in section 2.2) from interpretation itself (which will be done in the remainder of the thesis).

Secondly, I will explain why we cannot establish what the revisionary ontologists are doing simply by asking them. The central idea here is that when one's conscious aims and one's methods (in other words, what one is *trying* to accomplish and what one *can hope* to accomplish by one's actions) come into conflict, then sometimes, methods should be prioritized over conscious aims when answering the question about what one is doing. I will explain why for each interpretive situation considered in this thesis (the quizzical observer's situation, the mainstream revisionary ontologists' situation, and the feminist revisionary ontologists' situation), establishing what the ontologists are doing simply by asking about their conscious aims is not appropriate.

Finally, I will list and characterize the main interpretive options that are relevant for this thesis, including the one I will defend (the "theoretical metalinguistic view").

2.3.1. Interpreting versus fixing the object of interpretation

It might seem like the task of interpretation that I am undertaking is impossible: I must have already established what ontology is, before I can begin to interpret it. In trying to answer the interpretation question, I am trying to answer the question "What is ontology?". But in order to understand that question, after all, I apparently need to understand the term "ontology" that occurs in it. I must have this understanding before I can consider different answers to the question. So, I must *already* understand what ontology is in order to meaningfully ask and address the question. This paradox of interpretation is apparently a variant of Meno's paradox: it is puzzling how one can purposefully seek knowledge of something, X, if one does not already know X (in other words, if one does not know one's purpose in this quest). The solution, in the case at hand, is to draw a distinction between the sought after interpretation itself and the mere fixing of the object of interpretation. What I did in the previous part of this chapter was the fixing of the object of interpretation, but not yet the relevant act of interpretation itself.

What does it mean to fix the object of interpretation? For example, one may fix the object of interpretation by ostension, without yet giving an interpretation of that object. In a paradigmatic case, the ostensive fixing of the object of

interpretation would involve literally pointing to something with one's finger and asking: "What is *that*?" or "What is going on *there*?". This option is normally not available for the metaontological inquirers: they are usually not in the position to literally point their finger, visibly for their audience, at the phenomenon that they are interpreting (and evaluating and making recommendations about).

Although such "paradigmatic ostension" is usually unavailable for the metaontologist, something similar enough is available. Namely, the metaontologist can list examples of the phenomenon to be interpreted. She can say, for example: "The conversation between Lisa and David, in yesterday's seminar, was one in ontology". Of course, one would need to point to more than one example, so that the audience can get an idea of the relevant similarities between the examples. However, oral conversations between relatively unknown people may not serve as the best examples for a metaontologist who is trying to fix the object of interpretation for the purposes of a wider audience, many of whom may not know Lisa and David or their conversation from the day before. Examples that are accessible to a broader audience include, first and foremost, famous books and articles that belong to the domain under investigation (ontology, or more precisely, revisionary ontology). Not many people may have witnessed that conversation between Lisa and David, but more of the metaontologists' potential audience will be familiar with van Inwagen's *Material Beings* (1990), Merricks' *Persons and Objects* (2001), or Unger's "Why There Are No People" (1979). This is why I pointed to such famous works, and not private conversations, as examples in the previous section.

There are also more contentious examples, where it is less clear whether the work is part of the same phenomenon ("ontology" or "revisionary ontology"), that is the relevant object of interpretation. For example, one may wonder whether (dis)proofs of God's existence or arguments against free will should be included. Contentious examples also include work that is labelled "social ontology" or "feminist ontology/metaphysics". For the most part, I will not devote special attention to establishing whether a given unobvious case falls or does not fall under "revisionary ontology". I limit my attention to the central examples that have occupied most contemporary metaontologists, and I aim the interpretation to also cover arguments that are relevantly similar (in particular, arguments that similarly appeal to ordinary judgment and theoretical virtues). However, I will look at how my approach is useful for understanding feminist metaphysics of gender and its relationship to "mainstream" revisionary ontology, in chapter 5.

When I characterized ontologists' assumptions about their subject matter and the proper way of addressing it, and made suggestions about the methodological principles in play in their particular arguments, I did go a bit further than merely drawing attention to an object of interpretation. However, this was still not the kind of interpretation I am looking for. My interpretive question here is not primarily *how* ontologists do what they do, but *what* they do. In the next subsection, I will explain why we cannot establish what ontologists do simply

by asking them. This will also serve to show why the interpretive points of view matter: different interpretive situations require (or allow) us to disregard ontologists' conscious aims for different reasons.

2.3.2. Why not just ask? The relevance of the interpretive situation

Once we have *fixed* the object of interpretation, what do we still need to do, in order to say what the object of interpretation *is*? For the case at hand (interpreting revisionary ontology), I take the interpretation question that remains, to be: "What are (revisionary) ontologists *doing*?". One might then suggest that a good way to find out what someone is doing is to ask them. This is especially plausible if we take the question "What are they doing?" to mean: "What are they trying to accomplish?". However, the question can also be taken to mean: "What are they actually accomplishing?". For example, suppose that you see someone moving along slowly and leisurely, but insisting that they are trying to run. In this case, we might insist that they are in effect walking, not running, even if their intention is to run. In one sense, what they are *doing* (in the sense of "trying to do") is running, but in another sense, what they are *doing* (in the sense of "accomplishing") is walking.

Why not understand the interpretation question as the question about what the revisionary ontologists are trying to accomplish? Then, getting the correct answer would be as simple as asking them. If the revisionary ontologists give different answers, then we could conclude that they are indeed doing different things (that is, trying to accomplish different things). Indeed, in certain interpretive situations, "What are they doing?" should be understood as a question about the actors' conscious aims. For example, suppose that revisionary ontologists were always inclined to revise their methods so as to better suit their conscious aims, whenever there turns out to be a discrepancy between their conscious aims and their methods. Suppose further that their conscious aim is to find out what is true in ordinary English. And suppose that it turns out that this question should be approached by conceptual analysis and empirical observation, rather than by appeal to theoretical virtues and the like (the ontologists' current methods). The revisionary ontologists in question would then be inclined to revise their methods accordingly, because what they really care about is finding out what is true in ordinary English – and they are willing to do whatever needs to be done to achieve this aim. For such ontologists, the interpretation question about their project might pose no real difficulty: it could be answered by an act of introspection. The hard work would lie in finding the best methods for doing the work required by the aim thus established.

Now, for the revisionary ontologist who is determined to achieve the conscious aims and willing to change the methods accordingly, inquiring only into the conscious aims might well be a legitimate method for approaching the interpretation question. However, I do not have in mind the point of view of

such a revisionary ontologist when I ask the interpretation question in this thesis. That is why I do not approach the interpretation question simply by asking revisionary ontologists about their conscious aims. I suspect that the point of view in question, that of prioritizing conscious aims over methods in the case of a discrepancy, is rare among revisionary ontologists: I assume that they are somewhat more committed to their methods than their conscious aims. More importantly, it would be imprudent of them to be committed to their conscious aims over their methods. If there is indeed an important discrepancy, then choosing to revise the methods, rather than the conscious aims, would render the work done so far more or less useless and their expertise in the field questionable, whereas revising their conscious aims would amount to mere changes in framing and phrasing.

So I will not take up the presumably idiosyncratic interpretive viewpoint of those imprudent ontologists who are ready to drop the appeals to theoretical virtues, should it turn out that these methods are not best suited for their conscious aims in doing revisionary ontology, but are nonetheless well suited to some other worthy aims in the vicinity. Whose viewpoint will I take up then? I have already listed these viewpoints in the introduction, but I will explain them again here, now paying special attention to why, in each case, we might need to discount the ontologists' own conscious aims. This also helps to exemplify the relevance of the interpretive point of view in determining the adequacy conditions for the interpretation.

First, I will interpret revisionary ontology from the quizzical observer's point of view: the point of view of a fellow philosopher who is sufficiently familiar with the disputes among revisionary ontologists and between revisionary and non-revisionary ontologists, but continues to experience a sense of pointlessness upon observing and thinking about these disputes. (Again, "sufficiently familiar" means familiar enough not to be epistemically required to immediately dismiss the sense of pointlessness as a symptom of one's own incompetence.) Now, suppose that you observe some people engaging in behaviour that feels strangely pointless to you. This is puzzling because you have reason to believe that they are roughly your equals, in terms of their relevant mental capacities. This compels you to try and understand what they are doing. Suppose further that when you ask them what they are doing, this does not dissolve the puzzling sense of pointlessness. If they are doing what they say they are doing, then they are doing it in quite a silly way, it seems to you. However, there is an interpretation available that does not fit their own account of what they are doing, but explains how they might sensibly be doing something else. The interpretation is charitable in that it does not make them come out inferior to you in their mental capacities. Note that the mere fact that they are wrong about what they are doing does not make them appear inferior to you, the interpreter: you are yourself also inclined to misunderstand what you are doing sometimes. In order to avoid ascribing severely inferior capacities to the persons whose practices one is observing, one should sometimes ascribe a misunderstanding of the interpretee's own practice to the interpretee. I will

argue, in the next chapter, that the case with the revisionary ontologists and the quizzical observer is the kind of case where the ascription of a relatively minor misunderstanding of the practice might be required in order to avoid even greater uncharity.

I accept, however, the presumption that self-reports on what one is doing are reliable. So I do not consider it a *negligible* cost of an account that it attributes such reflective failure to those interpreted. Caution is needed in re-interpreting ontologists' projects inconsistently with their own professed intentions. For example, it would be an insult to van Inwagen's (1990) judgment to suggest that he wrote a whole book arguing for the rather trivial truth that table-particles are more fundamental than tables or that tables are non-fundamental, while thinking that he was arguing that there are no tables. Some reflective mistakes are more plausible and more charitable to attribute than others. I will elaborate on this point in the next chapter.

After addressing the quizzical observer's interpretive needs, I will take up the point of view of revisionary ontologists who are trying to give an account of what they are doing, to an audience that is not entirely unmoved by the arguments, but continues to feel entitled to their ordinary beliefs. In so far as ontologists are trying to defend a certain practice of theirs, we can ask: what is more central to the practice being defended? Is it the consciously endorsed aims of the practitioners or the way that the practice proceeds (the methods)? In order to understand this question, we need to think further about why the ontologists want to defend the practice. Presumably, it is because they want to continue the practice and because they want to be recognized for having engaged in a worthwhile practice in the past. Suppose now that it is indeed worthwhile to pursue the consciously endorsed aims of the ontologists, but it is utterly misguided to pursue these goals in the way the ontologists have, so far, been pursuing them. Further, suppose that it is also sensible to use the methods that the ontologists have been using, for some worthwhile aims, just not for their own consciously endorsed aims. In that situation, I contend, it makes more sense for the ontologists to give an account of "what they do" that aligns with their methods rather than their conscious aims, and to revise the latter.

Why? First, just having consciously pursued a worthwhile aim in the past, by entirely misguided means, is less respectable than having worked efficiently towards a worthwhile aim, while not recognizing it as one's aim. Anyone can announce some worthwhile aim as one's purpose (e.g. inventing a cure for cancer or ending all wars), but merely having a worthy purpose in mind, while not moving an inch towards it, hardly deserves credit. At the same time, if one actually invents a cure for cancer, without realizing that this is what one is doing, then this surely deserves more credit. Secondly, looking to the future, ontologists want to stay in business: that is their other aim in providing the defensive account, besides claiming credit for past activity. If it turned out that they have been consciously pursuing a worthy aim, but by entirely misguided means, then there would be a case for the pursuit of the worthy aim to continue, by different means; but there would not be any obvious case for the continuing

pursuit of this aim by those same ontologists. Perhaps there are other candidates, such as natural scientists or semanticists, who are better equipped to do the work that is really called for. Perhaps the natural scientists or semanticists have even been doing this work for some time already.

For example, Thomasson argues that ordinary-language existence questions, supposedly investigated by ontologists, are “straightforwardly answerable by making use of our conceptual competence and (often) conducting straightforward empirical enquiring”; and the philosophers’ work here “lies on the conceptual side” (Thomasson 2015, 20). Revisionary ontologists, however, may not be best qualified among philosophers to do that conceptual work, at least in so far as it is limited to conceptual analysis; or they might not be especially interested in doing it. So this way of specifying “what revisionary ontologists are doing” (by reference to their conscious aims) does not align well with their purpose in asking the interpretation question: namely, establishing what they can take credit for having done so far and what they can continue to do. By contrast, the alternative approach of changing their conscious aims and preserving their methods would equip revisionary ontologists with a good claim to their business – in virtue of their relevant skill and experience.

One might ask: is there not something dishonest about the approach I have been advocating for revisionary ontologists? Suppose that you ask someone what they are doing and they respond “X”. You then explain to them why it does not make sense to do X at all or why it does not make sense to do X in this manner. They say: “Oh, but I was actually doing Y. I just mislabelled it.” Suppose also that doing Y is consistent with their observable behaviour (Y can be done well by engaging in this sort of behaviour) and Y is a sensible and worthwhile thing to do. We may then be suspicious of the person’s change of mind about what they were doing, thinking that the rationalization of the behaviour is dishonest and that the person was doing X, after all.

One reason for allowing such a change of mind, for the actor giving an account of what they are doing, is that people do sometimes mischaracterize what they are doing. So someone’s recognition that she was actually doing Y and not X may be sincere and correct. More importantly, in the current case, it is not necessary that the ontologists give a literally true account of what they have been doing all along. In posing the interpretation question, their audience is interested in whether the behaviour characteristic of revisionary ontology deserves credit and whether it should continue. Revisionary ontologists are very well justified in claiming credit for and continuing their characteristic behaviour, if there is some project that (1) is worthwhile and (2) can be done via this behaviour, i.e. by the methods characteristic of revisionary ontology, *even if* this is not what they had been doing, via this behaviour. The interpretation question, in this case, should be understood as the question of whether there is some such project and if so, then what project it is. Perhaps for the revisionary ontologists to now really engage in that project would require a change in their intentions and self-conception. Perhaps it is not literally true that the revisionary ontologists have been doing what they now claim to be doing, all along; but it

still makes sense to answer the question “What are you doing?” in this way, and it is not particularly misleading or otherwise dishonest, given the audience’s interest in the question.

The third point of view that I will take up is that of “feminist revisionary ontologists” who are interpreting their own practice in relation to mainstream revisionary ontology. The conscious aims of these feminist philosophers are perhaps more diverse than those of mainstream ontologists. For example, Haslanger (2000) at least sometimes takes her aim to be that of improving concepts for ethical and political purposes, whereas Sveinsdóttir (2013) takes herself to be doing metaphysics proper. (I will suggest that improving concepts for ethical and political purposes is not “metaphysics proper”, given the assumption that metaphysics must be centrally aimed at investigating reality.) I will side with some conscious aims against others, in this diversity: I will argue that “feminist revisionary ontologists” should understand and present themselves as pursuing a project of conceptual engineering that is ultimately about improving the world, not about representing the world as it is (and thus their project is importantly different from the project of mainstream revisionary ontologists). This change in self-understanding and self-presentation again involves overcoming a discrepancy between conscious aims and the methods, by preserving the methods and modifying the aims where needed. The methods, here, involve appeals to ethical considerations that cannot be considered evidence for the facts supposedly investigated. The most reasonable response for the feminist ontologists, I will argue, is to give up the claim to be (exclusively) investigating facts, for example, about the nature of women.

The interpretation question, then, is: What are revisionary ontologists doing? For some interpretive projects, it might be reasonable to understand this as a question about the revisionary ontologists’ conscious aims; that is, as a question about what they are trying to accomplish. For the interpretive projects I am concerned with, however, the conscious aims may need to be discarded. Discarding the conscious aims is justified in different ways for the different interpretive points of view. From the quizzical observer’s point of view, discounting the conscious aims, to some extent, is needed to avoid attributing inexplicable asymmetry between the revisionary ontologists’ and the observer’s own mental capacities. From the mainstream revisionary ontologists’ own point of view, discounting the conscious aims enables them to more effectively defend their practice: to explain why its past achievements deserve credit and why they (rather than somebody else with more relevant skills and training) should be able to continue the practice. From the feminist revisionary ontologists’ point of view, finally, discounting the conscious aim of (exclusively) investigating facts avoids the charge of using non-evidential considerations as evidence for facts.

2.3.3. The main options for answering the interpretation question

Finally, I will seek further understanding of the interpretation question, the question about what revisionary ontologists are doing, by describing the main alternative answers to it.

(1) *The plain English view.* Revisionary ontologists are defending views about what exists in the ordinary, everyday sense of “exist” (and all other relevant terms). This view seems to be favoured by the realist Merricks (2001) and the deflationist Thomasson (2015). Note that the plain English view is distinct from the claim that the object of metaontology involves simply questions of the form “Are there *F*s?” or “Do *F*s exist?” (and perhaps some other specified forms). The object of metaontology, on this account, would still involve *ontological* discussions of existence questions. The answer to the interpretation question, however, would be that those discussions do not involve any special senses or ways of using claims of the form “There are *F*s” or “*F*s exist”.

On Thomasson’s deflationist account, an upshot of this position is that we should address the existence questions posed in ontological discussions exactly as we should address the existence questions posed in other contexts. For example, we should address “Are there tables?” similarly to how the naïve tourist should address “Are there bigfoots?”. The special methods of ontology (i.e. appeals to theoretical virtues and the like) are not required.

(2) *The Ontologese view.* Revisionary ontologists are inquiring into what exists, using some special technical language, perhaps involving a special sense of “exist” or “real” that is foreign to natural language. This view is sometimes attributed to Sider, but it is doubtful whether he intended this as an answer to the interpretation question. He rather seems to remain neutral on the interpretation question, focusing on the recommendation question: “All that’s important is that one *can* introduce a fundamental quantifier, which can then be used to pose substantive ontological questions” (Sider 2011, 171). It is unclear whether any realist actually holds the Ontologese view, as an answer to the interpretation question (Sider, again, seems to support the view as an answer to the *recommendation* question); but it is sometimes targeted by deflationists as the option to which the ontologists must resort, if they deny using ordinary, everyday English. One might ascribe such a view to Dorr (2005) and Fine (2009), but in their cases as well, it might be better to ascribe to them contextualist accounts, such that the ontological way of using “exist” (or “real”) would remain within the natural language.⁶ Chalmers (2009) apparently defends

⁶ I elaborate a bit more on the difference between claiming that revisionary ontologists depart from the natural language and that they depart from the everyday language, in my (Kitsik 2018a). A relevant consideration also mentioned there is that philosophy students are quick to grasp the relevant senses of existence claims in the metaphysics class, without

the Ontologese view as an interpretation of ontological disputes, but he does this as a deflationist, suggesting that the primitive ontological sense of “exist” in play in ontological disputes is a semantically defective, empty pseudo-concept.

(3) *The multiple languages view.* Revisionary ontologists with different views are each answering existence questions in their own language; none of these languages is ordinary English. This view has been put forth by the deflationist Hirsch (2009); but the view could in principle also be defended by a realist who thinks that some of these languages are better than others, for describing the world.

(4) *The contextualist view.* Revisionary ontologists are addressing existence questions in the natural language, e.g. English, but in a special metaphysical *context* (the ontology room). This view has been favoured by revisionary ontologists Horgan and Potrč (2008) and van Inwagen (2014). (These authors count as revisionary ontologists on my definition, since they *appear* to defend views that are opposed to ordinary belief; but it is unclear whether they really aim at repudiating ordinary belief or whether they can succeed in this.)

(5) *The practical metalinguistic view.* Revisionary ontologists are revising ordinary language, where the question about how to revise the language is understood as a matter of practical decision, not as a theoretical question. This is the central suggestion in Carnap (1950b). (One might propose instead that Carnap’s central suggestion is rather a variant of the Ontologese view and that he considers ontologists’ special technical language semantically defective. I do not wish to delve into such exegetical issues here; they make no difference to my arguments.) A similar view has more recently been defended by Thomasson (2017), who has come to see the weaknesses – especially, the lack of charity – of her former “easy-ontological” approach, which I have listed under the “plain English view” above. Belleri (2017) has also suggested a similar view.

(6) *The theoretical metalinguistic view.* Revisionary ontologists’ question is about how to revise ordinary language, understood both as a practical choice and a theoretical problem. This is the proposal that I will defend in this thesis. That is, I will defend this as a proposal for interpreting *mainstream* revisionary ontology. For feminist revisionary ontology, my proposal aligns with the “practical metalinguistic view” above.

needing to be introduced to a new language. In fact, Dorr makes a similar observation: “[T]he ease with which generations of students have been inducted into the practice of foundational ontology is evidence that the basic presuppositions of that practice cannot be wholly alien to our ordinary thought” (Dorr 2005, 253). However, he does not seem to use this observation – as I do – to argue that the language of the “ontology room” must be somehow continuous with the language outside the ontology room.

This list just gives the gist of each interpretive option, but there is much room for fleshing out the details. In particular, this list does not specify what the epistemic significance of the project of revisionary ontology is supposed to be, given each option, or in other words, how pursuing each of these questions is supposed to improve our epistemic standing. The epistemic significance of revisionary ontology is issue that I will devote special attention to, in this thesis. I will do this in chapter 4, which is devoted to investigating the interpretation question from the revisionary ontologists' own point of view, since it is from that point of view that the question about epistemic significance is particularly salient.

2.4. Chapter summary

Hopefully, some progress has now been made toward understanding the metaontological interpretation question. The object of interpretation, as I understand it, is ontological discussion: linguistically mediated attempts to answer questions of the form "Are there *F*s?" or "Do *F*s exist?" (or similar), where the participants have particular assumptions, laid out above, about their subject matter and the proper methods for addressing it. In this thesis, I am focusing on *revisionary* ontology: ontological discussions where the participants at least appear to argue for views that stand in opposition to folk belief.

"Interpreting" revisionary ontology (which is distinct from fixing the object of interpretation) means addressing the question of what revisionary ontologists are doing. Just asking the revisionary ontologists is not enough (the conscious aims may need to be disregarded), given the interpretive situations considered in this thesis. The main options for answering the interpretation question include the "plain English view", the "Ontologese view", the "multiple languages view", the "contextualist view", the "practical metalinguistic view", and the "theoretical metalinguistic view". I defend the theoretical metalinguistic view for mainstream revisionary ontology (from the quizzical observer's and the ontologists' own point of view) and the practical metalinguistic view for feminist metaphysics of gender (from the feminist metaphysicians' own point of view).

3. INTERPRETING REVISIONARY ONTOLOGY FROM THE QUIZZICAL OBSERVER'S POINT OF VIEW

3.1. Chapter introduction

Again, my aim in this thesis is to interpret revisionary ontology. There can be different reasons to pose the interpretation question about any phenomenon and hence different adequacy conditions can apply to the interpretive accounts of the same phenomenon. For example, how a phenomenon should be accounted for depends upon the audience of the account. When we explain physical events in the world to a five-year-old, a good interpretation will be very different from the one we would give to an audience of physicists. Yet, we are trying to be truthful in both cases. In this thesis, I am seeking interpretations of revisionary ontology where both the audience and those seeking the interpretation, in all cases, are philosophers. However, they are different kinds of philosophers with different kinds of explanatory needs. In this chapter, I will look for an interpretation of ontological disputes from the point of view of a “quizzical observer”. A quizzical observer is a philosopher who has a good level of familiarity with the ontological disputes in question, but continues to experience a certain “sense of pointlessness” upon observing or thinking about them.

The quizzical observer, I will argue, needs an interpretation of the disputes that would (1) explain the sense of pointlessness and (2) respect the presumption of peerhood, i.e. the presumption that the disputants’ key cognitive capacities are roughly equal to the quizzical observer’s. I will argue that certain prominent deflationist accounts – Hirsch’s (2009), Thomasson’s (2015) and Chalmers’ (2009) – are tailored to explain the sense of pointlessness, but fail to respect the presumption of peerhood. I will then defend a metalinguistic account that combines Plunkett and Sundell’s (2013) account of metalinguistic negotiation, Sider’s (2011) idea of ontology as the pursuit of a joint-carving conceptual scheme, and Bennett’s (2009) “epistemicist” view that the main problem with the ontological disputes in question is that the competing theories are on a par in terms of the relevant desiderata and therefore cannot be chosen between. This hybrid account, I will argue, satisfies both adequacy conditions and has advantages over the metalinguistic accounts already on the table, in particular, Thomasson’s (2017) recent account and other “practical” metalinguistic accounts.

3.2. Preliminaries

3.2.1. The quizzical observer's situation and the sense of pointlessness

Recall that the main metaontological questions about ontological disputes are the interpretation question (what are ontological disputes about?), the evaluation question (are ontological disputes worthwhile?), and the recommendation question (should ontological disputes proceed in the same way, be transformed somehow, or end entirely?). The motivation for tackling the interpretation question largely derives from an interest in the evaluation question and the recommendation question. In the case under discussion in this chapter, the interest in the evaluation and recommendation question, in turn, largely derives from what might be called “quizzical phenomenology”: feelings of pointlessness, annoyance, and impatience that the disputes give rise to, in some observers. The quizzical observer might articulate the feeling by saying “I don’t understand this” or “This is probably pointless”. Since it is a *phenomenological* reaction, however, its precise content is hard to capture in a sentence.

The viewpoint relevant here is not just that of any person who has this phenomenological reaction to ontological disputes, but that of a fellow philosopher who is sufficiently familiar with the disputes. That the quizzical observer is “sufficiently familiar” with the disputes means that she is epistemically permitted to hypothesize that something other than her own incompetence gives rise to the sense of pointlessness, or in other words, she is not epistemically required to immediately discount the quizzical phenomenology as a sign of her own incompetence. The grounds for claiming sufficient familiarity, in the case of the quizzical observer who reacts to *ontological* disputes could be, firstly, that she has rather detailed knowledge of the typical arguments given in such disputes; and secondly, that she has the general (not specifically metaphysical) background knowledge of philosophy that might be required for understanding those arguments. So the quizzical observer is not a person from the street who finds herself at a metaphysics conference and is confused by the sight of apparently intelligent adults debating whether there are tables and chairs. Such a quizzical observer with sufficient familiarity, of course, is not just a hypothetical possibility; many real-life cases can be found.

One may wonder, still, about the precise extent of familiarity with the disputes that is required from the quizzical observer, for her not to be required to assume that her own incompetence is behind the sense of pointlessness. For example, supposing that the quizzical observer tends to have the quizzical reaction to a variety of different disputes, should she be as familiar with the technical details of each of those disputes as the participants themselves? This would require great knowledge and competence from the quizzical observer indeed: the participants to the individual disputes may themselves be so intimately familiar only with their *own* dispute; but the relevant quizzical observer, on this characterization, would have to be equally familiar with a

range of different disputes (all those that she has quizzical feelings about). For example, she might need to be well versed in the special science knowledge that pertains to some of the disputes and have all the competence with formal methods that is required to grasp the details of others. I dare to guess that this level of familiarity is not typically the case, with the prototypes of the quizzical observer (e.g. Hirsch, Thomasson). However, this does not completely dissolve the significance of the comparatively limited familiarity with the disputes that the relevant quizzical observer does have, familiarity that is still far superior to that of the “person from the street”. That comparatively limited familiarity (limited, compared to the disputants’ own understanding of their discussion) is still sufficient for the quizzical observer not to be required to dismiss her sense of pointlessness offhand as a mere manifestation of her own incompetence with the terminology or the subject matter.

In this chapter, I will focus on ontological *disputes*, rather than ontological discussions more generally. This is because it is disputes that cause the “quizzical” reaction in question, and further, because certain explanations of the reaction are only applicable to disputes. For example, the explanation that the sense of pointlessness arises because the dispute is merely verbal does not apply to discussions that are not disputes. Whereas a discussion, as understood here, can in principle be conducted alone (for example, by writing a thesis that nobody will ever read), ontological disputes are linguistic exchanges between two or more philosophers. For most observers who are competent with the *prima facie* relevant language (most often, ordinary non-technical English), these exchanges appear to be aimed at resolving disagreements about whether *Fs* are (really) there or exist or are real. The typical *Fs* include “ordinary” macrophysical objects, such as tables and chairs; unusual objects, such as concrete possible worlds or arbitrary sums of other objects; and abstract objects, such as numbers, propositions, and universals.

This might seem like a needlessly long-winded characterization of ontological disputes. Why not just say that ontological disputes are about what there is? I have instead described what ontological disputes *appear* to be about, because what the disputes are *really* about, or what the disputants are *really* doing, is at issue here. Are the disputes about whether “*Fs* exist” is true in ordinary English? Or perhaps the disputants are each speaking different languages? Or maybe they are speaking, or at least trying to speak, some special technical version of English? Again, there can be different reasons to get behind the appearances of a dispute. Sometimes, the disputants themselves wish to understand what their dispute is really about or what they are really doing. However, here I will look for an account from the point of view of an outside observer. Further, it is not just any outside observer, but specifically the “quizzical observer”.

The choice of the adjective “quizzical” is inspired by how Yablo defines the noun “quizzicalist”: “Quizzicalists, as I’ll call them, find it hard to take (some? all?) ontological debate seriously and hold out little hope for a successful resolution” (Yablo 2009, 508). Note, however, that the emphasis in my notion of

a quizzical observer is on a characteristic phenomenology rather than a publicly espoused deflationary position. That is why I omit the “-ist” in Yablo’s “quizzicalist”. The “-ist” seems to convey a publicly espoused position – in this case, a deflationist position on ontology – rather than a characteristic phenomenology.

The quizzical observer, then, must be distinguished from the (metaontological) deflationist, as follows. For being a quizzical observer, it is necessary and sufficient that one is a philosopher who is sufficiently familiar with ontological disputes and experiences a sense of pointlessness, upon observing such disputes. For being a deflationist, it is necessary and sufficient that one publicly defends the position that ontological disputes are pointless. There is an overlap between real-life quizzical observers and deflationists. However, many quizzical observers are not deflationists, because they do not go on to defend their gut reaction in public. And it is at least possible to be a deflationist without being a quizzical observer. Non-quizzical deflationists might have no particular phenomenological reaction to ontological disputes, or they might even have a reaction of interest and approval. Perhaps they would have just thought of an argument against ontological disputes and presented the argument in public. I take this to be consistent with how the term “deflationist” is normally used: it refers to the position that one publicly takes and defends; deflationist *feelings* are not required from a deflationist, even if they normally have such feelings.

The point of drawing this distinction is to explain why it is not accurate to say that I am looking for a good “deflationist” account of ontological disputes. Since deflationists need not be motivated by the quizzical phenomenology, they are not necessarily responding to the explanatory needs that I am focusing on. So their accounts need not be assessed according to how well they address these explanatory needs. I am not looking for an account for the deflationist, then; I am looking for an account for the quizzical observer. And a quizzical observer is a philosopher who experiences the described sense of pointlessness and is sufficiently familiar with ontological disputes, not to be required to immediately dismiss the sense of pointlessness as probably caused by her own incompetence. This sense of pointlessness, perhaps together with the recognition that the disputants may be presumed to be roughly the quizzical observer’s intellectual equals, motivates the observer to interpret the dispute.

I do not assume that the sense of pointlessness attaches to any particular feature of the disputes, such as their subject matter or the method by which that subject matter is approached. Yablo, in another article, suggests that sceptical feelings towards ontological disputes tend to arise in connection with the disputes’ subject matter:

But again, there is a certain cast of mind that balks rather at the program’s goals. A line of research aimed at determining whether Chicago, April, Spanish, etc. really exist strikes this cast of mind as naive to the point of comicality. It’s as though one were to call for research into whether April is really the cruellest month, or Chicago the city with the big shoulders, or Spanish the loving tongue. (Yablo 1998, 231)

By contrast to this suggestion, I take the relevant quizzical feelings to have no such definite object, beyond being about the observed disputes in some way. The sense of pointlessness may arise in response to the subject matter of the dispute or the disputants' way of approaching it or something else entirely – this is yet to be found out. I assume that it is not transparent to the quizzical observer herself what precisely gives rise to the sense of pointlessness.

I suspect that these quizzical feelings are the motivating force for most deflationist accounts of ontological disputes. So I think that philosophers like Thomasson (2015) and Hirsch (2009) first feel that there is something wrong about (certain) ontological disputes and then propose accounts to make sense of that feeling. The alternative would be that the deflationists begin with a neutral interest in ontological disputes, then find them to be deeply problematic on closer investigation, and *then* develop sceptical feelings towards the disputes. I have no hard evidence to support my view over that alternative, but I hope that I am not alone in finding the first option (quizzical feelings motivating deflationist accounts, rather than the other way around) to be the more plausible course of events. Now, supposing that in fact the deflationist accounts are motivated by quizzical feelings, rather than the other way around, these accounts are responses to an explanatory need. The need is to make sense of the quizzical feelings. The quizzical observer putting forth a deflationist account should therefore ask: which of the alternative deflationist accounts, if any, is the best response to this explanatory need? Are any of these responses acceptable at all? Perhaps some non-deflationist account could meet the adequacy conditions that apply to the explanatory account?

Given the salient features of the quizzical observer's situation and her motivation, the interpretation (the explanatory account that she seeks) has the following two adequacy conditions. First, the account should explain the sense of pointlessness that the disputes give rise to, in the quizzical observer. Second, the account should respect the "presumption of peerhood": the presumption that the disputants' rational, linguistic, and reflective capacities are roughly equal to the quizzical observer's. I am assuming that the quizzical phenomenology, the sense of pointlessness, motivates the quizzical observer to seek an interpretation of ontological disputes. The quizzical observer wants to understand what it is about the disputes that gives rise to the sense of pointlessness. One adequacy condition for a satisfactory interpretation of the disputes, in this case, is surely that it should explain the observer's quizzical phenomenology. Explaining the quizzical phenomenology is what the interpretation is sought *for*. However, there is also an important *constraint* on the interpretation: it should respect the presumption that the disputants are the quizzical observer's epistemic peers. I will now go on to explain and defend this second adequacy condition for the interpretation.

3.2.2. The presumption of peerhood

Persons are epistemic peers, in the sense relevant here, when they have roughly equal key capacities, such as rationality, linguistic ability, and reflective ability. *Rationality* refers to the ability to act effectively in pursuit of one's ends. *Linguistic ability* refers to being able to acquire and correctly apply concepts, rules of composition, pragmatic rules of conversation, and similar resources that facilitate meaningful thought and communication. *Reflective capacity* refers to the ability to correctly assess and describe what one is doing. The quizzical observer need not suppose that the disputants are ideal in these respects. She just needs to suppose that the disputants are not inexplicably dissimilar from the quizzical observer. That means not just that the quizzical observer should avoid ascribing inexplicable grave deficits to the disputants, but also that she should avoid ascribing inexplicable major *surpluses* of abilities. *Respecting* the presumption of peerhood means that whenever the interpreter posits a major discrepancy between the capacities of herself, on the one hand, and the subjects of interpretation, on the other, the interpreter takes seriously the burden of providing a plausible explanation of that discrepancy. If such an explanation is not found, the interpreter should look for an alternative account that does not posit such a discrepancy.

To prevent confusion: the quizzical observer's situation is slightly different from standard cases of peer disagreement. The quizzical observer does not necessarily find herself *disagreeing* with her presumed peers. She feels a sense of pointlessness regarding disputes between her presumed peers. The disputants themselves, of course, do not feel that their dispute is pointless. This difference in feelings does not imply, however, that the quizzical observer disagrees with the disputants on the truth of the proposition that 'Ontological disputes are pointless'. The quizzical observer's essential feature is her quizzical *phenomenology*, not any view or belief that she holds about the disputes. One can have the quizzical phenomenology without forming any belief or view about the matter. A further difference from standard cases of peer disagreement is that I am not presuming that the quizzical observer and the disputants possess the relevant capacities to *exactly* the same degree. Attributions of *grave* deficits and *great* surpluses require an explanation, on my account.

Also, I do not suppose that all interpreters should always respect the presumption of peerhood. Sometimes, there is independent evidence that a particular subject of interpretation is not one's peer in the relevant sense; and there can even be evidence that most subjects of interpretation are unlikely to be one's peers – for example, as when one is an extraordinary genius, such that even most renowned specialists in her own research field are far beneath her. However, the presumption of peerhood is a justified one for the quizzical observer as she interprets the ontological disputants. One reason is that it is a part of the original puzzle: a part of what makes the observer's sense of pointlessness something to be explained is that the observer has reason to believe that the disputants are roughly on a par with her, in terms of their central

cognitive capacities. The situation would be quite different if the quizzical had overheard a dispute between small children still learning their native language or other persons with known linguistic or rational deficits and had experienced a similar sense of pointlessness. That would not have been a particularly *puzzling* sense of pointlessness. The puzzle, of course, is not solved when a part of the puzzle is simply ignored in the explanation. Furthermore, it is plausible that the quizzical observer should respect the presumption of peerhood, even if it were not a part of the puzzle. It would be a farfetched supposition that other philosophers with whom one can have fruitful discussions about non-metaphysical matters possess some grave deficit or a great surplus of rational, linguistic, and reflective capacities – a deficit or surplus that is not revealed in any other context besides metaphysics.

3.2.3. Why not charity?

The idea that deflationists sometimes attribute irrational behaviour or other strange shortcomings to ontologists is not novel.⁷ However, such criticisms of deflationist accounts typically point to the requirement of *charity*, not the presumption of epistemic peerhood. The usual way of stating the principle of charity is something like: “Maximize the truth and/or rationality of what others say or do.” I appeal to peerhood rather than charity because I find the appeal to charity too generic and undermotivated. Why should one interpret charitably, in the first place, and how does one know whether one is being charitable enough? Instead of addressing these questions as they stand, I prefer to appeal to the presumption of peerhood, which I think is better motivated and sets a more determinate standard for interpretation than the general principle of charity. However, the requirement to respect the presumption of peerhood may also be seen as a way of spelling out the version of the principle of charity that is relevant for interpreting revisionary ontology.

Appeals to charity often do not involve any justification of the principle of charity, as if it was too obvious to need a justification or as if the justification was common knowledge. Yet, it is important to consider the justification for charity, in order to determine the proper way and extent of applying it. In defence of the principle, one might say, in Davidsonian fashion, that it is a condition for understanding others at all that we interpret them charitably. For example, in order to learn our native language (and this is a condition for any linguistic interpretation to take place), we must believe that others are telling the truth when they point to objects and say their names. Processing metaphors is another example: when someone points to a laptop and says that “This is an old dinosaur”, we arrive at the non-literal interpretation by first ruling out the literal interpretation; and we rule the latter out because we assume (charitably) that the person would not say something so obviously false. If we did not have the

⁷ For example, see Horden (2014) and Thomasson (2017).

inclination to seek a charitable interpretation, we would fail to deal with metaphorical communication, then. Further, such charitable inclination might be required to deal with context-sensitive, not just metaphorical expressions. Suppose we need to figure out what someone means with “John is tall”: what is the relevant comparison class, is it basketball players or European men his age or some other group? Again, plausibly, at least one criterion that we employ, in figuring out the intended meaning, is which comparison class would make the statement come out true. More generally, when there are several candidate meanings allowed by linguistic conventions, charity is a guide for choosing between them.

However, we are here seeking a justification for the requirement to apply charity *consciously* when we interpret others. The question is why deflationists should try to be more charitable towards ontologists, against the deflationists’ initial inclinations. It might be tempting to appeal to the inevitability of charity, in order to justify the normative principle of charity; but the inference is actually hard to make. To the extent that charity is a condition for acquiring language and using it successfully, the principle seems to operate well enough without conscious effort on our part. When someone says “This is an old dinosaur”, pointing to the laptop, we do not have to remind ourselves or be reminded by others that in order to understand what they mean, we should presume that what they say is true, and that it is not true that the laptop is literally an old dinosaur, so this is probably not what they mean. On the other hand, we want to say that sometimes, when we are inclined to judge that what someone says or does is false or irrational, we should *consciously* apply charity, looking for an interpretation that makes their utterance or action come out true or rational. The justification for such a demand to apply charity consciously cannot simply be that we employ charity unconsciously all the time in linguistic communication. That would be a *non sequitur*.

Another possible justification for consciously applying charity is that it is at least sometimes not very important to find out what was actually meant by the speaker(s). It is more important to find out the truth of the matter. To this end, we should examine the most sensible version of what the speaker *might* have meant. One might propose, then, that it is not very important what the ontological disputants really *mean*, or what their dispute is *actually* about. Instead, we should look for the most worthwhile dispute in the vicinity. However, this appeal to charity overlooks the quizzical observer’s motivation in seeking an interpretation, and so it is not applicable in the case at hand. The quizzical observer’s aim is to explain how her sense of pointlessness arises from what the ontologists are *actually* doing. Given this aim, it would not be of much help to look for the most worthwhile thing there is for the disputants to do in the vicinity of what they are actually doing.

Given these problems with the generic appeal to charity, I appeal instead to the presumption of peerhood as the relevant constraint on the quizzical observer’s interpretation of the ontological disputes. Again, this might also be understood as a way of spelling out the relevant principle of charity. When we

are inclined to judge that what someone is doing is excessively irrational or exhibits other grave deficits, we should remind ourselves of our reasons to believe that the persons we are interpreting are not that inferior to us in their rational, linguistic, and reflective abilities, and look for an alternative interpretation. However, the presumption of peerhood differs from the principle of charity, as commonly understood, in that it also warns against excessive charity in the form of ascribing an unexplained surplus of the relevant capacities to the interpreted person(s).

3.3. Some accounts that disrespect the presumption of peerhood

We now have an idea of what motivates the quizzical to interpret ontological disputes and what the central adequacy conditions for such an interpretation are. Again, the interpretation should (1) explain the quizzical's sense of pointlessness and (2) respect the presumption of peerhood. Next, I will argue that some candidate accounts that are tailored to explain the sense of pointlessness fail to respect the presumption of peerhood.

3.3.1. Verbalism

A hypothesis that the quizzical observer might propose, in order to explain the sense of pointlessness, is that the parties are “just speaking past one another”. The quizzical observer's reaction to the disputes about revisionary ontologists' theses would then be like the reaction of someone familiar with both British English and American English to a dispute between an Englishman and an American about whether chips are crisps or French fries. This is a variant of the interpretive option that I have referred to above (in chapter 2) as the “multiple languages view”; but the more specific account considered here asserts not only that the proponents of different ontological views speak different languages, but that what each ontological disputant says in its respective language (about ontology) is true. Further, there is no real (relevant) disagreement between the disputants.

Hirsch (2009) has developed such a deflationist account of ontological disputes. Hirsch defines a merely verbal dispute as one in which “each side ... ought to find it plausible to interpret the other side as speaking the truth in the other side's language” (Hirsch 2009, 238). He submits that in certain ontological disputes (such as that between endurantists and perdurantists, i.e. those who deny the existence of temporal parts and those who affirm it), each indeed ought to find it plausible to interpret the other side charitably as speaking the truth in the latter's own language, and hence concludes that such disputes are merely verbal.

More precisely, the parties ought to interpret each other in this conciliatory manner, because otherwise they would have to attribute egregious *a priori* falsehoods or perceptual errors to their interlocutors. Hirsch interprets the principle of charity as the “presumption that typical speakers make perceptual assertions that are reasonably accurate, and that they do not assert relatively simple sentences that are *a priori* false” (Hirsch 2009, 240). Perdurantists, when shown a wooden stick, would assent to the sentence “In front of us there are a succession of highly visible wooden objects that persist for a moment and then go out of existence” (ibid.). If endurantists would take the perdurantists to be speaking the same language as endurantists themselves speak, then the perdurantists would seem to be making a strange perceptual mistake, which is in turn “linked to their general *a priori* mistake of asserting the false E-English [endurantist English] sentence, ‘Any persisting object *a priori* necessarily consists of a succession of temporal parts’” (ibid.). Charity, according to Hirsch, requires the endurantists to suppose instead that the perdurantists are speaking a different language, in which it is true that a persisting object consists of a succession of temporal parts. (Assuming, that is, that an interpretation of that alternative, perdurantist language – something like a set of translation rules into the endurantist language – is available for the endurantists. Hirsch argues that such an interpretation is indeed available.)

Now, how exactly does such a verbalist account explain the quizzical observer’s sense of pointlessness: what is pointless about merely verbal disputes? “Merely verbal”, of course, sounds bad; but what precisely is bad about it? I propose that the answer is to be found in the notion of a *dispute*. A dispute is a linguistic exchange that appears to express a disagreement (a rational conflict between the parties’ attitudes); but it is not *just* that. It is also a certain sort of goal-driven activity. It is aimed at resolving a disagreement, by convergence on the truth or the right course of action. Note that while my definition of a disagreement as a rational conflict between the parties’ attitudes borrows from Plunkett’s (2015, 835), my definition of a dispute adds something to his. Plunkett defines a dispute as “a linguistic exchange that appears to express a disagreement” (Plunkett 2015, 835). On my view, the exchange “There are chairs; No, there aren’t” in itself, even if accompanied with non-verbal signs of disagreement, such as shaking heads and stomping feet, is not necessarily a dispute. I take a dispute to be a goal-driven activity, where the goal is one of resolving the relevant conflict in mental states by converging on the truth or the right course of action. People merely appearing to *express* conflicting mental states, with no goal beyond that, is not a dispute. If it were, then the pointlessness of merely verbal disputes could perhaps consist in the parties making a mistake about whether they disagree about the relevant matters; but I do not think that this captures the pointlessness in question. Instead, I suppose that the source of the pointlessness of merely verbal disputes is that in merely verbal disputes, the parties already agree about the relevant matters and thus the goal of the dispute, namely agreement, is already

achieved.⁸ This is what is ultimately “pointless”, or more generally, “bad” about such disputes. Merely verbal disputes are instances of an activity that has a characteristic end, i.e. resolution of a disagreement, or in other words, the reaching of agreement; and that characteristic end is already achieved, regardless of the activity (the parties already agree about the relevant matters). The people engaging in a merely verbal dispute are thus *prima facie* irrational in the same way that people who keep washing their already clean hands are *prima facie* irrational.

The verbalist interpretation, then, explains the quizzical observer’s sense of pointlessness with the fact that she is observing *prima facie* irrational behaviour: the disputants are engaging in a certain goal-driven activity, while the goal (agreement) has already been achieved, and the participants should be aware that it has already been achieved. Hirsch’s implicit argument from mere verbalness to the irrationality of a dispute might be the following.

- P1. If the characteristic aim of an activity is achieved regardless of the activity, then the activity is irrational.
- P2. A dispute is an activity that has the characteristic aim of reaching agreement.
- P3. If a dispute is merely verbal, then the aim of the dispute (agreement) is achieved regardless of the dispute. [This is so because in merely verbal disputes, the parties already agree about the relevant matters.]
- C. If a dispute is merely verbal, then the dispute is irrational.

The irrationality of a dispute where the participants already agree on the relevant matters, then, would explain the sense of pointlessness that observing a merely verbal dispute gives rise to. Now, the problem is that this account does not accord well with the presumption of peerhood. We can run an argument from the presumption of peerhood (taking the interpreter’s point of view) to a denial of Hirsch’s interpretation, as follows.

⁸ The idea that “merely verbal disputes” do not reflect disagreement is a common one, affirmed, for example, by Jenkins (2014). According to Jenkins, a merely verbal dispute occurs “when the two parties do not disagree about the subject matter(s) of their (putative) dispute, but merely present the appearance of doing so owing to their divergent uses of language” (Jenkins 2014, 11) Hirsch himself does not emphasize the parties’ agreement on the relevant matters: he says, again, that the parties ought to judge that each is speaking the truth in their language. However, if each speaks the truth about the same matters, in the course of the dispute, then presumably they are in agreement. If there would be disagreement, then the propositions affirmed by each could not be true (recall the definition of “disagreement” as rational conflict between the parties’ attitudes, given above). So if the parties should judge that the propositions affirmed by each are true, then they should also judge that they do not disagree about the relevant matters.

- P1. If the aim of an activity is achieved regardless of the activity, then those engaging in such an activity are presumably importantly inferior to me (the interpreter) in their rational capacities.
- P2. If a dispute is merely verbal, then the aim of the dispute (agreement) is achieved regardless of the dispute.
- C1. The participants to a merely verbal dispute are presumably importantly inferior to me in their rational capacities.
- P3. The ontological disputants are presumably not inferior to me in their rational capacities.
- C2. The ontological disputants are presumably not participants to a merely verbal dispute.

The ontological disputants, on Hirsch's account, seem to be afflicted with a rather grave and basic kind of irrationality. Surely the quizzical observer herself would not be prone to engage in goal-driven activities when the characteristic goal of the activity is already achieved (and the quizzical observer should be aware of this). Further, this deficit of rationality on the disputants' part seems to be grounded in a deficit in a *linguistic* capacity, namely the failure to apply the unconsciously operative variety of the principle of charity. Hirsch writes that the principle of charity is "constitutive of the phenomena of language and meaning" (Hirsch 2009, 240), which seems to suggest that properly applying the principle of charity lies at the foundation of linguistic competence. The parties, as competent language users, ought to interpret each other as speaking the truth in their respective languages. Yet, somehow they fail at this, according to Hirsch. Presumably, this must be because they do not correctly apply the principle of charity. Properly applying the unconsciously operative principle of charity, then, is a fundamental linguistic capacity that the disputants appear to lack (at least locally), and one that the quizzical observer herself presumably possesses.

This is not to say that whenever we diagnose a dispute as merely verbal, we attribute grave irrationality to the participants. Normally, merely verbal disputes arise because of understandable ignorance of the linguistic divergence between the parties. Such understandable ignorance underlying the merely verbal dispute would defeat the initial impression that the parties are behaving irrationally. Everyday verbal disputes often begin and continue in the absence of a disagreement because the parties are unaware of their relevant different usages of language. Misled by the apparent contradiction between their assertions, they mistakenly believe that they disagree. For example, an American may not know that "chips" means French fries in British English, and an Englishman may not know that "chips" means crisps in American English. So they may begin, and for some time continue, a dispute without a disagreement on whether a man they both see at a distance is eating chips or not. The fact that one of them asserts the sentence "The man is eating chips" and the other denies it gives them the impression of a disagreement in need of resolving. However, this explanation of how a merely verbal dispute may arise between rational people does

not apply to the disputing ontologists. The disputing ontologists are well aware of each other's systematic differences in classifying certain sorts of (putative) things as "existing" or not. For example, in a dispute between a universalist and a nihilist, the nihilist knows that when there are two indivisible objects in an area, the universalist would say that there is also a third one made of those two; and the universalist knows that the nihilist would deny that there are any objects in the area besides the two indivisible ones. So there appears to be no such understandable ignorance of linguistic divergence in the case of the ontological disputes.

My criticism of Hirsch, which may be construed as founded on the principle of charity, differs from Horden's (2014) criticism, which also makes use of an interpretation of the principle of charity. Horden insists that charity requires not only that we try to make our interlocutors' statements come out true (as Hirsch seems to assume), but that

we should interpret each subject so that we ascribe to her intrinsic desires either that we hold ourselves or that explicably differ from our own intrinsic desires. And, *ceteris paribus*, we should ascribe to her whichever instrumental desires seem most reasonable in the light of the intrinsic desires and beliefs we ascribe to her (Horden 2014, 231).

The strange desire that Hirsch asks the ontologists to ascribe to each other, according to Horden, is the desire to state trivial truths. Indeed, on Hirsch's account, ontologists' assertions of their philosophical positions would be trivial truths, by their opponents' lights; and such assertions of trivial truths are indeed hard to make sense of. However, I do not find this requirement of charity, namely the requirement to attribute desires similar to one's own desires – which, as Horden notes, can be found in Davidson and Lewis, among others – as obvious as those requirements that I have captured in my definition of the presumption of peerhood. (Again, the presumption of peerhood is the presumption that the interpreted persons are roughly our equals in terms of their rational, linguistic, and reflective capacities.) I do not find that we normally would or should expect those that we interpret to have similar desires to us. In fact, such a presumption may often lead us astray. When we presume that others have the same beliefs as us, it is because we presume our beliefs to be true and we expect others to be as interested in, and as good as us at, tracking the truth. However, with desires, there is no equivalent explanation: we do not (or, in any case, we should not) take most of our desires to be the *right* desires and we do not (or in any case, we should not) take others to be interested in tracking the right desires. This is mostly because the notion of a "right desire" is a controversial one, or in any case much more controversial than the notion of a right (true) belief. Further, fleshing out a charity-based criticism of Hirsch does not require us to posit the presumption of similar desires as a necessary aspect of charity.

Thomasson generalizes Horden's criticism of Hirsch as follows: "[T]hose who diagnose ontological debates as mere 'verbal disputes' give a charitable interpretation of what the disputants are *saying* (in a way that leaves each uttering a truth) at the expense of having difficulties in giving a charitable interpretation of what they are *doing*" (Thomasson 2017, 6). This formulation does not involve the presumption of similar desires between the interpreter and the interpretee as a requirement of charity. However, compared to my criticism of Hirsch above, it has the disadvantage of not spelling out why exactly the verbalist account fails to give a charitable interpretation of what the disputants are doing. I spelled this out as the violation of the presumption of peerhood, a violation that involves ascribing to the disputants inferior rational capacities that are exhibited in an inexplicable engagement in an activity with a characteristic aim (a dispute, which has the characteristic aim of reaching agreement), while the aim of the activity is already achieved and the parties ought to know this.

So the verbalist account provides an explanation of the quizzical observer's sense of pointlessness: the quizzical observer is observing an activity that has a characteristic aim (agreement), and yet that aim is already achieved. But the account also attributes to the disputants a serious deficit of rationality, which on Hirsch's specific account appears to be in turn grounded in a serious linguistic deficit (failing to properly apply the principle of charity in interpreting one's interlocutor). No explanation is given of how these deficits came to be; and no explanation appears to be within easy reach. Perhaps the verbalist account could be elaborated, so as to explain why the merely verbal dispute has arisen and why it persists, although the disputants are competent, rational humans, similarly to the interpreter. Until such an elaboration is provided, however, I take the account to disrespect the presumption of peerhood.

3.3.2. The easy-ontological interpretation

Let us then turn to another way in which the quizzical observer might try to explain the sense of pointlessness that the ontological disputes give rise to. According to this account, the disputants do disagree about something: namely about whether *F*s (e.g. chairs or temporal parts) exist, in the plain English sense of "*F*s exist". The disputes are still pointless, according to this account, because the disputants address the subject matter of the disagreement in a wholly misguided way.

The most well-known version of this account is Thomasson's (2015) "easy-ontological" deflationism. Given how she has branded this approach and how she tends to describe its gist, it would seem that the problem with ontology is that the ontologists subject easily answerable questions to needlessly long and complex discussions. She writes about the approach:

I call this the 'easy' approach to existence questions, since it entails that those existence questions that are meaningful are not deep and difficult subjects for

metaphysical dispute, but rather questions to be resolved straightforwardly by employing our conceptual competence, often combining this with empirical investigations. (Thomasson 2015, 20)

For example, instead of engaging in these long disputes, the ontologists could simply infer from the uncontroversial truth that there are particles arranged table-wise, the controversial truth that there are tables; such inferences, Thomasson holds, are licensed by linguistic competence. However, she qualifies this general view, allowing that not all philosophical existence questions are easily answerable – for example, whether there is free will requires hard work thinking about what free will is. The important point, for Thomasson, is that the hard work is conceptual rather than somehow mysteriously metaphysical:

[T]he general point remains that a great many of currently disputed existence questions can be straightforwardly answered; and where difficulties arise, these are to be resolved by conceptual methods (difficult though those may be) rather than by any epistemically metaphysical procedure. (Thomasson 2015, 45)

So the relevant existence questions (which Thomasson takes to be the ordinary language existence questions) might be hard to answer, but in any case, they should be answered by empirical methods and/or conceptual analysis, and not by any specifically *metaphysical* methods, involving, say, appeals to parsimony or intuitions about what the world is really like. As with Hirsch, I will once again not go into the details of her justification for this view. As she admits herself, she does not have any “decisive arguments” against theorizing about existence questions in the “neo-Quinean” vein – that is, the kind of theorizing that involves appeals to theoretical virtues (Thomasson 2015, 324). Mainly she defends her deflationist approach by indicating that it is a coherent way to understand and approach existence questions, which is pragmatically justified with its promise of escaping the mysteries of a specifically metaphysical methodology.

How does this account explain the sense of pointlessness? One way in which ontological disputes turn out to be pointless, on Thomasson’s account, is outlined by her as follows:

Suppose existence questions can be answered easily – often by trivial arguments from uncontroversial premises, and always by invoking nothing more than competence with language and reasoning and straightforward empirical knowledge. That would render ontological disputes pointless in a whole new way, while remaining coherent with our everyday uses of existence questions and avoiding the epistemic mysteries of hard metaphysics. (Thomasson 2015, 318–219)

Thomasson here says that if existence questions were answered easily, that would render ontological disputes pointless, in some way. More precisely, the argument seems to be the following.

- P1. If a question is easily answerable, then a dispute devoted to that question is pointless.
- P2. Ontological disputes are devoted to existence questions.
- P3. Existence questions are easily answerable.
- C. Ontological disputes are pointless.

Much of Thomasson's work is devoted to justifying P3: showing that ordinary language existence questions can indeed be answered easily. For example, the question of whether houses exist is answered easily, by looking out of the window on the street and applying one's linguistic competence to interpret the observations; or by relying on one's confidence that there are particles arranged house-wise and drawing the trivial conclusion that there are houses. However, a major threat to the argument is the possible meaning shift in "existence questions" between P2 and P3: are the existence questions that are easily answerable (the ordinary-language existence questions) the same as the existence questions discussed by metaphysicians? If not, then the easiness of ordinary-language existence questions is just beside the point, when we are interested in the worthwhileness of metaphysicians' ontological debates. The following argument purports to show that if ordinary-language existence questions are easily answerable by a certain method, but metaphysicians painstakingly address *their* existence questions by another method, then the ordinary-language existence questions are presumably not the existence questions debated by metaphysicians.

- P1. If a question is easily answerable by method A, then persons who are roughly equally rational to me would not painstakingly address it by method B.
- P2. Ordinary-language existence questions are easily answerable by method A (conceptual analysis and empirical observation).
- P3. The parties to ontological disputes painstakingly address certain existence questions by method B (e.g. appeals to theoretical virtues).
- P4. The parties to ontological disputes are roughly equally rational to me.
- C. The parties to ontological disputes do not address ordinary-language existence questions.

The point can also be put as follows. Suppose that the relevant ordinary language existence questions (e.g. "Are there houses?") are indeed as easy as Thomasson supposes. Now, if I, the interpreter of ontological disputes, would be interested in whether houses exist, in the ordinary English sense, I would not seek out another philosopher and start a long theoretical debate about it. I would just look out of the window on the street and have my answer. So why should I suppose that metaphysicians think that engaging in long disputes with other philosophers is a good way to go about finding out whether houses exist, in that ordinary sense? Are they so much less rational than me? If I think that metaphysicians are roughly as rational as me, not particularly prone to perceptual

errors and roughly as competent English speakers as me, then I can presume that they also would not spend much time arguing about questions they could answer by looking out of the window.

So the easy-ontological account too appears to explain the quizzical observer's sense of pointlessness at the cost of disrespecting the presumption of peerhood. The account makes the disputants look particularly bad at choosing appropriate means to their ends. Here, the problem is not that the end of the dispute is already achieved, but that it is pursued in an inadequate way. (The relevant "end" itself, relative to which irrationality is displayed, is also different from the previous case: on the verbalist account, the end was agreement; here, the end is not agreement, but establishing the truth about the subject matter of the dispute.) Further, as in the previous case, the deficit in rationality is apparently grounded in a linguistic deficit. The reason why ontologists address existence questions (e.g. "Are there chairs?") in such a wrong-headed way must presumably be that they do not understand what those questions mean. Yet, the questions are phrased in the ontologists' native language and often involve only common everyday terms (like "table", "exist" or "there are"). What would explain this local, yet pervasive deficit in their linguistic competence?

The nature and gravity of these deficits in rational and linguistic capacities, again, is such that it is implausible that the quizzical herself is similarly afflicted. Further, no account of understandable error is provided. As with the verbalist account, then, we may conclude that the easy-ontological account disrespects the presumption of peerhood, until some explanation of the relevant errors on the ontologists' part is provided.

3.3.3. The primitivist account: the deflationist version

So the quizzical observer must continue the search for the best explanation of the sense of pointlessness. The verbalist and the easy-ontological accounts explain the sense of pointlessness, but as they currently stand, they seem to fail to meet the other adequacy criterion; namely respecting the presumption of peerhood.

Although the presumption of peerhood should make us wary of the verbalist interpretation, Hirsch's idea of quantifier variance does point to a significant feature of ontological disputes: the parties' systematically different patterns of using "exist", "there is" and similar expressions. As we saw, the parties' awareness of these systematic differences makes the case dissimilar to ordinary confusion-based verbal disputes. How should we interpret the situation, then, if we are duly reluctant to dismiss the disputes as merely verbal? One option is to suppose that, despite their different usages of "exist", the ontologists nevertheless share a primitive (meta-) concept of existence. The somewhat parallel case for basic moral concepts may be useful for understanding how this is possible.

Arguing against moral naturalists' attempts to posit supervenience relations between moral and natural properties, Horgan and Timmons (1992) proposed

the following Moral Twin Earth thought experiment. As in Putnam's original thought experiment, everything on the Moral Twin Earth is pretty much the same as on Earth, except for the following. The Earthlings' moral judgments and statements are regulated by a certain set of natural properties and the Twin Earthlings' twin-moral judgments and statements are regulated by a different set of natural properties. For example, the Earthlings might base their moral judgments on the actors' motivating psychological states and Twin Earthlings might base their twin-moral judgments on the consequences of actions (as defined by further criteria). Regardless of the systematically different judgments about what and who is good and what should be done, twin moral discourse "operates in Twin Earth society and culture in much the manner that moral discourse operates on Earth" (Horgan and Timmons 1992, 245). Horgan and Timmons think that reflection on the thought experiment should make us conclude that the Earth-based explorers of the Moral Twin Earth would be right in judging that the twin-moral terms of Twin English have the same meaning as the English counterpart terms.

The reason for supposing that there is a sameness of meaning is that after the Earthlings become aware of the systematically different usage of moral terms, "[t]here is no hermeneutical pressure to revise the original interpretation of Moral Twin Earthlings as having a moral vocabulary that they use to express moral beliefs" (Horgan and Timmons 1992, 247). Perhaps an even stronger point is warranted: there *is* hermeneutic pressure to interpret the people on Moral Twin Earth as sharing the same general moral concepts (like "good" or "right"). Indeed, Horgan and Timmons draw the stronger conclusion later on:

What seems wrongheaded is to chalk up the contemplated differences to differences in the meanings of "good" and "right". In fact, here the question about what really is the fundamental right-making property seems to be an open question, and one over which Earthlings and Twin Earthlings disagree (ibid., 248).

So here we have a way of accounting for systematically distinct patterns of usage without judging the dispute to be merely verbal: the parties may share a general meta-concept expressed by the term. Chalmers apparently supports this view about ontological disputes. More precisely, he thinks that the disputing metaphysicians share a meta-concept of "exist", which they all use to express, "or at least to attempt to express," the primitive concept of *absolute existential quantification*. Uses of this concept "attempt to quantify over absolutely everything – that is, over everything that exists, in the most fundamental sense of 'exists'" (Chalmers 2009, 91). He even finds it "obvious" that ontological discourse functions as if there was such a concept.

It is unclear whether Horgan and Timmons' motivation for supposing that moral discourse involves primitive moral concepts also applies to the existence concept. If we discovered different practices of quantification on a faraway planet, it is not at all apparent that we should take ourselves to genuinely

disagree with the inhabitants of that planet about what exists, instead of supposing that they speak a different language. However, a different argument can be made for the conclusion that a primitive existence concept is in play, in ontological disputes. The reason, essentially, is that there are certain *prima facie* reasons to consider the dispute a verbal one: the disputants apply key terms to different things; however, they are not inclined to end the dispute when this difference is pointed out or when the use of those terms is disallowed. Chalmers pursues this line of argument when he classifies ontological disputes as among those verbal-looking disputes that are hard to resolve, by means of disallowing the use of the crucial term, “exist”:

Suppose that a mereological nihilist (one who denies that there are any composite objects) and a nonnihilist disagree over “Only particles exist”. We might bar “exist” and introduce terms such as “exists₁” as a quantifier that ranges only over simple objects and “exists₂” so that “There exists₂ an F” comes to “There exist₁ simples arranged F-wise”. The parties might then agree that only particles exist₁ and that not only particles exist₂. Is there a residual disagreement? At least according to the parties, there is a residual disagreement: it is over whether only particles exist and over whether existence₁ coincides with *existence*. Once certain basic quantifiers are barred, this dispute may become impossible to state. But according to the parties, we should not conclude that the dispute is verbal. (Chalmers 2011, 544)

One option, then, would be to say that since ontologists’ dispute cannot be resolved by disambiguation (e.g. introducing the terms “exist₁” and “exist₂” for the relevant concepts), the dispute is not merely verbal. Further, one could say that the primitivist account is a plausible alternative to the verbalist account: the primitivist account also makes sense of the parties’ different application of the existence concept, and unlike the verbalist account, it makes sense of the parties’ failure to end the dispute by disambiguation. On this basis, Chalmers finds it plausible to suppose that the parties to ontological disputes use expressions like “exist” at least *attempting* to express a common concept of existence.

One might wonder why this must be a *primitive* concept and what precisely this primitiveness consists in. That a primitive concept is in play, according to Chalmers, is “reflected in the fact that when we try to resolve the dispute, at each point the concept of existence (or a cognate concept) reoccurs” (Chalmers 2009, 91). In this regard, Chalmers finds these disputes similar to disputes on what one ought to do: like “ought”, the ontologists’ “exists” is “especially resistant to analysis in more basic terms” (ibid.). This is, then, how the primitivity of the ontologists’ existence concept is understood: as resistance to analysis in more basic terms. And, again, the concept appears to be primitive, because the term keeps reoccurring and cannot be dispensed with, in favour of other, more basic terms, such that the dispute could be carried on by discussing whether these more basic terms apply, instead.

Now, one way to further elaborate on the primitivist account is to insist that the primitive concept in question is defective: the sentences that the ontologists appear to disagree over (e.g. “Tables exist”) do not have determinate content. (It is unclear whether the parties *really* disagree, in this case, or in other words, whether there is a rational conflict between their attitudes towards the meaningless sentence.) Chalmers suspects that the primitive existence concept is indeed a defective, empty pseudo-concept: “something that functions in our thought and talk like a concept, in some respects, while falling short in other respects (including respects tied to truth-evaluability, perhaps)” (Chalmers 2009, 92).

This *deflationist* primitivist account, as we might call it, alike with the previously considered accounts (verbalism and easy ontology), explains the quizzical observer’s sense of pointlessness rather well. Again, the disputants display an irrationality that is bound to irritate an astute observer. In this case, the disputes cannot possibly achieve their end of resolving the disagreement by convergence on truth, because there *is* no truth of the matter (nor a right course of action). On the verbalist account, the problem was that the dispute’s goal (agreement) is already achieved; on the easy-ontological account, the problem was that the goal (the truth of the matter) should be pursued by different means; and here, the problem is that the goal (again, the truth of the matter) is only a mirage and cannot be attained at all. That makes the dispute pointless, and the pointlessness of the dispute explains the *sense* of pointlessness experienced by the quizzical observer.

And once again, the account appears to disrespect the presumption of peerhood. Pursuing an end that cannot possibly be attained, because it is only a mirage, is irrational, unless one is understandably ignorant of the end being a mere mirage. No account of understandable ignorance is provided here. And again, as in the previous accounts, the disputants’ deficit of rationality seems to be grounded in a local linguistic deficit. The disputants inexplicably fail to use language in a meaningful, truth-apt way when they do metaphysics. As with the previous accounts, these deficits are not such that the quizzical interpreter would plausibly be equally afflicted. Perhaps, again, one could explain how the disputants can fail to use language in a meaningful and truth-apt way when they do metaphysics, without attributing deficient cognitive capacities to the disputants. However, until then, there is some pressure to consider the alternative accounts available.

3.3.4. The realist primitivist account

Having put aside the previous accounts, as failing to respect the presumption of peerhood (at least as they currently stand), the quizzical observer might think of a somewhat different way to explain the sense of pointlessness. Maybe the observer *herself* is somehow deficient, in comparison with the disputants; and her deficiency keeps her from seeing the point of the disputes. Specifically, the quizzical observer, in comparison with the disputants, might lack competence

with the primitive metaphysical concept of existence – competence that is essential for understanding what is going on in the ontological discussion. This *realist* primitivist account is somewhat similar to the deflationist primitivist account. According to both accounts, ontologists try to pose the question about the existence of *Fs* in a special primitive sense of “exist”. However, according to the realist primitivist account, ontologists *succeed* in this attempt.

For example, Hirsch suggests that Sider might have in mind such a primitivist realist account:

I think that Sider’s idea is that ontological arguments themselves reveal what the arguments are about. Those who have an aptitude for ontology become engaged with these arguments in a meaningful way. They thereby display their understanding of Ontologese and what is meant by ‘logical joints’, though they have no way to explain these matters in other terms. (Hirsch 2011, 195)

As one might expect, the realist primitivist account is unpopular with real-life quizzical observers. It is not obvious how to articulate the quizzical observer’s frustration with the account into an argument against it, however. One might want to say that the realist primitivist’s move is somehow an uncommendable one in philosophy: that “[i]t is bad philosophical strategy to treat certain notions as so fundamental (or “basic”) as to resist analysis, while at the same time affording them such central significance as to require that their meaning be relatively clear to all” (Kraut 2016, 43). However, perhaps it just is the case that such a primitive concept is in play in ontological disputes, and some people (such as the quizzical observer) lack the requisite ability that is needed to acquire the primitive concept via exposure to ontological arguments. It surely cannot be a “bad strategy” to describe truly what is going on in the disputes.

My suggestion is that the problem with this account as well is that it disrespects the presumption of peerhood. In this case, the problem is not that the quizzical observer would assign a *deficit* of the relevant capacities to the disputants, but that she would assign a *surplus* of such capacities. After all, the quizzical observer has gone through the same process through which the disputants supposedly acquired competence with the primitive concept of existence. Just like the disputants, the quizzical observer has read books and articles on metaphysics, attended talks on metaphysics and participated in discussions on metaphysics. However, unlike the disputants, the quizzical observer has somehow failed to become competent with the crucial concept, according to the realist primitivist account. That could only be the case, it seems, if the quizzical observer lacks a certain kind of linguistic capacity in comparison to the disputants. Since she is otherwise roughly an epistemic equal with the disputants, it seems odd that she would lack this specific, local linguistic capacity that is necessary for doing and appreciating metaphysics – the “aptitude for ontology”.

So once again: while the realist primitivist account would explain the quizzical observer’s sense of pointlessness by appealing to the fact that she fails

to grasp the special primitive concept of existence that is essential for grasping the point of the disputes, the account disrespects the presumption of peerhood.

3.4. The metalinguistic account

I have now put aside the verbalist, easy-ontological, deflationist primitivist and realist primitivist accounts, as inconsistent with the presumption of peerhood (at least as they currently stand). An account that fares better in this regard, I will argue, is a certain metalinguistic account; and we can also explain the quizzical observer's sense of pointlessness within this account. The proposed account incorporates elements from three main sources: Plunkett and Sundell's (2013) framework for analysing apparently object-level discussions as covert "metalinguistic negotiations", Sider's (2011) idea of ontology as the search for the most joint-carving language, and Bennett's (2009) epistemicist deflationism. Before turning to the precise account I defend, however, I will look at existing work that takes the metalinguistic approach to interpreting disputes in ontology and philosophy more generally.

3.4.1. Metalinguistic analyses of ontological and other discussions: background

The gist of the suggested account is already present in Carnap. He writes that the existence question asked by metaphysicians is a "pseudoquestion, that is, one disguised in the form of a theoretical question while in fact it is non-theoretical; in the present case it is the practical problem of whether or not to incorporate into the language the new linguistic forms which constitute the framework of numbers" (Carnap 1950b/1956, 209). Carnap may well be understood as saying that metaphysicians are really asking the practical question about whether and how to revise our language, while they are wrong in thinking of the question and presenting it as a theoretical one. Then, Carnap would turn out not to target and deflate ontology itself, but only metaphysicians' understanding of what they do when they do ontology.

Manley, when he briefly considers interpreting Carnap along these lines, notes that the view faces the challenge of providing "a compositional semantics in which certain sentences that have the form of declarative, claim-making sentences are treated as of a different semantic type from ordinary declarative sentences" (Manley 2009, 16). However, there is no need to provide an unusual *semantics* for ontological sentences that appear to be declarative. The linguistic proposals can be conveyed pragmatically. Here is an example of how a disagreement can be about what the parties should do, while their utterances are in declarative form.

John: "We will go to Italy for our honeymoon."

Judy: "No, we will go to France."

Suppose that John and Judy do not take themselves to be psychics and they have not yet established plans about where to go. Then, the natural interpretation is that they are negotiating their travel destination in a resolute tone. People commonly phrase their proposals or requests in declarative form, so that these look like statements about what will happen: “You will not leave this room until I am back”, “Our child will not go to a boarding school”, etc. Now, here is an example (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, 15) of *linguistic* proposals being negotiated in declarative form, via use (not mention) of the contested term (“spicy”):

- (a) That chilli is spicy!
- (b) No, it’s not spicy at all.

Plunkett and Sundell suggest that it is natural to interpret the parties as negotiating what the spiciness-threshold should be, for the term “spicy” to apply in the context. Indeed, it seems like a generally sensible policy to consider such an interpretation when dealing with a dispute that seems to be about whether *F*s are *G*s (or similar), where one party systematically categorizes *F*s as *G*s and the other party does not, and the parties are aware of this difference. We need not suppose that the parties share a primitive meta-concept of *G* and stop the explanation there, if we can find reasons that each party might have to insist on their preferred usage of “*G*” in the shared context.

Plunkett and Sundell coined the term “metalinguistic negotiation” for such disputes (Plunkett and Sundell 2013). Their original focus was on interpreting disputes involving normative or evaluative vocabulary as covert metalinguistic negotiations. Thomasson (2017) and Belleri (2017) have recently applied Plunkett and Sundell’s framework to metaphysical disputes in general and ontological disputes in particular. Plunkett (2015) himself has also applied this analysis to certain disputes in metaphysics (those concerning grounding, supervenience and real definitions), but not specifically to the kinds of ontological disputes that concern us here. There are also similar analyses of ontological disputes suggested by some who do not use the term “metalinguistic negotiation” and do not make use of Plunkett and Sundell’s framework. As I already proposed here, Carnap (1950b) can be interpreted as suggesting a similar interpretation of ontological disputes; such an interpretation of Carnap is also developed by Kraut (2016). Kraut labels this an “expressivist account”, and takes the parties to be expressing “pragmatically motivated commitments to the adoption of certain linguistic forms” (Kraut 2016, 30).

The topic of improving language (in particular, concepts) as a concern of philosophers extends beyond the interpretation of ontology and also beyond detection of the metalinguistic nature of apparently object-level disputes. Carnap directly addressed the topic of improving concepts – “explication”, as he called it – in his *Logical Foundations of Probability* (Carnap 1950a). Eklund observes that Quine and his followers have tended to share Carnap’s concern with conceptual revision: “both Quine and latter-day Quineans are more concerned with what sorts of conceptual tools to employ than with what conceptual tools we happen to find ourselves with” (Eklund 2017, 194). One

motivation for improving rather than simply analysing concepts is that ordinary concepts are importantly indeterminate or “messy” and thus an attempt to analyse such concepts, by providing necessary and sufficient conditions for their application, is bound to come out empty (Eklund 2017, 194). Another is that even if ordinary concepts were clear, determinate and straightforward to analyse, the ordinary concepts might not be the ones that serve our interests the best, among the space of possible concepts: “the concepts that we find ourselves with are only some among the possible concepts we could have and use” (Eklund 2017, 195). One issue in conceptual engineering is thus which concepts we should use at all. Another is which terms we should pair with which concepts. Chalmers lists some reasons for caring about this second issue, the “ethics of terminology”: “for nonideal agents such as ourselves, the accepted meaning for a key term will make a difference to which concepts are highlighted, which questions can easily be raised, and which associations and inferences are naturally made” (Chalmers 2011, 542).

Now, although philosophers often address these metalinguistic issues directly, it is plausible that they also sometimes debate them in the “material mode” or at the “object level”, as opposed to the “formal mode” or “metalinguistic level”.⁹ As was mentioned earlier, Plunkett and Sundell (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, Plunkett 2015) have been developing a theoretical framework for diagnosing various everyday and philosophical disputes as covert metalinguistic negotiations. By a “metalinguistic negotiation”, they mean a “dispute in which speakers each use (rather than mention) a term to advocate for a normative view about how that term should be used” (Plunkett 2015, 832). For example, the disputants might say “This is art” and “This is not art,” referring to an abstract piece with “this” and using the term “art” to advocate for a normative view about how the term “art” should be used. Although the literal content of the parties’ utterances in such disputes concerns object-level matters (e.g. whether this or that object is art), the disputants pragmatically convey conflicting views about which concept should be paired with a given term. These metalinguistic disagreements expressed in the disputes are in turn motivated by deeper disagreements about non-linguistic, usually normative matters, such as what is valuable and how we should live. In the case of “art”, for example, the motivating non-linguistic disagreements could be about which objects we should value in a certain way, place in museums for exhibition and preservation, and so on.

As was also mentioned, Thomasson (2017) applies this analysis to metaphysical disputes, such as disputes about free will between compatibilists and incompatibilists, and disputes about personal identity. Regarding the ontological disputes that most commonly give rise to the quizzical phenomenology (e.g. exchanges that appear to be about whether “ordinary objects” exist), however, it is not clear whether Thomasson takes them to be covert metalinguistic nego-

⁹The distinction between the material and the formal mode of speech originates from Carnap’s *Logical Syntax of Language* (1934).

tiations or not. If she does, she apparently does not take them to be very sensible ones at that. In the next section, I will argue against her criticism of such disputes, considered as metalinguistic negotiations. Then, I will propose an alternative, Siderian metalinguistic account. Combined with Bennett's epistemicism, the account can also explain the quizzical observer's sense of pointlessness.

3.4.2. The problems with the practical metalinguistic accounts

In this section, I will criticize existing attempts to analyse disputes in revisionary ontology in a metalinguistic vein, focusing on Thomasson (2017). Her account, as well as Belleri's (2017) are species of what I have called the "practical metalinguistic view" in listing the main interpretive options regarding revisionary ontology. On this view, the ontological discussants (or more specifically, disputants) are seen as discussing whether and how we should revise our language, and this is seen as a *practical* problem, as opposed to a theoretical one. According to the practical metalinguistic view, the ontologists are not trying to find out facts about what the world is like, but deciding on how (in which terms and which concepts) to speak and think, in the light of our interests, values, and preferences.

Thomasson (2017), in proposing a practical metalinguistic account of metaphysical disputes, focuses on those disputes that seem to have social significance (such as the disputes on free will and personal identity); but she also considers the application of Plunkett and Sundell's framework to ontological disputes of the kind that typically give rise to quizzical phenomenology:

the sorts of ontological debates that Carnap had in mind, which fill the pages of the mainstream metaphysics articles, and are the targets of suspicions that they are either verbal or easily resolvable – debates, say, about whether mereological sums, tables, numbers, properties, and the like exist. (Thomasson 2017, 17)

Her overall judgment appears to be that such disputes cannot be legitimized by the metalinguistic analysis. This is because we cannot understand eliminativism about tables, for example, as the view that the term "table" serves a problematic function and should thus not be used. According to Thomasson, the function of "table" is

to enable us to keep track of our environment ... in ways that enable us to more simply arrange dinner parties, furnish our homes, cope with our dining and writing and other practices, perhaps as part of a social/artefactual environment that plays a part in reinforcing a web of behavioural norms. (Thomasson 2017, 18)

Of course, this is a useful function to be served and there also seems to be no problem with how the concept currently associated with "table" serves it. Even

if using the term-concept pair involves us in some hidden contradiction between our commitments, this does not justify giving up the pair if it serves its important purpose well; perhaps some modification is then in order (Thomasson 2017, 18).

Thomasson here appears to pay insufficient attention to the possibility that the same concepts can be employed for different purposes in different contexts, such as the “everyday” context and the “ontological” context. I wish to resist the idea of each concept having a single function. If eliminativists about tables were insisting that the function served by the concept of table in ordinary discourse is a bad one, or that the concept of table does not serve this function well enough, then this would indeed be silly of them. However, we can employ concepts for various purposes; and it is more plausible that the eliminativists are saying that we should change the way we use concepts in the *ontological* context.

The same point applies to Hofweber’s remark on interpreting ontological disputes about numbers:

As a practical question it is undisputed that number talk is useful and great. ... Whatever question other than the standard question philosophers are in fact asking when they continue to ask whether there are numbers is thus not the question whether it is useful to describe the world in the numbers language (Hofweber 2016a, 21–22).

This inference seems too quick. The “usefulness” of a piece of language can be considered relative to different purposes for which we might want to employ it in different contexts (including theoretical purposes), not just relative to its original or most common function. So we cannot rule out the possibility that ontologists are sensibly disputing whether to use the concept ‘table’ or number concepts, merely on the ground that the concepts obviously serve their purposes in ordinary discourse or mathematics well enough. Granted, if we wish to claim that ontologists are sensibly discussing whether and how to use such concepts in the ontological context, for special ontological purposes, we must explain what the ontological context is all about and what those special purposes are. I will take up this task in the next section. Before this, however, I will also look into Belleri’s (2017) application of Plunkett and Sundell’s framework for the analysis of ontological disputes.

Belleri suggests the metalinguistic analysis as a move against Hirsch’s diagnosis that the dispute between the endurantist and the perdurantist is merely verbal. She recommends the metalinguistic analysis as “the best way of explaining the persisting intuition of disagreement in the face of the presence of a verbal dispute” (Belleri 2017, 2215). Belleri’s account, in contrast to mine in this chapter, seems not to be aimed at understanding what particular ontologists are doing, but rather at finding a way for a deflationist to think of the enterprise of philosophical ontology, conceived of in some more abstract way. This allows her to eventually leave aside the interpretively more plausible idea that

ontologists are in the business of identifying a joint-carving language and conclude instead that an ontological dispute “could be taken as a stipulative enterprise in which the parties aim to decide which language – and thus which ontological commitments – to choose given certain practical (or even aesthetic) interests or standards” (Belleri 2017, 2224). Before Belleri arrives at this conclusion, her account has similarities to mine in that she also suggests that the deflationist should adopt Bennett’s (2009) idea that the theoretical virtues of the relevant languages are on a par; and she takes the theoretical virtues to be possibly indicative of joint-carving. In these regards, her account has advantages over Thomasson’s (2017), who suggests that the metalinguistic analysis, applied to the disputes over ordinary objects and the like, would imply that the ontologists are arguing about whether we should preserve or modify the talk of tables, etc., in everyday discourse. Still, I do not see why the deflationist would be compelled to consider the standards in play in ontological disputes to be practical or aesthetic, after accepting that the theories are equivalent in terms of their theoretical virtues.

I find both Thomasson’s and Belleri’s eventual emphasis on practical (or pragmatic or aesthetic) considerations as those that drive the ontologists’ metalinguistic negotiation implausible; at least in so far as we are interpreting the ontologists from the quizzical observers’ point of view. From that point of view, it does not make sense to say that the ontologists ultimately disagree about the practical or aesthetic value of ways of speaking. That would arguably again disrespect the presumption of peerhood, by attributing an inexplicably inferior reflective capacity (that is, an inferior ability to understand what they are doing) to the disputants. Ontologists take themselves to be investigating the way the world is; other things being equal, it would be preferable to find an account that sustains this central feature of their self-conception. Further, the appeal to theoretical virtues would not make much sense, given the practical metalinguistic views: how are theoretical virtues supposed to amount to practical considerations? What ends (if not the end of representing the world as it is) are they supposed to be a means to? Granted, there is some appeal in the suggestion that the relevant theoretical virtues are really *aesthetic* criteria; a view along those lines has been defended by Benovsky (2016). If theoretical virtues were indeed ultimately aesthetic virtues, then it would make sense for ontologists to argue about how to make our language more beautiful, by appealing to theoretical virtues. However, the inferior reflective capacity issue would remain: ontologists, I assume, would adamantly deny that their project is about how to make our language more beautiful. Their project, they would say, is about finding out what reality is like. This issue does not seem to have much to do with the issue of finding a beautiful language. This reflective mistake is not the kind of mistake about our purposes that we, the interpreters, would be inclined to make. We would not find out that while we thought we were talking about what the world is like, we were really looking for a beautiful language in which to describe the world. So there seems to be a problem with respecting the presumption of peerhood here.

Finally, it is unclear how the sense of pointlessness is to be explained on such practical metalinguistic accounts. Does the sense of pointlessness arise just because the disputants *appear* to be having a merely verbal dispute, while they are really engaging in practical metalinguistic negotiation? Then we would expect the sense of pointlessness to disappear, once the quizzical observer adopts the proposed metalinguistic account instead of the verbalist account; but it is unclear whether the sense of pointlessness would indeed disappear. Also, not all quizzical observers who experience the sense of pointlessness share the impression that the disputes are merely verbal (for example, some instead have the impression that the disputants approach the issue by the wrong methods). So this explanation of the sense of pointlessness (arising from the impression that the dispute is merely verbal) does not apply to all the quizzical observers.

3.4.3. The Siderian theoretical metalinguistic account

What could then be the revisionary ontologists' reasons for insisting on a given way of using language in the metaphysical context, i.e. in the ontology room? In the last section, I put aside the option that it could be practical interests or the desire to find the most beautiful language (in combination with the belief that theoretical virtues are features that make a language beautiful). What are the other options? Insistence on one's own way of using language might sometimes just be a product of conservative character, coupled with inexperience with local or individual linguistic differences; but this is also implausible in the ontologists' case. Ontologists hardly ever bring up the generally accepted practices of quantification (either in the metaphysical community or in the broader community) in support of their view or as an objection to someone else's. On the contrary, the reasons that revisionary ontologists give for and against saying that something exists are remarkably independent of what other people and other ontologists say exists. Let us leave aside conservatism as a motivation, then.

I draw instead on Sider (2011) for an idea of why ontologists might want to insist on their way of using language, in the ontology room. Sider himself does not straightforwardly propose it as an interpretation of ontological disputes. He rather presents it as something that ontologists could reasonably switch to doing, instead of what they currently do. Also, his proposal is rather that the ontologists ought to *speak* the language that is appropriate to the ontology room (Ontologese), not that they should speak *about* what that language would be like. Nevertheless, Sider's core ideas about ontology are useful for developing a theoretical (as opposed to practical) metalinguistic account.

According to the Siderian metalinguistic negotiation account that I propose, the aim in the ontology room is to identify the conceptual scheme that reflects the world's objective structure, or "carves at the joints". On this account, the eliminativist ontologists, when they say "Tables don't exist", are insisting that the concept of table, or the concept of existence that allows quantification over

tables (I will remain neutral between these options), is not among the optimal representational resources, given the aim of carving at the joints. More generally, according to this account, revisionary ontologists are debating which conceptual scheme is best suited for the purpose of joint-carving representation. And it is the revisionary ontologists' shared understanding that the choice between the competing conceptual schemes is to be made by weighing the relevant theoretical virtues of the schemes: comparing how well the schemes fare in terms of criteria like simplicity, explanatory power, and elegance.

I do not want to say anything too specific about what "concepts" are, but what I have in mind is close to what Machery calls the psychologists' concept of 'concept': "A concept of x is a body of knowledge about x that is stored in long-term memory and that is used by default in the processes underlying most, if not all, higher cognitive competences when these processes result in judgments about x " (Machery 2009, 12). As Machery also notes, one should not read too much into the word "knowledge" here: unlike philosophers, psychologists apparently do not think that knowledge needs to be true or justified. The important part is that concepts are in individual minds (stored in long-term memory) and we draw on them to make judgments about the things that these concepts are about. Further, I suppose that we can talk about "shared" concepts, the concepts of a language shared by many individuals, by appeal to the overlaps between individuals' concepts, i.e. the bodies of knowledge in individual minds.

There are various options for understanding how concepts are "bodies of knowledge"; in particular, there are various views about what form the body of knowledge takes. Sometimes, the body of knowledge is thought to involve a mental image of a prototypical satisfier of the concept (e.g. a picture of a typical dog, in the case of the concept of a dog), or a set of features associated with the concept (e.g. "has four legs, has a tail, barks..."), or something like a proto-scientific theory of the satisfiers of the concept (e.g. that dogs are a biological species – which would allow us to find out that a given thing that looks like a dog and has superficial features that we have associated with dogs is not really a dog). I am neutral between these options. Further, any of these options, I suppose, can accommodate the talk of concepts as rules for using expressions: our concepts tell us which judgments we are allowed to form, using the relevant expressions. I am neutral on whether the concepts tell us how to use an expression via mental images or feature lists or something else. What is important is that the body of knowledge, whatever form it takes, leads us to make judgments, for example, about whether a concept applies in a given situation. Revisionary ontologists, on my view, are concerned with the consistency, elegance and simplicity of the set of those judgments, conceived of as our theory of the world.

I also assume that not all the desiderata for a set of concepts are inscribed into the "bodies of knowledge", or the mental rules for using the relevant expressions. For example, my concept of a table does not itself include the desideratum that the concept should be applied in a contradiction-free way. This

allows us to talk about improving concepts as a distinct enterprise from inquiring into how the concepts, as they currently are, ought to be applied.

With this metalinguistic account of revisionary ontology in mind, the reasons given by ontologists in the disputes make good sense. Take, for example, the desideratum of avoiding contradictions between our judgments. Concepts that involve us in hidden contradictions (i.e. bodies of knowledge in our long-term memory that license contradictory judgments) are not necessarily a problem if we only employ such concepts for practical purposes. We operate with vague concepts all the time and their vagueness only gets us into trouble in exceptional circumstances, for example, when confronted with sorites paradoxes by revisionary ontologists. The kind of logical troubles highlighted by revisionary ontologists – for instance, that a table minus an atom is still a table, but something made of only three atoms is never a table – apparently hardly ever bring with them any adverse practical consequences. Avoiding such logical troubles, then, should not be a relevant desideratum when we are looking for a concept of table that would best serve the original function of the concept of table in everyday discourse. However, we presumably do not want our ultimate *theory* of the world to involve such contradictions. We want our ultimate theory of the world to embody theoretical virtues like simplicity and elegance to an especially high degree that is not needed for the representational devices that we devise for practical purposes. And the ontology room is all about devising our ultimate theory of the world, starting out with ordinary concepts.

More details about on how we should interpret revisionary ontology as a project of conceptual engineering will be revealed in the next chapter, where I defend this account from the revisionary ontologists' own point of view, as opposed to the quizzical observer's point of view. In the next chapter, the focus will accordingly be on how the account allows the revisionary ontologists to explain the epistemic significance of their project. Here, the focus is instead on finding a rough outline of the account of revisionary ontology (in particular, *disputes* in revisionary ontology) that would explain the quizzical observer's sense of pointlessness without disrespecting the presumption of peerhood. In the next section, I will look into how the proposed account meets these adequacy conditions.

3.4.4. Meeting the adequacy conditions

How does this account fare in terms of the two adequacy conditions: does it respect the presumption of peerhood and does it explain the quizzical observer's sense of pointlessness?

Let us begin with the presumption of peerhood. Unlike the verbalist account, the metalinguistic account does not take the parties to be disputing in the absence of a disagreement, i.e. engaging in a goal-directed activity, while the characteristic goal of the activity (agreement) is already achieved and the parties ought to know this. According to the current account, the parties really disagree.

They disagree about the best conceptual scheme for the purposes of constructing our ultimate theory of the world. Further, unlike the easy-ontological account, the current account does not take the parties to be appealing to intuitions about simplicity and the like, when they should be conducting straightforward empirical investigations or analysing the application conditions of ordinary-language terms. According to the current account, the considerations that ontologists bring to the table are relevant for addressing the issue that they are concerned with. For example, logical coherence is plausibly relevant for attaining the best, most joint-carving theory of the world, even if we can get along well enough with an incoherent conceptual scheme in daily life. This account also does not attribute to the disputants a failure to understand how a question phrased in their native language should be properly addressed – i.e. the linguistic failure that plausibly underlies the poor choice of methods for addressing the question, on the easy-ontological account.

One might suspect, however, that as with the deflationist primitivist account, the current account takes the ontologists to be making purported statements without determinate content or truth-value. More specifically, the quizzical observer who accepts the above account might be suspicious about whether there actually is a fact of the matter about which conceptual scheme is best for our ultimate theory of the world, or for carving nature at the joints. My response is that the mistake of the ontologists who mistakenly believe that there is such a fact of the matter would be quite unlike the mistake of the ontologists who have simply started speaking nonsense, invoking an empty pseudo-concept of absolute quantification, for no reason at all. The quizzical observer who adopts the proposed metalinguistic account may indeed believe that the goal of the ontological dispute cannot be attained, because there is no truth or right course of action upon which to converge. However, here the fact that the parties nevertheless participate in the dispute is not explained with a brute fact of local linguistic incompetence (the ontologists imagining that a concept is a determinate one when it is not). Instead, the ontologists, unlike the quizzical observers, judge that there *is* a fact of the matter about which conceptual scheme is most joint-carving. If this judgment is mistaken, then this is not a mistake that would disqualify ontologists as the quizzical observer's epistemic peers, in the sense relevant here. It is the kind of mistake that someone can make even if they have roughly equal rational, linguistic, and rational capacities to the quizzical observer's.

Finally, the current account, unlike the realist primitivist account, does not take the ontologists to possess a special linguistic aptitude for ontology that the quizzical observer lacks. This may also be a controversial point; some quizzical observers may insist that they cannot understand what terms like “joint-carving”, “objective structure” or “ultimate theory of the world” mean. I do not force the current account on such quizzical observers; but I think that such quizzical observers have little hope of arriving at an interpretation that would satisfy the two adequacy conditions. In any case, introducing the talk of structure and joint-carving makes progress with rendering the ontological enterprise

more intelligible to the observer, beyond the mere positing of a primitive absolute quantifier. And this at least diminishes the worry that the observer needs to attribute superior linguistic capacity to the disputants.

In these ways, then, the current account respects the presumption of peerhood more than the previous accounts. On the other hand, a new problem arises in connection with the presumption of peerhood. The current account seems to attribute a deficient *reflective* capacity to the disputants. They might be doing something relatively sensible, but they are strangely unable to describe it accurately. They say and feel that they are discovering and describing reality when they are actually debating how we should use concepts in a certain context. As Kraut puts the problem: “There is *something it’s like* to do ontology: one has the sense of engaging in *discovery* rather than *invention*” (Kraut 2016, 45). Further, revisionary ontologists sometimes specifically say that their statements are not a matter of convention, as conceptual choices presumably would be. For example, van Inwagen writes: “It is a basic conviction of mine that this theory [the “contact” theory of composition] is wrong and that its being wrong is in no sense a matter of convention” (van Inwagen 1990, 36).

My response is that the disputants’ self-conception is actually not thoroughly misguided. The dispute *is* ultimately about what the world is like, and not just about linguistic conventions, although the issue of what the world is like is discussed by discussing the best concepts for describing the world. So the disputants are not mistaken about the ultimate topic of their disagreements or the aim of their enterprise. They might only be mistaken about what they *communicate* when they speak (linguistic proposals rather than statements about the world). A failure to understand what exactly one communicates in an exchange is nothing unusual.¹⁰ Further, it is unclear whether ontologists even hold strong views, or even any views, about what precisely they communicate in their disputes. Chrisman (2007, 239–240) plausibly suggests that ordinary speakers do not have fine-grained opinions about their claims’ expressive force. Although ontologists are not quite “ordinary speakers” (for example, because they can be assumed to know what “expressive force” means), I still do not know of any evidence that ontologists hold strong views about the expressive force of their claims. I suppose they do tend to believe strongly that they are in the business of investigating the world (and not just occupied with linguistic issues); but the current account is not in conflict with this belief. Ontologists, on this account, investigate the world *via* discussing the best concepts for describing it.

Now, what about the other adequacy condition: explaining the quizzical observer’s sense of pointlessness? I propose that the sense of pointlessness is best explained with the fact that the alternative conceptual schemes, advocated by the disputants, appear to the quizzical observer to be on a par in terms of their theoretical virtues, such as coherence, simplicity and elegance. Bennett (2009) calls the position that the competing theories are equally good at meeting

¹⁰See also Plunkett and Sundell (2013, 23).

all the desiderata, and therefore that we are not in a position to choose between them, “epistemicism”. Bennett’s own characterization of the epistemicist view is the following: “‘There are *F*s’ is either true or false, and disputes about its truth-value are not verbal disputes. But there is little justification for believing either that it is true or that it is false” (Bennett 2009, 42). At least one reason why there might be little reason for accepting or rejecting “There are *F*s”, as uttered in an ontological dispute, is that both the theory accepting *F*s and the theory rejecting *F*s seem to be on a par, considering the relevant desiderata (centrally, theoretical virtues). This is the kind of epistemicism I will have in mind here: the view that we cannot rationally choose between the competing theories because they are on a par in terms of their theoretical virtues.

It may well seem to the quizzical observer that there is little reason for taking either side in the disputes that she observes, precisely because each side puts forth a theory that is on a par, in terms of theoretical virtues, with that of the opponent. Granted, in order to come to this judgment, the quizzical observer would have to observe the disputes in quite close detail. It is far from an obvious matter whether the competing theories are equally simple, coherent, and so on. But this is in accordance with how we have defined the relevant “quizzical observer”: it is someone who has a good level of familiarity with the disputes, more precisely, a level such that she is not epistemically required to immediately dismiss her sense of pointlessness as a sign of her own incompetence. We are not here trying to explain the sense of pointlessness of someone who just takes a quick glance at the ontological disputes.

Bennett herself advocates epistemicism for only a limited range of ontological disputes and warns against the assumption that generalizations can be made about the problems haunting metaphysics or ontology in general, without delving into the specifics of particular discussions. (She elaborates on this methodological concern in (Bennett 2016).) Note that I do not side with Bennett on her epistemicism for *any* disputes; I remain neutral on this. Instead, I suggest that the quizzical observers can explain their sense of pointlessness with their epistemicist judgments. So I combine the Siderian metalinguistic account with the idea that quizzical observers are epistemicists in Bennett’s sense, even if they do not fully realize it themselves; and this epistemicism is the source of their quizzical phenomenology. Whether the quizzical observer is wrong or right about the theoretical virtues of the competing views being on a par, I cannot say. I consider it something that reasonable people can disagree about. So, when the quizzical observer diagnoses this as the source of her sense of pointlessness, she is still able to regard the disputants as reasonable, capable persons and is not committed to denying that the disputants are her epistemic peers, in the relevant sense.

One might ask why the observer’s sense of pointlessness should necessarily be explained by the diagnosis of a (real or apparent) failure in the observed disputes. Perhaps the quizzical observer should be more self-critical than that and rather suspect that some bias of hers is in play or perhaps she just does not find interesting some issues that other philosophers find interesting. This is

indeed a legitimate option. However, it surely seems to the quizzical observer that there is something wrong with the disputes. An explanation of the sense of pointlessness that would invoke a bias or a lack of interest in the topic would need to account for the quizzical observer's mistaken impression that the sense of pointlessness arises because there is something wrong with the disputes. Perhaps this can be done, but this is an option that I will not explore here. Regardless of how the sense of pointlessness is to be explained, as long as it is an explanation that is compatible with the theoretical metalinguistic account and respects the presumption of peerhood, the main thrust of the argument here is not threatened. The main thrust of the argument here is that the quizzical observer should find an account that explains the sense of pointlessness while respecting the presumption of peerhood, and the theoretical metalinguistic account meets those requirements. What exactly the explanation for the sense of pointlessness is, on the proposed account, is not crucial for my purposes.

3.4.5. Implications for evaluating the disputes

What, if anything, does this conclusion about how the quizzical observer should interpret ontological disputes imply about how she should evaluate the disputes? I will argue that the proposed metalinguistic account rules out certain ways in which the disputes could in principle fail, but does not imply that the dispute indeed fails in the way diagnosed by the quizzical observer. Her judgment that the theoretical virtues of the conceptual schemes are on a par, and that therefore the matter cannot be settled, might be mistaken.

There are various ways for a dispute to fail. If Tolstoy is to be believed about families, then disputes might be similar to families, in this regard: the successful ones involve the same prominent features, whereas the unsuccessful ones can lack any single one of those features, or some, or maybe even all; and so the unsuccessful disputes vary more than the successful ones.

Here is a provisional list of the features of worthwhile disputes.

- (1) The dispute reflects a genuine disagreement between the parties.
- (2) The disagreement concerns a proposition that is either true or false (or in other words, an issue that is a matter of fact) or a course of action that should be taken or should not be taken.
- (3) The disputants pursue the issue by appeal to relevant considerations and adequate methods.
- (4) It is important whether the proposition is true or false (or what the fact of the matter is) or whether the course of action should be taken (or alternatively: the effort spent on the dispute is proportional to the importance of the issue).
- (5) The parties can in principle come to know whether the proposition is true or false or whether the course of action should be taken (the relevant evidence and considerations are available to them);

- (6) The parties have sufficient common ground regarding the assessment of evidence and considerations.

This list is not meant to be exhaustive. The basis for its compilation is rather the attempt to find the success conditions that correspond to the failings that ontological disputes are most often charged with. Some of the failings corresponding to these success conditions make us especially suspicious of whether the disputants are as rational and otherwise capable as us. For example, when the dispute fails because there is obviously no fact of the matter and there is also no explanation of why the disputants would think that there is a fact of the matter, that raises the question whether their rational capacities are not significantly inferior to ours. Likewise, this question is raised when the diagnosed failure of the dispute is that the disputants pursue their issue via appeal to strikingly irrelevant considerations and strikingly inadequate methods (as the ontological disputants do, according to the easy-ontological account). And likewise, suspicions about inferior capacities are raised when the participants do not really disagree and there is no explanation of why they would reasonably think that they disagree.

On the other hand, some of the failures do not indicate severely inferior capacities. When the quizzical observer looks for a failure that would explain her sense of pointlessness, she should prefer the options that attribute errors that could be made by a person of roughly equal capacities. I have proposed that the theoretical metalinguistic account allows the observer to explain her sense of pointlessness without diagnosing the kinds of dispute failures that would be indicative of participants having severely inferior capacities. The account still allows the observer to diagnose other kinds of failures; for example, she might judge that the parties do not have sufficient common ground to make progress with their disagreement or that they are unable to come to know the facts of the matter (the matter being the most joint-carving conceptual scheme).

Finally, when the quizzical observer has identified some such potential problem with the dispute that does not indicate the severe inferiority of the participants, she cannot jump to the conclusion that the dispute indeed has the problem in question. The sense of pointlessness, although its source is the diagnosis of a certain failure by the interpreter, may not be veridical. The quizzical observer must now go on to think about whether the theoretical virtues of the conceptual scheme indeed are on a par, whether the disputants are indeed unable to come to know the facts of the matter, and so on (depending on what the failures diagnosed exactly are).

3.5. Chapter summary

In this chapter, I addressed the interpretation question about revisionary ontology from the quizzical observer's point of view, focusing on *disputes* in revisionary ontology, rather than discussions more generally. The quizzical

observer is a fellow philosopher who feels a sense of pointlessness upon observing or thinking about ontological disputes, and is sufficiently familiar with the disputes, not to be epistemically required to immediately dismiss the sense of pointlessness as caused by her own incompetence. The quizzical observer's situation (her motivation in seeking the interpretation and the knowledge available to her) suggests two adequacy conditions for the account sought: the account should explain the quizzical observer's sense of pointlessness and do justice to the presumption that the disputants are roughly the quizzical observer's epistemic peers. In the light of these adequacy conditions, I argued that a certain metalinguistic negotiation account fares better than the verbalist, easy-ontological and (deflationist and realist) primitivist accounts.

I agree with Thomasson's (2017) and Belleri's (2017) suggestion that Plunkett and Sundell's (2013) framework for diagnosing apparently object-level disputes as metalinguistic negotiations is a valuable resource for those struggling to make sense of ontological disputes. However, according to the accounts that Thomasson and Belleri propose, the ontologists' motivating considerations in the metalinguistic discussion are practical, pragmatic, or aesthetic, whereas on my account, the ontologists are seeking the most joint-carving conceptualization of the world. In addition to Plunkett and Sundell's framework, my account incorporates Sider's (2011) view of ontology as the search for the most joint-carving conceptual scheme and Bennett's (2009) view that the main problem with ontological disputes is that the contending theories embed the relevant theoretical virtues (simplicity, elegance, etc.) to the same extent and that we are therefore unable to rationally choose between them.

I have here only argued that this account is a good one for the quizzical observer to adopt. So I cannot make a swift move to prescribing a revision in the disputants' self-understanding. The disputants' hermeneutic situation differs from that of the quizzical observer: their own dispute does not confront them as a puzzle. Might the best interpretation of any philosophical dispute be the one that should be given by a puzzled peer? I do not take a stand (and do not even have any intuitions) on this. Here, I have merely addressed the question of how the puzzled peer should interpret the disputes if she is to respect the presumption of peerhood as well as to account for the sense of pointlessness. In the next chapter, I will take on the interpretation question from the revisionary ontologists' own point of view.

4. INTERPRETING REVISIONARY ONTOLOGY FROM THE REVISIONARY ONTOLOGISTS' POINT OF VIEW

4.1. Chapter introduction

In this chapter, I will again defend the theoretical metalinguistic account of revisionary ontology, or in other words, the view of revisionary ontology as a project of conceptual engineering that is aimed at investigating the world. However, now I will defend this account from the revisionary ontologists' own point of view, with different arguments. I will also add some detail about the account; in particular I will include a proposal about the project's (limited) epistemic significance, given this interpretation. The proposal involves a distinction between two kinds of beliefs (practically and theoretically oriented beliefs, or practical and theoretical beliefs, as I will also call them). My view is that (mainstream) revisionary ontologists should see themselves as targeting the concepts that we use to form theoretical beliefs, but not those that we use to form practical beliefs.

My general aim in this chapter is to look for a plausible story for revisionary ontologists to tell about what they are doing and why it is worth doing. For a reminder: I use the label "revisionary ontology", because it is familiar and relatively short, compared to, for example, "apparently anti-commonsensical ontology"; but I do not assume that revisionary ontologists in fact try to revise anything. Instead, "revisionary ontology" is extensionally defined here; the best characterization of the project is to be sought. In the extension of "revisionary ontology", then, are certain discussions conducted by metaphysicians like Horgan and Potrč (2008), van Inwagen (1990), Merricks (2001), and Unger (1979, 1980); and other relevantly similar discussions. In the relevant discussions, the metaphysicians at least *appear* to be denying the existence of certain ordinary objects, such as chairs, tables, sticks and stones; or they at least appear to be affirming the existence of certain extraordinary objects, such as talking donkeys and the object made of a dog and the tree, when the dog is resting its back on the tree. Further, the discussants have certain shared assumptions about their subject matter and the proper way of addressing it, and they give arguments for their claims. At the centre of these arguments are the puzzles that the ordinary way of thinking about the world gives rise to. I will provide examples of such puzzles later. (I have earlier provided examples of arguments in revisionary ontology, but here I will elaborate on how these arguments can be seen as puzzles.) So this is what revisionary ontologists appear to be doing; but what they are really doing and why it needs to be done is the question asked here.

The answer that I will propose is that revisionary ontologists are pursuing a project of conceptual engineering and this project is meant to improve our theoretical beliefs. Theoretical beliefs are beliefs that, rather than helping us achieve our ultimately non-cognitive goals (like most of our ordinary beliefs),

are formed solely for the sake of the intrinsically worthwhile epistemic achievement. In proposing this account, I both draw on and criticize Sider (2011). Similarly to Sider, I take revisionary ontology to be the project of making our conceptual scheme more theoretically virtuous (e.g. more coherent, elegant, simple) and therefore more likely to reflect the objective structure of reality, or to “carve at the joints”. But I will address certain pressing questions that Sider and others, to my knowledge, have not quite satisfactorily addressed: questions about the epistemic value of revisionary ontology, thus conceived. Once we accept such a general idea of revisionary ontology as conceptual engineering (towards greater joint-carvingness), a necessary further question is: what are we developing this conceptual scheme *for*? How does such an improvement of the conceptual scheme improve our epistemic standing?

Granted: the ordinary conceptual scheme has *prima facie* problems, such as inconsistency or a certain inelegance. The ontologists’ puzzles, such as sorites paradoxes, bring these problems to light; and their proposed alternative schemes might overcome the problems. I also grant that such theoretically superior alternative conceptual schemes might capture the objective structure of the world better than the ordinary, flawed scheme does; and I grant that there is an objective structure of the world. (I grant all this for the sake of the argument.)¹¹ But still, this is not enough to prescribe revising the ordinary scheme: it seems that despite its problems, the ordinary scheme works well for most practical purposes. In fact, the ordinary scheme might work better, for such practical purposes, than a theoretically superior and presumably more joint-carving conceptual scheme. Briefly put, this is why I cannot accept Sider’s suggestion that the joint-carving conceptual scheme should be employed for all belief formation. But then we need a different way to understand the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, if we are to view it as the pursuit of a more joint-carving conceptual scheme. My proposal is that although improved joint-carvingness is not necessarily an improvement for most of our beliefs, it is plausibly an improvement for a small subclass, which I will call “theoretical beliefs”. This modification to Sider’s account limits the potential epistemic significance of revisionary ontology.

However, before I can come to Sider’s views and my account that builds on those, I will need to reject certain alternative accounts that might seem more

¹¹ There is, of course, a rich literature on whether and why we should take theoretical virtues in general or particular theoretical virtues to indicate something about reality. For example, regarding simplicity, it is sometimes supposed that reliance on this “virtue” involves the unwarranted assumption that the world is simple rather than complex. Huemer (2009) challenges this supposition, but is ultimately still sceptical about the legitimacy of appeals to parsimony in philosophical argumentation. There is also discussion on how we should understand the various theoretical virtues, more precisely. For example, in the case of parsimony, we might ask whether it is only qualitative or also quantitative parsimony that matters. Nolan (1997), for instance, argues against Lewis that quantitative parsimony does matter. I just mention these examples here to gesture towards important debates concerning theoretical virtues, debates that I will not be able to engage with in this thesis.

obvious and appealing. After explaining further what kind of account of revisionary ontology I am seeking (what the adequacy conditions are), in the next section (4.2), I will criticize such more obvious accounts, starting from the most obvious one, which I will call the “simple incompatibilist account” (section 4.3). In section 4.4, I will criticize the most popular alternatives to simple incompatibilism: three kinds of compatibilist account. In section 4.5, I will introduce and criticise an incompatibilist account of revisionary ontology that builds on Sider’s views. This is an account of revisionary ontology as a project of conceptual engineering, of seeking the best language for “writing the book of the world”, where the rationale for the conceptual engineering is that all our beliefs should conform to the world as perfectly as possible. I reject this rationale. Finally, in section 4.6, I will defend my modified Siderian account, limiting the target of this conceptual engineering to what I will call “theoretical beliefs”.

4.2. Understanding the question

4.2.1. Two adequacy conditions: explaining the sense of destabilization and the sense of entitlement

Before examining the possible answers, let us get clearer on the question: what is the nature and epistemic significance of revisionary ontology? More specifically, I will be looking for an account that revisionary ontologists should provide for an audience who has a certain typical reaction to the puzzles posed by the ontologists. This reaction is made up of two components, which I will call the “sense of destabilization” and the “sense of (perception-based) entitlement”. The account that we are seeking should make sense of these reactions and explain how revisionary ontology can improve the audience’s epistemic standing.

By the “puzzles posed by the ontologists”, I mean a central element in revisionary ontologists’ argumentation: questions (or arguments) that cause puzzlement, either because the respondent is inclined to give contradictory answers to the questions (or assess the premises and conclusions’ truth value inconsistently) or because she does not know how to answer (or how to assess the premises and conclusions) at all. For example, the ontologist might ask: “Which ship is the Ship of Theseus? Is it the one that departed to the sea and then had all of its parts gradually removed and replaced; or is it the one that was made of those removed parts?”. The respondent might want to say that both ships – the one with all the original parts and the one that sailed through the ship’s usual route – are the same ship as the original one. But the respondent might also want to say that the original ship cannot be numerically identical with two different ships. The respondent would then be committed to an inconsistent set of claims.

Another puzzle that can be seen as purporting to reveal the inconsistency of ordinary beliefs is the puzzle of causal over-determination (Merricks 2001): does the ball cause the same event, the breaking of the glass, that is also caused by the ball-particles? The respondent does not want to say that an event can be causally over-determined like this; but she wants to say, when confronted with the two individual cases, that the ball does cause the breaking of the glass, and that the ball-particles do cause the breaking of the glass. Likewise, the “problem of the many” points to an inconsistent set of commitments: the respondent wants to affirm that there can be exactly one table in a room, but is also inclined to agree that the table minus a particle is a table, and there would be many of those in the room as well (Unger 1980). A somewhat different case is van Inwagen’s puzzle of composition: what does it take for some things to compose a further thing (van Inwagen 1990)? Do we need to bring the things into contact? For how long a period? What about scattered objects, like galaxies? A satisfactory answer proves hard to find. The puzzle of composition might not reveal inconsistent commitments, however, but rather a lack of order, of principle, in a basic feature of our thinking: our notion of a composite object.

The general moral of the puzzles, it seems, is that the way we normally think about the world does not hold up on closer investigation. The audience’s reaction tends to support this contention: the puzzles seem to show that something is wrong with their beliefs. I will call that audience reaction the “sense of destabilization”. For example, van Inwagen has said that puzzles like the Ship of Theseus “perhaps create a vertiginous sense of inhabiting a world to which the laws of logic do not apply” (van Inwagen 1990, 69). I suppose that the “vertiginous sense” has something to do with belief destabilization. Korman writes that “when one is reminded of one’s own commitment to scattered objects (e.g., constellations), and finds oneself unable to identify any principled difference between them and trout-turkeys, one feels the pressure to accept the very thing that one was at first inclined to deny” (Korman 2015, 303). This “pressure”, I suppose, is also an aspect of the sense of destabilization.

This, then, is one set of data that the account of revisionary ontology sought here must accommodate: revisionary ontologists put forth puzzles like those described and these puzzles give rise to a sense of destabilization, the feeling that something is wrong with our ordinary beliefs. For example, presented with the problem of the many, one is likely to feel that there is indeed something wrong with holding that (1) there is exactly one table in the room, and that (2) a table minus an atom is a table, and that (3) there is also a table minus an atom in the room (rather many of those, in fact). In this case, the sense of destabilization is presumably grounded in the respondent’s recognition that to accept all three claims would be to accept claims that are logically inconsistent and that it is not alright to do that. The same holds for the puzzle of over-determination and the sorites arguments: the audience recognizes the impermissibility of inconsistent beliefs and this destabilizes the audience’s confidence both in the directly relevant beliefs (e.g. the belief that there is exactly one table in the room) and

many other beliefs that are indirectly affected (e.g. that there is exactly one chair in the room, or that there are tables and chairs at all).

The sense of destabilization can also be understood in this way for the puzzle of composition. Perhaps the audience is committed to the claim that there must be a unified principle of composition, rather than a hodgepodge of facts about when things do and do not compose a further thing; and this is inconsistent with their particular judgments on when a composite object is or is not formed. Another way to understand the sense of destabilization, for the puzzle of composition, is that in this case, the puzzle reveals some other problematic feature of the audience's set of beliefs, instead of logical inconsistency. Possibly, the puzzle reveals the disorderly, unprincipled, inelegant nature of the belief system – a less gruesome, but still troubling theoretical shortcoming of the belief system. This problem is still somewhat similar to outright logical inconsistency; possibly, it is a less extreme version of the same problem.

So the puzzles lead the audience to experience a sense of destabilization – a sense of dissatisfaction with their beliefs – by revealing logical inconsistency or some other troubling theoretical shortcoming in the belief system. But there is also another, contrasting phenomenological reaction to the puzzles. I will call this other reaction the “sense of perception-based entitlement”. It is the feeling that one remains entitled to the ordinary beliefs about what there is, despite the problems revealed by the puzzles. Further, this entitlement seems to have something to do with what one can see or, more generally, perceive. As I look at the table in front of me – for all I know, the only table in the room – I cannot help but feel that I am permitted to believe that there are tables and there are not millions of them in each situation where there is one. This is because there is exactly one table in this room, as I can see. And the ontologists' arguments do not appear to touch this justification for my belief that there are tables and there are not millions of them in each situation where there is one.

The sense of (broadly) “perception-based” entitlement can arise even if I do not have a table in front of me right now, but I can imagine the kind of situation that I know obtains in most kitchens, and that the ontologists would also agree obtains in most kitchens, in the area where people usually sit down to eat. On the basis of this imagining and my assessment of what is the case in the situation that I imagine, I feel entitled to the belief that there is exactly one table in all these situations, and thus also the belief that there are tables. Again, the ontologists' arguments do not seem to undermine this entitlement. Further, on the basis of my assessment of relevant imagined situations, I feel similarly entitled to the belief that there are not millions of tables in each of these kitchen-situations, and that a dog resting its back against a tree and the tree do not make up a thing. I feel entitled to believe that there are no dog-trees because when I see or imagine a dog resting its back against the tree, I do not see or imagine a dog-tree. I see two things (or a thing and a being) there, not three; and this entitles me to believe that the dog-tree does not come into existence, in this situation. And, again, it seems that the ontologists' arguments do not defeat this entitlement.

The dual reaction to the puzzles, consisting of the sense of destabilization and the sense of entitlement, might be expressed as follows: “Yes, I agree that a table minus an atom is a table and that there are many of those in the room, as well as the one table that I said is in the room. And I do not like saying that the ball and the ball-particles both caused the window to break. And I am confused about which of the two ships is the Ship of Theseus. But I can *see* that there is exactly one table in this room. And I can imagine the relevant situations that, as revisionary ontologists would agree, really obtain and that according to the revisionary ontologists do not include balls and ships; and in such imagined situations, I see balls and ships. On this basis, I am entitled to the belief that there are tables, balls, and ships. The ontologists do not manage to take away this entitlement, it has a source that the arguments do not touch. Although the puzzles make me feel a bit uncomfortable about my ordinary beliefs, they are, in some way, perfectly alright for me to have.”

It is important not to confuse this explanandum, the sense of perception-based entitlement, with some others, for example, the relevant perceptual experiences or the perception-based beliefs themselves. It is one thing to explain why we see the world in a certain way, it is another to explain why we have certain beliefs about the world, and yet another why we feel *entitled* to certain beliefs about the world, based on what we see. The relevant datum, the sense of entitlement, is also not to be confused with the closely related datum that the folk do not retract their assent to the relevant claims, when confronted with the arguments. For example, Daly and Liggins describe the latter datum as follows: “[W]hen the folk understand the objection to taking all infinite numbers to be equal, they will straightforwardly retract their claim, whereas when the folk see the revisionists’ objections, they will become ambivalent and confused but not retract” (Daly and Liggins 2016, 409). Daly and Liggins here describe how the folk tend to behave in response to the arguments and some accompanying phenomenology (like confusion), but not the specific psychological phenomenon that plausibly motivates the non-retracting response, namely the phenomenon of the sense of perception-based entitlement.

I will be looking for an explanatory and defensive account of revisionary ontology that the ontologists should offer to someone who has this dual reaction. In order to be “defensive” in the relevant sense, the account should not just make sense of the sense of destabilization and the sense of perception-based entitlement; it should also explain the value of the project. What kind of value could that be? It is implausible that the project would bring practical benefits, at least when we restrict revisionary ontology to the kind of discussions considered in this chapter. One might instead think of “revisionary ontology” in a broader sense, so that it also includes certain discussions on the existence and nature of gender and race, and then a part of the project of revisionary ontology could indeed be practically significant: it could have important practical implications for how we behave in everyday contexts. However, I do not include the metaphysics of race and gender in the “revisionary ontology” that is my object of interpretation in this chapter. There are important differences

between the metaphysics of gender and race, on the one hand, and the project that I focus on here, on the other hand. In particular, the metaphysics of gender and race involves appeals to ethical considerations and not just appeals to the demands of reason, such as the requirement to avoid inconsistency. Although I think both kinds of revisionary ontology can be seen as projects of conceptual engineering, they are engineering concepts for different purposes. (I will elaborate on the relationship between mainstream and feminist revisionary ontology, conceived as different projects of conceptual engineering, in the next chapter.)

Now, it seems that if the project of mainstream revisionary ontology considered here brings any value, it must be epistemic value. One of the adequacy conditions for the defensive account of revisionary ontology sought here, then, is that the account should say what that epistemic value consists in, or in other words, what the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology is. I will elaborate on this adequacy condition in the next section.

4.2.2. The third adequacy condition: explaining the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology

How then shall we understand “epistemic value” or “epistemic significance”? I propose that we understand it as follows: a project has epistemic significance (or epistemic value) if and only if the project is conducive to the satisfaction of epistemic aims. I further understand “the satisfaction of epistemic aims” as follows: the satisfaction of an epistemic aim means that an epistemic target of evaluation meets one of its success-conditions.¹² Some epistemic targets of evaluation are beliefs (or belief sets), agents, and minds. Some relevant success-conditions are truth, knowledge, understanding, coherence, and rationality. Some target/success-condition pairs, for example, a “knowledgeable belief” and a “true mind”, are inappropriate and cannot be considered “epistemic aims” on my account. Appropriate target/success-condition pairs include, for example, true beliefs, coherent belief sets, and rational agents/minds. Here, I do not assume that in addition to the target of evaluation being an “epistemic” one, the success-condition also needs to be “epistemic”, in order for the target meeting the success-condition to count as the satisfaction of an epistemic aim. Since there is no such restriction on the success-conditions, the belief set’s conduciveness to the belief-bearer’s happiness, for example, can count as the satisfaction of an epistemic aim, as long as conduciveness to the belief-bearer’s happiness is indeed a success-condition for belief. What the success-conditions of beliefs actually are will turn out to be a crucial issue for understanding the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology.

¹² I also interpret epistemic aims in similar terms in my (Kitsik 2018b), but there I only consider an epistemic target of evaluation meeting an *epistemic* success-condition as the satisfaction of an epistemic aim.

In what follows, I will assume that the relevant target of evaluation is belief and I will try to understand how revisionary ontology can help belief meet its success conditions – this is how I investigate the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology. This includes investigation into the success conditions for beliefs. Elsewhere (Kitsik 2018b), I have pointed out that we may need to consider targets of evaluation other than beliefs, in particular, the agent; and a relevant success condition for the agent, I argued, is understanding connections between facts. This led to a line of criticism against Sider’s account that is distinct from the criticism to be pursued here. Here, the only relevant targets of evaluation that I consider are beliefs. Suppose, then, that we take the relevant epistemic target to be a belief or a belief system. What could the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology then consist in?

Revisionary ontology centrally involves arguments. Whatever epistemic significance revisionary ontology has, we can expect it to have that significance in virtue of the arguments proposed by revisionary ontologists, or more precisely, because of the effect of these arguments on the audience. Supposing also that the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology must consist in the improvement of beliefs (in the beliefs meeting their success-conditions), then what we need is an account of how the revisionary ontologists’ arguments improve their audience’s beliefs, or in other words, how the arguments make the audience’s beliefs more successful as beliefs. (Note that the revisionary ontologists who propose the arguments may themselves also count as the “audience” whose beliefs are to be improved. So in the cases where there is no audience other than the revisionary ontologist herself, the ontologist’s arguments can still be epistemically significant, if the arguments improve the ontologist’s own beliefs.)

Now, there are different ways in which arguments can improve beliefs. These correspond to the different ways in which arguments can have effects on beliefs. The main relevant options for the effects of arguments on beliefs appear to be the revising of beliefs and the (mere) adding of beliefs. Revising may occur to different extents. In radical belief revision, the audience previously believes that a proposition is certainly true (the degree of belief is 1), and as a result of the arguer’s efforts, they come to believe that it is certainly false (the degree of belief is 0), or the other way around. Often, however, the audience changes their degree of belief less dramatically. For example, suppose that I feel quite confident that a particular state policy should be implemented, because of its expected beneficial consequences; someone then points out some counterbalancing negative consequences; I am now slightly less certain that the policy should be implemented. In the case of mere adding of beliefs, as opposed to revision of beliefs, by contrast, the audience begins to believe a proposition that they previously had no beliefs about. For example, suppose that I go to a physics conference as a complete novice and the presenter convinces me of the truth of a theory in a subfield I did not even know existed. The theory does not have implications regarding any prior beliefs of mine, as far as I know. So I

only gain in knowledge, as a result of the arguer's efforts, but no former beliefs on the subject matter of the new belief are revised.

These effects, as described, are evaluatively neutral. In order for the argument to be epistemically significant, in the relevant sense, the effects need to involve not just any revision or addition of beliefs, but the revision or addition also needs to be such that afterwards, either the audience's beliefs on a given subject matter meet the success-conditions for beliefs that they previously did not meet (or the beliefs on the subject matter meet the success-conditions to a higher degree, if the success-condition admits of degrees); or beliefs on a new subject matter are added, such that these beliefs meet the success-conditions for beliefs. For example, if the relevant success-condition for beliefs is truth, then in order for the arguments to be epistemically significant, the arguments need to either replace false beliefs on a subject matter with true ones (or at least raise the degree of truth of the beliefs on a subject matter, if we allow talk of degrees of truth) or else the arguments need to add true beliefs on a new subject matter, on which the audience was previously neutral.

I will suppose, then, that the main desiderata for the account of revisionary ontology sought here include making sense of the audience's dual reaction to the arguments (consisting of the sense of destabilization and the sense of perception-based entitlement) and explaining the epistemic significance of the project (i.e. how the ontologists' arguments can improve the audience's beliefs). Now, focusing on the last desideratum – explaining the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology – the obvious candidate account that comes to mind is what I will call the simple incompatibilist account. However, as I will show in the next section, although simple incompatibilism provides a straightforward explanation of the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, it does not fully make sense of the audience's dual reaction to the ontologists' arguments. In particular, it does not properly account for the sense of entitlement that remains, despite the sense of destabilization.

4.3. Rejecting simple incompatibilism

4.3.1. What simple incompatibilism is

According to the simple incompatibilist account, revisionary ontologists are doing just what they appear to be doing: defending existence claims that contradict what most people believe. Further, according to this account, the ontologists reveal these ordinary beliefs to be false. This account certainly makes revisionary ontology look epistemically significant and explains the sense of destabilization. By revealing the theoretical shortcomings (the inconsistency and disorderliness) of our belief system, the puzzles indicate that there is a mistake, perhaps a widespread mistake, in the system. Further, the account involves a specific view about the nature of the mistake, namely, the beliefs affected by the mistake – beliefs like 'There are tables' and 'There is one table

in the room’ – are *false*. The sense of destabilization, caused by the recognition of inconsistency and disorderliness, indicates a possibly widespread mistake, the prevalence of false beliefs in the belief system. As the audience does the rethinking that this sense of destabilization calls for – conceding, for example, that there are no tables or that there are millions in each situation where there is one – they replace their false beliefs with true ones. And since truth is a success-condition for beliefs (true beliefs are better than false beliefs), the replacement is an improvement. What beliefs exactly are the false culprits is a further question. Perhaps there are far fewer things or perhaps there are many more than we thought. In any case, “the puzzles are shown to have rested on a mistake” (Merricks 2001, 55), and the mistake is in some subset of our beliefs, which are false.

Merricks (2001) is perhaps the most well-known proponent of the simple incompatibilist account. Many revisionary ontologists reject simple incompatibilism. I will look at some of their reasons in the next sections. In particular, I will look at the reasons that are popular, but in my view not very good ones. Then, in the section after that, I will turn to what I consider to be a good reason to reject simple compatibilism: its failure to account for the sense of entitlement.

4.3.2. Bad reasons for rejecting simple incompatibilism

Revisionary ontologists’ reasons for rejecting simple incompatibilism are usually based either on the idea that ontologists need to grant the truth of ordinary *beliefs* or else the idea that ontologists need to grant truth of what people ordinarily *say*. For example, van Inwagen focuses on the authority of what people ordinarily say, writing that he is “enough of a Wittgensteinian to think that it is not possible for very much of what we say ‘in the midst of life’ to be false” (van Inwagen 2014, 9). His wife’s assertion of “The chair you said you’d carry upstairs is still in the living room” is true, he says; and not just that. The assertion is

[t]rue *without qualification*. True *when taken straightforwardly and literally*. True *tout court*. True *simpliciter*. True *full stop*. True *period*. Not “true in the loose and popular sense but false in the strict and philosophical sense,” but *just true*. (van Inwagen 2014, 10)

In a similar spirit, but referring to ordinary beliefs, rather than what people ordinarily say, Fine writes:

[I]n 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. It may perhaps be conceded that the arguments of the sceptic appear to be utterly compelling; but the Mooreans among us will hold that the very plausibility of our ordinary beliefs is reason enough for

supposing that there *must* be something wrong in the sceptic's arguments, even if we are unable to say what it is. (Fine 2001, 1)

One reason to think that what people ordinarily say or believe is true is that we need to be charitable. The objection from charity is discussed and criticized by Daly and Liggins (2016). However, they do not discuss it as an objection to the simple incompatibilist account of revisionary ontology, as I do, but as an objection to revisionary ontology itself, conceived of in accordance with the simple incompatibilist account. In particular, they consider the objection that "nihilism and universalism are both unacceptably uncharitable because each of them implies that a great deal of what we ordinarily believe is false" (Daly and Liggins 2016, 405–406). As they further construe the objection, it involves the assumption that the (non-) existence of tables and the like is a trivial a priori matter, such that it would be a sign of some sort of linguistic "idiocy" to be mistaken about this matter – and the folk, on the revisionary ontologists' view, must apparently be wrong about this trivial a priori matter. Daly and Liggins take this objection (which they attribute to Hirsch) to be question-begging: it assumes without argument that the (non-)existence of tables is a trivial matter (whether it is trivially true or trivially false), which is something that revisionary ontologists clearly would not agree with. I agree with Daly and Liggins' assessment of this objection, but I suppose that my argument against the simple incompatibilist version of revisionary ontology, which I will present shortly, is different from this question-begging argument.

One way in which one may argue against the simple incompatibilist account, then, is that the existence or non-existence of tables and the like is such a trivial matter that it is uncharitable to attribute a mistake on this matter; and the revisionary ontologists attribute a mistake on this matter to the folk. And the problem with this argument, again, is that it simply assumes without argument that the existence or non-existence of tables and the like is a trivial matter. A somewhat different and perhaps more common reason for rejecting the simple incompatibilist account of revisionary ontology (or revisionary ontology as a whole, on the assumption that it can only be properly made sense of on the simple incompatibilist account) is the Moorean argument. The Moorean argument appeals to the fact that the revisionary ontologists' audience is typically more confident about the falsity of the ontologists' arguments' conclusions than about the truth of their premises. For example, van Inwagen (1990) is apparently motivated by the Moorean argument to distance himself from simple incompatibilism. He phrases the challenge as follows:

Your position, if it rests on anything at all, rests on certain arguments. But the premises of these arguments, whatever they may be, could not possibly be so worthy of belief as what you are denying, viz. that there are such things as tables and chairs. (van Inwagen 1990, 100)

My reason to be suspicious of the Moorean argument is that it generalizes problematically as a way of discounting any argument out of hand, if one does not like the conclusion: if the conclusion appears to be wrong, then something *must* be wrong with the premises, whatever it precisely is. It seems procedurally correct to begin examining and evaluating an argument from its premises, rather than the conclusion. Further, I take it to be a contentious empirical question whether most people are actually more certain of the falsity of the ontologists' conclusions than of the truth of their premises.

4.3.3. My reason for rejecting simple incompatibilism: failure to account for the sense of entitlement

My reason for rejecting simple incompatibilism is different from the previously considered unsatisfactory reasons. I reject simple incompatibilism because it does not account for the sense of perception-based entitlement that I have described above. Further, simple incompatibilism, as put forth above, is *prima facie* inconsistent with what I take to be the best explanation for the sense of perception-based entitlement.

The best explanation for the sense of perception-based entitlement, on my view, is that we actually do retain an entitlement to the relevant beliefs, such as the belief that there are tables, despite the ontologists' arguments. This might not be an all-things-considered, no-qualifications-necessary kind of entitlement, but in any case, the arguments leave a certain kind of entitlement to the beliefs untouched. More precisely, on my account we remain entitled to these beliefs because a certain kind of justification for the beliefs is left untouched by the ontologists' arguments. That justification is that we can form these beliefs by a highly truth-conducive method, namely by drawing on our conceptual competence with the relevant expressions (for example, we can draw on our competence with "table", to judge that there is exactly one table in this situation), together with the competence to draw certain simple inferences (such as the inference from "There is exactly one table in this situation" to "There are tables and there are not millions of tables in each situation where there is one"). Further, at some level, we recognize or are aware of (although perhaps not consciously aware of) our competence with the relevant expressions and inference types. We are aware, then, of our conceptual and inferential competences that provide a way of justifying the beliefs, and this justification for the beliefs is left untouched by the ontologists' arguments. This is the gist of the explanation; I will now elaborate on it in a bit more detail.

Let us look at a particular case of the sense of perception-based entitlement that arises in response to the ontologists' arguments, as an example. Suppose that I happen to be in a regular kitchen, when the ontologist presents me with the problem of the many. I experience the sense of perception-based entitlement: it seems to me that I remain entitled to the belief that there are tables, despite the ontologist's argument, and that this entitlement is based on

what I can see in the room, or more precisely, it is based on the fact that I see a table, or more precisely, that I see exactly one table. So I see what looks to me like exactly one table in front of me, I judge that there is exactly one table in this situation, and I feel that this judgment entitles me to believe that there are tables. My account says that I am aware that the perceptual judgment that there is exactly one table in this situation is one that I can make by applying my conceptual competence to interpret my experience. Further, from the thus justified judgment that there is exactly one table in this situation, I can infer that there are tables (because there is at least the one that is in this situation) and that there are not millions of tables in each situation where there is one (because in this situation, there is exactly one table, not millions). And I know that I am competent at drawing simple inferences like the inference from “There is exactly one table in this situation” to “There are tables and there are not millions of them in each situation where there is one”. My awareness of my ability to form the latter belief in this highly truth-conducive way – by applying my conceptual and inferential competence – is why I feel entitled to the belief that there are tables and not millions of them in each situation where there is one. I have a way of justifying this belief that is left untouched by the revisionary ontologists’ arguments. Further, this way of justifying the belief seems difficult to defeat, for the revisionary ontologists. They cannot plausibly maintain that I am not actually competent with the word “table” or that I cannot competently draw the kinds of inferences described. This justification could in principle be undermined by arguments and evidence, but not by ontologists’ arguments and evidence. For example, this justification could be undermined by arguments to the effect that I might be dreaming or hallucinating. But this is not the kind of argument that revisionary ontologists provide.

4.3.4. Alternative explanations for the sense of entitlement

There are other ways one could try to explain the sense of entitlement. In particular, one could explain the sense of entitlement as a non-veridical one – one could explain why the audience would feel entitled to the beliefs, although they actually are not. I suppose that such explanations would centrally appeal to one of the following three phenomena: (1) the audience’s intellectual vices, or (2) the audience’s inborn or habitual tendency to perceive and think in certain ways, or (3) the fact that things would look the same, whether or not there are *F*s (the entities that the revisionary ontologists argue are there or are not there, in apparent contradiction with folk belief). I will go through these types of explanation in order, showing why none of them provide a satisfactory explanation of the sense of entitlement that arises in response to the revisionary ontologists’ arguments.

(1) The audience's intellectual vices

One way in which this explanation for the sense of entitlement – appealing to the audience's intellectual vices – could be further elaborated is that the audience is too intellectually deficient to understand and therefore to appreciate how the arguments speak against their beliefs. This variety of the alternative explanation can be left aside, since we are assuming that the audience feels a sense of destabilization that the arguments give rise to – so they can understand that the arguments in some way speak for belief revision.

A different, better way to elaborate on this alternative explanation is that the sense of entitlement is to be explained with something like epistemically vicious stubborn dispositions. Perhaps the audience takes pride in being right and therefore they resist belief revision (and the admission of mistake that goes along with it), even when they actually recognize that belief revision is due. This explanation, however, would be better suited to explain a different phenomenon: the fact that the audience does not revise their beliefs, in response to the arguments. It does not directly address the sense of entitlement, and I cannot see how this explanation could account for the sense of entitlement – in particular, the sense of perception-based entitlement. The explanation does not refer to perceptual experiences at all, in accounting for the sense of entitlement. Finally, the phenomenology that we would expect, given this explanation, is quite different from a sense of entitlement. It feels a particular way to be stubborn about a belief, in the face of relevant arguments speaking against it, out of a sense of pride and unwillingness to admit a mistake; and it feels different to be entitled to a belief. So I do not believe that this or other explanations that appeal to the audience's intellectual vices can go far in explaining the sense of entitlement.

(2) The audience's inborn or habitual tendency to perceive and think in certain ways

The second kind of explanation for the sense of entitlement might involve reference to hard-wired illusions: ways of perceiving our environment that come naturally to us yet are deeply mistaken. For example, we might have something like an inborn notion of a paradigmatic macroscopic physical object: something that is cohesive (not scattered) and usually moves around (if it moves) in one piece, perhaps. Due to this inborn notion, we pay attention to certain parts of our surroundings and label them with words like “table”, “chair”, “mountain”, “cloud”, etc.

In this vein, the revisionary ontologists could try to explain the sense of entitlement as the result of a persistent illusion, arising from how we naturally tend to see the world. Daly and Liggins suggest that seeing tables may be similar to hard-wired perceptual mistakes, such as seeing straight sticks as bent in water (Daly and Liggins 2016, 410). Certainly, we sometimes see things being a certain way, come to believe that they are that way on the basis of such perception, and then later learn that things are actually quite different. This is the case with the illusion that the sun, rather than the earth, moves. In this case,

the fact that a normally highly truth conducive way of forming a belief goes wrong is explained by appeal to illusion. However, note that once we are aware of the illusion, although our perceptual experience may remain the same, we do not feel that its appearing to us that the sun moves around the earth still entitles us to believe that the sun moves around the earth, regardless of what astronomers argue. Yet, we feel an analogous entitlement in the case of revisionary ontology.

For some reason, Daly and Liggins and others who bring up similar examples do not make much of the striking contrast between these examples of optical illusion and the case of revisionary ontology: in the latter case, we not only have the same perceptual experiences, after being exposed to the arguments, but we also still believe the relevant contents and even further, we feel entitled to those beliefs. Perhaps they would say that there is no such sense of entitlement; and then my disagreement with them would come down to an empirical matter that is difficult to resolve empirically. I will go on to simply assume that the sense of entitlement is a real phenomenon. My main point here is that it cannot be explained by referring to well known cases of hard-wired illusions (seeing straight sticks as bent in water, etc.), which this case (of seeing tables, etc.) might be similar to. This is because we do not form beliefs based on those illusions, nor do we feel entitled to those beliefs, once we are aware of the illusions. So someone who would bring up the hard-wired illusions in response to the argument from the sense of entitlement would misunderstand the relevant explanandum: the explanandum is not that we see the world a certain way, but rather that we continue to feel entitled to the beliefs under attack, despite the ontologists' arguments.

Perhaps the explanation could go further as follows: normally, when we see (in a non-factive sense) that things are in a certain way, then this entitles us to believe that things are that way. When we encounter the situation that obtains in most kitchens, we see (in a non-factive sense) that there is exactly one table in that situation. Since normally, when we see that *p*, that entitles us to believe that *p*, we think that this is how it works in this case as well. However, in this case, what we see is not actually the case, as the revisionary ontologists' arguments should persuade us. Now, the problem with this account is that it still does not explain the feeling that the entitlement to the belief that *p* is unaffected by the ontologists' argument. Given this explanation for the sense of entitlement, the sense of entitlement should not persist after the ontologists' arguments are introduced and understood: the arguments tell us that we are not dealing with a "normal" case, where seeing that *p* entitles us to believe that *p*.

(3) *The fact that things would look the same, whether or not there are Fs*

Similar remarks apply to Merricks' suggestion that "one's 'seemingly seeing a statue' is caused – in a non-hallucinatory, non-prankish way – by things *arranged statuewise*" (Merricks 2001, 2); and "one's visual evidence would be the same *whether or not* those atoms composed something" (Merricks 2001, 9). In other words: things would look the same, even if there were no

tables. Now, this might perhaps help explain how the audience could believe that there are tables, as long as they are given no reason to believe otherwise. They are interpreting the visual evidence in a certain way, because they have not yet been given a reason to believe that this is a mistaken way to interpret the visual evidence. However, this suggestion about visual evidence does not explain the sense of entitlement that persists after reasons have been given to believe that there are no tables. (I will here leave aside the question about whether Merricks is correct that the world would look the same to us, whether there are tables or only particles arranged table-wise. This claim does not strike me as obviously correct, however.)

So the alternative explanations fail to account for the sense of entitlement, as opposed to why we see the world in a certain way or why we form certain beliefs on the basis of what we see. Now, I have not quite spelled out yet how my explanation for the sense of entitlement is *prima facie* inconsistent with the simple incompatibilist account. One way to put the point is as follows. On my account, we are entitled to the relevant beliefs, for example the belief that there are tables. This entitlement is based on the fact that we can form the relevant beliefs via a highly truth-conducive method, namely by applying our conceptual competence in the interpretation of an experience to form judgements, and on the basis of these judgments, drawing inferences of the sort we are competent in drawing. Further, if we can form a belief by such a highly truth-conducive method, then we are not only entitled to the belief, but the belief is highly likely to be true. According to the simple incompatibilist account, however, the belief (e.g. that there are tables) is false.

Against this, one might argue that our conceptual competence can dispose us to make false judgments, and this might be happening in the cases at hand as well, for example, when we judge that there is exactly one table in the situation. Then, we could still combine the view according to which the sense of entitlement is explained by our awareness of our conceptual competence, with the view that revisionary ontologists reveal that judgments like the judgment that ‘there is exactly one table in this situation’ and the inferred judgment that ‘there are tables’ are false, in the language that we speak. The view that our conceptual competence can dispose us to make false judgments has been defended by Eklund, who writes (objecting to the argument from inconsistent concepts to dialetheism):

To be fully competent with an expression, a speaker need merely be *disposed* to accept the meaning-constitutive principles for this expression as true. This disposition may be overridden, for example by evidence that the meaning-constitutive principles of the language are jointly inconsistent. (Eklund 2002a, 322)

Eklund also develops this idea – that semantic competence can dispose us to make false judgments – in (Eklund 2002b). Applied to the case at hand, the idea could be that, for example, our semantic competence with “table” disposes us to accept as true the sentence “If tables exist, then they are such that a table minus

an atom is a table". However, this sentence, as Eklund argues, could still be false – it could be what he calls the “culprit” of the paradox. Further, although Eklund himself might pick the “If tables exist, then they are such that...” premise (the principle of minute differences) as the culprit, the revisionary ontologists could argue instead that the culprit is the perceptual judgment, which our competence with “table” also disposes us to make, namely “There is exactly one table in this situation”. If revisionary ontologists could hold that this perceptual judgment is false, although licensed by linguistic competence, they could also reject as false the inferred judgment “There are tables and not millions of them in each situation where there is one”. They would then maintain consistency within their judgments by affirming all the premises and the conclusions of the revisionary ontologists’ arguments (e.g. the problem of the many) and rejecting as false the perceptual and inferential judgments that make the revisionary conclusion appear false. Then, revisionary ontologists could accept my explanation for the sense of entitlement (that conceptual competence “licenses”, i.e. disposes us to perceptual judgments like “There is exactly one table in this situation”); and they could nevertheless maintain that they are showing that the ordinary belief that there are tables (and not millions of them in each situation where there is one) is false. Taking this strategy, revisionary ontologists would also need to show why the perceptual and inferential judgments, rather than some premise(s) in their argument, are false; but perhaps they can do this.

This strategy, of course, would also call for an account of how a judgment can be false, even though it is licensed by semantic competence. Eklund suggests such an account in his (Eklund 2002b). It is a broadly Fregean account. The meaning-constitutive principles for an expression are embedded in the Fregean “sense” (I suppose this could also be called the “concept”); and the semantic value of the expression, or the “reference”, is what comes closest to satisfying all the principles embedded in the sense. Now, the problem with this account appears to be that it remains unclear where the requirement of consistency comes from, as a further determinant of the semantic value, beyond what is contained in the sense. On the Fregean account, sense is supposed to determine reference, so if there is an all-trumping requirement of consistency that plays a role in determining the semantic value, then this requirement of consistency should be a part of the sense, the concept. Alternatively, one might appeal to something like “eligibility” as the external determinant of the semantic value, in a Lewisian vein; but that move should be avoided, because of the mysteriousness of the idea that eligibility can determine meaning, without there being a speaker intention involving deference to eligibility (and such deference would seem to put the requirement of consistency back in the “sense”).

So it seems that in order for the Fregean account to work, the requirement of consistency, as a trumping determinant of the semantic value, should be embedded in the sense. However, then we would expect our dispositions to reflect this universal, trumping requirement of consistency. If it is true about a

particular expression (e.g. “table”) that competence with the expression disposes us to accept inconsistent judgments *and* this disposition is overridden by the requirement not to accept inconsistent judgments, then discovering the inconsistency of the judgments should make the speaker retract at least one of the judgments that are collectively inconsistent or perhaps suspend judgment for all of them (not knowing which one is the culprit). However, this retraction or suspension does not seem to happen, in the case of revisionary ontology. There is another reason to be suspicious of the idea that all concepts involve the built-in requirement of consistency: why would our language have evolved like this, if concepts that license certain inconsistent judgments seem to be working well for most ordinary, practical purposes? For these reasons, I am not convinced that the demand of consistency is somehow inscribed into all our concepts, trumping the other application conditions. Instead, I take demands like consistency (i.e. the concepts licensing only consistent judgments) to be desiderata that are external to the concepts themselves.

Note that it does not appear to be Eklund’s own view that the requirement of consistency is inscribed into our concepts. He rather seems to hold that our aversion to true contradictions (an aversion that, as I understand it, is itself not a part of our conceptual scheme) makes it the case that our expressions get the semantic values that come closest to satisfying the meaning-constitutive principles in a contradiction-free way. So the consistency-requiring determinant of reference would still come from inside the speakers’ minds, but not from the concepts (or senses) in question. I am not certain how the aversion to true contradictions can enter into fixing the reference of expressions, without being a part of the concept or the sense associated with these expressions; but that might be due to my own insufficient familiarity with the relevant discussions.

Now one will surely ask: do I then accept dialetheism (the view that there are true contradictions)? I am inclined to think that one can recognize that there are inconsistent concepts (concepts that license inconsistent judgments) *and* that there is no trumping requirement of consistency embedded in all concepts *and* that semantic values are not fixed by eligibility or mental aversions, independently of our concepts, *and* that classical logic can still somehow govern the discourse carried out using the inconsistent concepts. This is, however, because I find each of these conjuncts independently plausible, not because I have an account of how to accommodate all these claims. The threat of dialetheism, once we recognize that there are inconsistent concepts, is an important issue that nevertheless falls out of the scope of this thesis.

Further, I suppose that it is not strictly speaking necessary to tackle these issues, in order to reject simple incompatibilism on the ground that it does not explain the sense of entitlement. If simple incompatibilism were further developed along the lines suggested above – i.e. by invoking the idea that conceptual competence can dispose us to make false perceptual judgments like “There is exactly one table in this situation” – then we would be dealing with a more sophisticated account that may not ultimately be that different from my own. If judgments like “There is exactly one table in this situation” are false, and

conceptual competence disposes us to make such false judgments, then we should still presumably revise our concepts so that they would not involve such a disposition to make false judgments. Revisionary ontology would then still be a project of conceptual engineering, although the details might be fleshed out a bit differently from how I flesh them out. Revisionary ontology would then be epistemically significant because it helps us get rid of false beliefs by revising the concepts that dispose us to form false beliefs. On my current account, by contrast, beliefs like the belief that there is exactly one table in this situation and the belief that there are tables are not false. They are true, but they are just cast in theoretically problematic (e.g. inconsistent) concepts.

Again, I have spelled out the inconsistency of the simple incompatibilist account with the best explanation for the sense of perception-based entitlement, as follows. According to the best explanation, we can form the relevant beliefs (e.g. that there are tables) by a highly truth-conducive procedure, namely by applying our conceptual and inferential competence. However, this suggests that the relevant beliefs are true, and according to the simple incompatibilist account, they are false. I did not find it particularly plausible that these beliefs could still be false, although licensed by conceptual competence. (In any case, if revisionary ontologists adopt such an account, they should explain why precisely these are the false judgments, rather than some premise(s) in their argument; and they should give a plausible account of how a judgment licensed by linguistic competence can nevertheless be false.) Further, whether the inconsistency of my explanation for the sense of entitlement with the simple incompatibilist account should be spelled out in this or some other way, the explanation that I have provided for the sense of entitlement (citing our awareness of our conceptual and inferential competence) calls for a more nuanced account of revisionary ontology. We need to understand how we can remain entitled to beliefs like the belief that there are tables, in virtue of our conceptual and inferential competence, and how revisionary ontologists can nonetheless be in a position to destabilize these beliefs and to improve our beliefs with their arguments.

There are some similarities between my criticism of the simple incompatibilist account of revisionary ontology and Thomasson's (2015) criticism of "hard ontology". Thomasson claims that we can get the answers to the supposedly difficult ontological questions by drawing certain simple inferences that are warranted by linguistic competence, for example, by going from "There are particles arranged table-wise" (which is uncontroversial for many revisionary ontologists) to "There are tables". So she also appeals to judgments warranted by linguistic competence. However, she does not appeal to the sense of perception-based entitlement and so her account seems to lack motivation for supposing that the relevant inferences are warranted by linguistic competence. My account can supply the motivation, although perhaps not for the particular inferences that Thomasson thinks are thereby warranted. Further, a significant divergence from Thomasson's account is that I do not take any of this to warrant general deflationism about serious, hard ontology; it rather suggests to

me that the revisionary ontologists need to look for an alternative to the simple incompatibilist account.

Again, many revisionary ontologists themselves actually reject simple incompatibilism, although not for the reason that I have highlighted: the failure of the account to explain the sense of entitlement. In the next section, I will look at the alternative accounts of revisionary ontology that have been developed or suggested by revisionary ontologists, such as van Inwagen, who reject simple incompatibilism for reasons that differ from mine. These will be compatibilist accounts of revisionary ontology.

4.4. Rejecting compatibilism(s)

Most revisionary ontologists who reject simple incompatibilism adopt some variety of compatibilism. According to these compatibilist accounts, there is no rational conflict between revisionary ontologists' claims and ordinary beliefs about what there is. I will consider various kinds of compatibilism – Socratic compatibilism, indifference compatibilism, and linguistic compatibilism – and reject all of these. The categorization of compatibilisms here is based upon the following question: what, if any, beliefs on the relevant subject matter (e.g. whether there are tables) does the audience have, according to the compatibilist view in question, prior to encountering the revisionary ontologists' arguments?

4.4.1. Against Socratic compatibilism

According to what I call Socratic compatibilism, most people have believed all along that, for example, there are no tables or that there are talking donkeys, in the one and only literal ordinary-language sense of the sentences "There are no tables" and "There are talking donkeys". I call this "Socratic compatibilism", because the revisionary ontologists, on this view, are embodying the Socratic idea that the dialogue with the philosopher brings to one's awareness what one already knows. The idea, then, is that the audience already has all the right beliefs about what there is, for example, that there are no chairs and that there are talking donkeys (and does not have the wrong beliefs on these same matters), and the ontologists' job is just to bring those beliefs to their awareness. I discuss this compatibilist option as a logical possibility; I do not know of anyone who explicitly defends this view. However, it seems to fit in well with a view about ordinary discourse that is sometimes attributed to van Inwagen (although he rejects this attribution (van Inwagen 2014, 11)). The view is that when we say, for example, "There are chairs in the next room", what we mean is rather that there are particles arranged chair-wise in the next room. Our ontology, what we believe to exist, on this view, is not reflected in how we speak; in particular, we speak as if there were chairs, when we really believe that there are only particles arranged chair-wise and no chairs.

What would be the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, on this account? The significance cannot be the mere gaining of true beliefs, because according to Socratic compatibilism, we already had the true ontological beliefs, somewhere and somehow, all along – even before the time when the revisionary ontologists’ midwifery began. One option for understanding the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, on this account, is by appeal to the idea that good beliefs are not just true, but also acknowledged by us as our beliefs. So the view would be that it is possible to have a true belief, but without recognizing that one has it, or perhaps even while denying that one has the belief (as the case seems to be with the belief that there are no tables, on this account). Further, one success-condition for beliefs is that they should be true; but another is that they should be recognized and reflectively endorsed by us. Of course, when a “hidden” belief is false, it cannot be improved by making it a recognized and endorsed belief. Only true hidden beliefs can be improved in this manner. Indeed, there is some plausibility to the idea that truths hidden so deep in the back of our minds that we do not recognize them as our beliefs (or are even inclined to deny them) are not as valuable as true beliefs that we consciously endorse. Another option for explaining the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, on the Socratic account, is that what matters, epistemically speaking, is still just truth, but the ontological midwives help us to gain true meta-beliefs about our ontological beliefs, and to get rid of false meta-beliefs.

So there are various ways to make sense of the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, on this compatibilist account. The problem with the account, however, is that the claims it makes about what people believe are highly implausible. If other evidence does not establish that most people believe that there are tables, then we can find the evidence in the sense of destabilization and the sense of entitlement. Both of these present us with our belief that there are tables: the former presents it as the object of destabilization and the latter presents it as the object of entitlement. To override this evidence, we would need to explain why we would believe that we believe that p (e.g. ‘There are tables’) when actually we do not believe that p and we even believe that *not*- p . In the absence of such an explanation, we should reject this kind of compatibilism.

4.4.2. Against indifference compatibilism

According to another compatibilist view – indifference compatibilism – most people hold no views on whether chairs exist or whether tables exist. As with Socratic compatibilism, discussions in revisionary ontology, on this view, concern the truth of existence claims in their ordinary, everyday sense. According to indifference compatibilism, however, the epistemic significance would consist in providing people with new beliefs on this matter, rather than bringing into their awareness the beliefs that they already have. Another

contrast with Socratic compatibilism is that indifference compatibilism, although it is similarly a view without much initial plausibility, appears to have a prominent proponent: van Inwagen (1990), in the chapter entitled “Why the Proposed Answer to the Special Composition Question, Radical Though It Is, Does Not Contradict Our Ordinary Beliefs”. This chapter is not very clear, but based on what I can make of it, the reason why van Inwagen’s view on composition, which implies that there are no tables and chairs, does not contradict our ordinary beliefs is that our ordinary beliefs do not include the belief that there are tables and chairs.

One of van Inwagen’s attempts to repudiate the impression that surely we all believe that there are tables and chairs goes as follows:

There is what we might call Universal Belief: that body of propositions that has been accepted by every human being who has ever lived, bar a few imbeciles and madmen; which is accepted even by Spinoza and Bradley when the madness of philosophy is not upon them. Is the existence of chairs – or, at any rate, of things suitable for sitting on, like stones and stumps – a matter of Universal Belief? If it were, this would count strongly against my position, for any philosopher who denies what practically *everyone* believes is, so far as I can see, adopting a position according to which the human capacity for knowing the truth about things is radically defective. ... It is far from obvious, however, that it is a matter of Universal Belief that there are chairs. (van Inwagen 1990, 103)

Of course, there is a distinction to be made among the following claims:

- (a) It is not the case that almost everyone believes that there are chairs.
- (b) Most people do not have beliefs on whether there are chairs.

The first claim, which is what van Inwagen directly expresses in the quote above, allows for the possibility that almost everyone believes that there are no chairs (the assumption of Socratic compatibilism). However, since this would be such an implausible claim about what people believe, I suppose that van Inwagen holds the somewhat more plausible view (b) that most people do not have beliefs on whether there are chairs. His explicit claim (a) that it is not the case that almost everyone believes that there are chairs would also be consistent with the claim that only a slight majority of people believe that there are chairs. However, that interpretation would not align with van Inwagen’s espoused purpose in the chapter, to show that his view “does not contradict our ordinary beliefs”. So I take van Inwagen’s position, in his (van Inwagen 1990), to be that most people do not have beliefs on whether there are chairs, in the ordinary English sense of “There are chairs”.

Van Inwagen’s attempt to argue for indifference compatibilism (assuming that it is indeed his view) falls far short of being convincing. His strategy appears to be to show how our everyday talk, much of which seems to entail that there are chairs, can actually be free of ontological commitment to chairs. This general approach to the interpretation of everyday talk as non-committal about ontological matters has been helpfully fleshed out by Eklund (2005), who calls the view “hermeneutic indifferentism”. Eklund claims, plausibly, that

“even genuinely literal assertions have what we may call non-serious features, features that are not important to the point of the assertions”, and that “among these features are normally the ontologically committing ones” (Eklund 2005, 558). Or as he also puts the point:

Relevance to the main point of an utterance is naturally a matter of degree, but we can still draw a rough and ready distinction between the features of an utterance that are central to the point of making it (features the speaker takes seriously, as I shall put it) and features that are not so central (the non-serious ones). My claim is then that the ontological commitments, including ontological commitments to spatiotemporal objects, are often (perhaps always) *non-serious*. (Eklund 2005, 564)

Van Inwagen’s approach apparently is to defend indifference compatibilism (the view that most people do not have beliefs about the existence of chairs) against a certain obvious objection, which van Inwagen considers to be the main source of support for incompatibilism: the objection that people often sincerely assert sentences like “There are two chairs in the next room”. These sentences entail that the entities in question (e.g. chairs) exist; so presumably people who assert such sentences believe that there are chairs. Van Inwagen’s defence against this objection to indifference compatibilism consists in bringing examples of cases where people talk as if *F*s existed, without believing that they do. This way of supporting indifference compatibilism, by appeal to hermeneutic indifferentism, is unconvincing, since indifference compatibilism needs to be defended against different and more important objections instead.

These more important objections are different ways of supporting the claim that most people believe that there are chairs. For one, we could ask them – this is, after all, how we usually inquire into what people believe about a given matter. We are not limited to interpreting what people tend to say. Note that my aim here is not to argue against hermeneutic indifferentism.¹³ I am looking for an account of what revisionary ontologists are doing, and hermeneutic indifferentism is not an account of that. Hermeneutic indifferentism is an account of what we all do when we quantify over various things in everyday discourse. The relevance of this account for interpreting revisionary ontology is that hermeneutic indifferentism (or some similar account of ordinary quantificational discourse) is supposed to make a certain account of revisionary ontology, namely indifference compatibilism, more plausible, according to van Inwagen. Indifference compatibilism, again, is the view that (1) revisionary ontologists argue about what there is in the ordinary, natural language sense of expressions

¹³ I touch on this in my (Kitsik 2008a), where I point out that hermeneutic indifferentism seems less plausible as an interpretation of everyday utterances of sentences like “There are chairs” – I bring an example of such an everyday utterance – as opposed to utterances of sentences like “There are two chairs in the next room”. Further, I point out there that we may expect speakers who utter sentences like “There are chairs” to deny that they are indifferent about whether there are chairs.

like “There are *F*s” and (2) their views (e.g. that there are no *F*s) are nevertheless not in conflict with what most people believe, because most people do not have beliefs on whether there are *F*s. Hermeneutic indifferentism is relevant only in so far as it can be invoked to explain how it is possible that people can go around saying things like “There are two chairs in the next room”, while they have no beliefs about whether there are chairs. But hermeneutic indifferentism in no way implies indifference compatibilism.¹⁴

Assuming that revisionary ontologists indeed argue that there are no chairs (for example), in the one and only, literal English sense of “There are no chairs”, then there is good reason to believe that what they argue contradicts ordinary belief – regardless of whether hermeneutic indifferentism is true. This is, first, because we can ask people, and I assume that they will report their belief that there are chairs, when asked. Secondly, in this chapter, I am assuming that the audience reacts to the revisionary ontologists with a sense of destabilization and a sense of entitlement. Again, the objects of that sense of entitlement and destabilization are the very beliefs that, according to indifference compatibilism, are not present: for example, the belief that there are chairs.

Indifference compatibilism, then, should be rejected, although it provides a straightforward explanation of the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology. The explanation of the epistemic significance, again, is that revisionary ontology gives us new true beliefs about matters we had no prior beliefs about. Further, these seem to be significant truths: whether tables exist is a *prima facie* interesting topic. It is certainly not like knowledge of how many blades of grass there currently are in my backyard, for example. However, the problem with indifference compatibilism is similar to the problem with Socratic compatibilism. The problem with Socratic compatibilism is the implausible belief attribution, and the problem with indifference compatibilism is the slightly less implausible, but still implausible attribution of *non*-belief (the lack of beliefs on matters like whether there are chairs).

If one is not convinced that these attributions are implausible in their own right, then this criticism of Socratic and indifference compatibilism can instead be construed as follows. These compatibilisms do not meet the adequacy criteria of accounting for the sense of entitlement and the sense of destabilization. Not only do these compatibilisms fail to explain why we would experience these reactions to the ontologists’ arguments, they are inconsistent with these data. The sense of destabilization and entitlement arise in relation to beliefs with a certain content, for example, beliefs with the content that there are

¹⁴ I do not think that Eklund uses hermeneutic indifferentism to defend indifference compatibilism. According to Eklund, the “point that indifferentism is supposed to drive home” is that “ordinary assertive utterances are not as much hostage to metaphysical fortune as it might seem” (Eklund 2005, 576). What interests us here, however, is not whether there is a conflict between ordinary talk and revisionary ontology, but whether there is a conflict between ordinary *belief* and revisionary ontology.

chairs. Socratic and indifference compatibilism deny that we have beliefs with such content. In principle, these compatibilists could argue that we can have a sense of entitlement and destabilization that appear to be about such beliefs, while we do not really have these beliefs (and might even believe the opposite instead). But then it would need to be explained why it seems to us like we have these beliefs. As things stand – with such explanations lacking – Socratic and indifference compatibilism are not strong contenders as accounts of revisionary ontology.

4.4.3 Against linguistic variance compatibilism

But there is yet another kind of compatibilist to consider, and this one is a stronger contender. The “linguistic variance compatibilist” grants, with high plausibility, that most people believe that there are tables and that there are no talking donkeys, in the literal plain English sense of these claims. The linguistic compatibilist further holds that revisionary ontologists address these matters (matters like the existence of tables and talking donkeys) in a *different* sense of sentences like “There are chairs” and “There are no talking donkeys”. These other, metaphysical readings of the sentences are not readily available to most speakers of ordinary English. So we may expect that most ordinary speakers have given no thought to the existence of tables and talking donkeys in this other sense, and so they have no beliefs about these issues. The unavailability of these alternative meanings might not be a principled matter; it might just be that most people never find themselves in a context (such as a metaphysics seminar) where the metaphysical meanings of sentences like “There are chairs” are relevant.

Such linguistic variance compatibilism may take the form of the view that, in listing the main interpretive options, I have called the “Ontologese view”; or it may also take the form of the “contextualist view”. On the former view, ontologists speak a language that should be considered distinct from the relevant natural language, e.g. English. On the latter view, ontologists still speak the relevant natural language, but they speak it in a special ontological context. I do not think that the difference between these two kinds of linguistic variance matters for assessing the tenability of linguistic variance compatibilism in light of our adequacy conditions.

Van Inwagen apparently has become a linguistic variance compatibilist of the contextualist variety: “[O]nly metaphysicians (or at any rate only people who have been exposed to discussions of the metaphysics of artefacts) have ever considered – ever entertained, ever grasped, ever held before their minds – the inside proposition” (van Inwagen 2014, 6). The “inside proposition” is the proposition that sentences like “There are chairs” express in the “ontology room”, the ontological context. Van Inwagen (ibid.) mentions that this linguistic variance compatibilist position was already “implicit” in his *Material Beings* (1990); but I find it more plausible to interpret the proposal there as a version of

indifference compatibilism. Horgan and Potrč (2008) might also be linguistic variance compatibilists of the contextualist variety.

Van Inwagen, again, draws a distinction between the “inside” and “outside” proposition, i.e. what “There are chairs” expresses in the ontology room and outside it. He thinks that

the metaphysical neutrality of the outside proposition can be established by a very simple observation: it is made true by such states of affairs as *that* (pretend, reader, that I am speaking rather than writing, and that, as I spoke the words ‘such state of affairs as *that*’, I made an ostensive gesture in the direction of some things arranged chairwise). (van Inwagen 2014, 13)

Further, van Inwagen concedes that “there being things arranged chairwise is sufficient for the truth of what is expressed by ‘Chairs exist’ in everyday circumstances” (ibid.). Although van Inwagen cites this as a point of agreement with Hirsch, it is even more prominently a point of agreement with Thomasson (2015). As such, this account also accords well with my Thomassonian explanation for the sense of perception-based entitlement. The linguistic variance compatibilist can say that the object of the sense of entitlement is the belief that there are chairs, in the ordinary, non-metaphysical sense of “There are chairs”. Then, the sense of entitlement can be further explained as I did in a previous section, as arising from our awareness of our competence with the word “chair” (in the ordinary, non-metaphysical sense of “chair”). Unlike the previous accounts, then, linguistic variance compatibilism accommodates the sense of entitlement rather well: it can help itself to what I have proposed is the best explanation for the sense of entitlement. We are entitled to our beliefs about what there is because the application conditions for the relevant expressions (like “There are chairs”) are satisfied, in the language that we normally speak. And we *sense* our entitlement because we are aware of our competence with our language. However, I will argue that linguistic variance compatibilism does not explain the sense of destabilization and does not explain how revisionary ontology can improve our beliefs.

Before this, I need to address an initial problem with linguistic variance compatibilism: the problem of understanding the meaning of sentences like “There are chairs” in the ontology room, or in Ontologese (the language spoken by metaphysicians – perhaps a contextual variant of English, perhaps a distinct language). A common response to linguistic compatibilism (and other views that posit a special ontological meaning of existence claims) is: how else can “There are chairs” be understood, if not in the usual way? One possible answer is the following: when ontologists ask what there is, they are asking what there *fundamentally* is, i.e. what the fundamental entities are. But this is unsatisfactory, as a defensive account of revisionary ontology, because it is unclear how the ontologists’ arguments could serve as arguments about the (non-) fundamentality of certain entities, rather than their (non-) existence. Also, it seems like this would render many theses in revisionary ontology mere

platitudes that everyone agrees with and that hardly need book-length defences. For example, why write a book defending the claim that chairs and tables are non-fundamental? Is there anyone who thinks that they are fundamental (the basic furniture of the universe)? The latter worry might be addressed, to an extent, by interpreting “fundamental” as “irreducible”. It is not obvious that tables are fully reducible to the atoms that they are made of: that the level of description and explanation that includes tables can be dispensed with, when we want to understand the world. The latter might be a claim that van Inwagen is committed to. However, it does not seem to be what his central arguments (primarily, the argument from composition) aim to establish. The arguments do not seem to draw on the kinds of considerations that are relevant for demonstrating the reducibility of tables and chairs. The reducibility of things like tables and chairs to fundamental particles rather seems to function as a (possibly disputable) premise in the argument, not as the conclusion.

The option that I favour instead, for understanding the point of quantificational language in the ontology room, is Sider’s (2011). (However, I do not think that Sider himself can be considered a linguistic variance compatibilist; the incompatibilist aspect of his account will be discussed in the next section.) The idea is that revisionary ontologists try to identify and employ a conceptual scheme that carves the world at its joints, that is, reflects the world’s objective structure. It is controversial whether the world *has* an objective structure, whether concepts can *reflect* that structure, and whether *quantificational* concepts can reflect that structure (whether there is such quantificational structure to be reflected). But I will assume that these worries can be addressed and talk of joint-carving concepts, including the joint-carving quantifier, makes sense. I further assume that it makes sense for revisionary ontologists to adopt Sider’s view about how we should look for the most joint-carving conceptual scheme. Namely, we should look for the most elegant, contradiction-free, simple – in other words, the most theoretically virtuous – conceptual scheme. We can then expect the concepts of that virtuous scheme to be the joint-carving ones. This is, of course, a highly contested and contestable assumption, and I am only granting the connection between theoretical virtues and reflecting reality for the sake of the argument.

I leave it open here whether the linguistic variance compatibilist’s proposal should be that ontologists *use* a version of English that has an attempt at joint-carving built into it (as Sider would say) or that the ontologists are talking about how to *revise* ordinary language, so that it would carve at the joints. I do have a preference, though, and it is the second option. Sider himself (2011, 2014) seems to prefer the first option. Hirsch (2008, 520) has suggested that the second one would be more plausible. So claims like “There are no tables”, on this account, could be understood as: “In the variant of English with the most joint-carving concepts, we could not truly say ‘There are tables’.”

Let us return to the adequacy conditions. It is *prima facie* tricky for the linguistic variance compatibilist to explain the sense of destabilization. According to linguistic variance compatibilism, the ontologists’ arguments do

not at all address the beliefs that most people have about the existence of tables or talking donkeys. These ordinary beliefs are presumably cast in ordinary concepts; but according to the linguistic variance compatibilist, the ontologists are either talking about what a joint-carving conceptual scheme would be like or are already using that scheme. So it does not make good sense for the audience to start doubting their ordinary beliefs, cast in ordinary non-joint-carving concepts, when they hear the arguments. A linguistic variance compatibilist might propose that the audience mistakenly *takes* the ontologists' arguments to address the ordinary beliefs about the existence of tables and talking donkeys; after all, the arguments' conclusions are misleadingly phrased (e.g. "There are no tables"). Indeed, the mere fact that ontologists, who are plausibly their audience's intellectual equals or superiors, appear to disagree with them about whether there are tables, may make the audience (reasonably) doubt this belief.

However, this does not get the phenomenology right. The sense of destabilization contains more than just the sense that something about what the ontologists say makes us doubt our ontological beliefs. The arguments, the puzzles make us doubt the beliefs – and not just the fact that the ontologists disagree with us. The puzzles reveal problematic features of our belief system: our belief system somehow leads us to say contradictory things or leaves us confused about what to say, in response to apparently easy questions (like how many tables there are in the room). The source of the destabilization is some problem with the beliefs, pointed out by the ontologists, and not the mere fact that our intellectual equals or superiors appear to disagree with us about what there is.

Similar doubts about compatibilist accounts more generally have been expressed by Korman as well (although he does not use my terminology, so he does not talk about a "sense of destabilization"): "[I]f after giving the usual arguments for her surprising ontological claim the ontologist then claims not to be denying what we have believed all along, we wonder why not, since her reasons, if taken seriously, strike us as reasons for revising our beliefs" (Korman 2015, 302). Indeed, this problem applies likewise to Socratic compatibilism and indifference compatibilism, as well as to linguistic variance compatibilism. I did not bring it up before because there is another, more prominent way in which Socratic and indifference compatibilism fail to explain the sense of destabilization: they deny that the objects of destabilization, such as the belief that there are chairs, even exist. The linguistic variance compatibilist does not deny that there is such a belief, but she cannot explain why the revisionary ontologists' arguments would appear to destabilize that belief.

Linguistic variance compatibilism explains the sense of entitlement, then, but does not explain the sense of destabilization. Further, linguistic variance compatibilism (without further elaboration) does not explain how revisionary ontology can improve our beliefs. According to linguistic variance compatibilism, there is no rational conflict between what most people believe about what there is and what the ontologists are arguing. But then, why should anyone care about the ontologists' arguments? The linguistic variance compatibilist

might respond that the project's epistemic significance need not consist in a challenge to the beliefs we already have, but instead, in providing us with additional true beliefs, cast in joint-carving concepts. However, these additional true beliefs are to be suspected of a certain kind of uninterestingness, such that gaining these beliefs is not an epistemic improvement. If the linguistic variance compatibilist is right, then most people already have true beliefs about the relevant parts of the world. Suppose, for example, that I have the true belief that there are two pens on the table in front of me. According to sophisticated compatibilism, the nihilist wants me to acquire the additional true belief that *there are* (in the joint-carving sense) just particles arranged pen-wise there. And the universalist wants me to acquire the additional true belief that *there is* (in the joint-carving sense) also a pen-pen, made of the two pens, and not just the two pens there. But I already had true beliefs about what is going on there, on the table in front of me. Moreover, I have the relevant true beliefs about what is going on in the world generally, not just on my table. How is my epistemic standing improved by gaining these additional true beliefs? Am I not just learning to describe the world in a new language? It is not enough to just say that the joint-carving conceptual scheme is a better way to think about what is going on, on my table and elsewhere in the world. *Why* is it better?

In the next section, I will take up Sider's incompatibilist account that addresses this question. Sider's account also explains the sense of destabilization and the sense of entitlement. However, I will argue that it fails because of an underlying problematic ethics of belief. I will then defend a modified Siderian account, in the last section.

4.5. Siderian incompatibilism

4.5.1. How it is supposed to work

The key point of the account that I will elaborate on and criticize in this section, and build upon in the next, is that revisionary ontology is supposed to improve our concepts, in order to improve our beliefs that are cast using the concepts. I assume that beliefs are attitudes towards propositions, and these propositions are cast using certain concepts. For example, the belief that cats love dogs (or more precisely, the proposition believed) would be somehow made up of the concepts of cats, love, and dogs. Revisionary ontologists' arguments reveal what may be called "theoretical problems" with those concepts that are used in the construction of beliefs. Chief among those problems is inconsistency, or more precisely, licensing inconsistent judgments.

The idea that revisionary ontology reveals tensions within ordinary thinking is quite common, but it is not always fleshed out in terms of inconsistent *concepts*. For example, Horgan and Potrč write that their "methodological maxim" is to "follow commonsense reflection where it leads", and this involves "not backing off from the inquiry when common sense begins to fall into internal

tension with itself” (Horgan and Potrč 2008, 15). I unpack the idea of common sense falling into tension with itself, as follows: the arguments show that ordinary concepts license inconsistent judgments. To persist with inquiry, upon recognizing the inconsistency, is already to propose some way of improving the concepts, neglecting some judgments that the concepts currently license, to preserve others. Whether this means *revising* the same concepts or *replacing* them with better ones depends on how we individuate concepts and I will not take a stand on this.

Again, sometimes this general idea about the significance of ontological arguments, as revealing tensions within ordinary thought, is described without using the word “concept”. For example, Scholl writes about how we are disposed to make conflicting judgments in the case of the Ship of Theseus:

Perceptual simulation might continue to suggest that the renovated ship is the Ship of Theseus, because if you were to watch it sail around while any particular renovation was occurring, you would represent it via the same object file. More abstract judgments based on brute similarity or origin might still – and at the same time – suggest to you that the scavenged ship is the Ship of Theseus, though, since the parts of your mind that generate these judgments are distinct from those parts that are cleaving to spatiotemporal continuity. (Scholl 2007, 584)

Scholl here suggests that our perceptual and abstract judgments tend to clash, in the Ship of Theseus case, and in that sense the puzzle reveals a tension within our way of thinking about the world. This is not framed as a tension within our concepts. Sometimes, however, it is taken as a given that the tension is a tension within our concepts. For example, Thomasson describes the relevant arguments as “pure a priori arguments based on apparent contradictions within our ordinary concepts” (Thomasson 2007, 4). In this and the following section, I will further explore how the project of revisionary ontology can be understood as a project of conceptual engineering, as opposed to the project of replacing false beliefs with true ones, focusing on such “tensions” within our concepts as the driving force behind the conceptual engineering. This account, I will argue, has better prospects for meeting the adequacy conditions (explaining the audience’s dual reaction and the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology) than the previously considered simple incompatibilist account and the various compatibilist accounts.

Let us begin with the sense of entitlement. I have proposed previously that the best explanation for the sense of entitlement is that we can form the relevant beliefs (e.g. the belief that there are tables) by applying our conceptual competence and drawing simple inferences, and we know this to be a highly truth-conducive method for forming beliefs. The conceptual engineering account (or the theoretical metalinguistic account, as I have also called it) is compatible with this explanation for the sense of entitlement. Unlike simple incompatibilism, the conceptual engineering account allows us to admit that we

have the described kind of justification for our belief that there are tables, and this justification is untouched by the revisionary ontologists' arguments. Our sense of entitlement reflects our awareness of what our concepts license. For example, our concept of table licenses the judgment that there is exactly one table in the situation that obtains in most kitchens.

The sense of destabilization can also be explained, on this account: it reflects our awareness that the arguments have revealed a problem with the concept that licenses such judgments. For example, the argument might have revealed that our concept of table also licenses the more abstract judgment, used as a premise in the problem of the many, that if there are tables, then they are such that a table minus an atom is a table. This judgment, along with other uncontroversial enough premises, leads to the revisionary conclusion that there are no tables or there are millions of tables in each situation where there is one. And that revisionary conclusion is inconsistent with the judgment that can be easily inferred from the perceptual judgment licensed by the concept of table. From the licensed perceptual judgment that there is exactly one table in this situation, we can infer that there are tables and there are not millions of them in each situation where there is one. This is how the problem of the many reveals that the concept of table licenses inconsistent judgments and gives rise to the sense of destabilization. Contra Thomasson, then, we can find out not just common-sense truths, but also revisionary truths, by applying our conceptual competence and combining the judgments licensed by conceptual competence (e.g. that a table minus an atom is a table) with uncontroversial premises and drawing simple inferences. What moral to draw from this? In particular, what moral can we draw from this that would illuminate the nature and value of the project of revisionary ontology?

One option would be that revisionary ontology shows us that we should not rely on our conceptual competence for making judgments, that this is actually an unreliable method, since it leads to inconsistent results. But how would we then make judgments? The method seems to be indispensable. What is not indispensable, however, are the particular concepts that we happen to employ in forming these judgments. The problem is not in the method of concept-application as such (for finding out truths about the world), but in the particular concepts used. The value of revisionary ontology, accordingly, could consist in demonstrating the problems with our concepts and proposing revisions.

It is relatively clear how this works in the case of the paradox-based arguments like the problem of the many and the sorites arguments, but there are also arguments in revisionary ontology that do not appear to belong in this group, at least not obviously so; for example, van Inwagen's composition argument and Merricks' argument from causal over-determination. However, I think that this interpretation can be applied to those arguments as well, without too much strain. Van Inwagen's argument, for example, could be taken to show the problems with our notion of a composite object. On the one hand, thinking about the matter abstractly, we are disposed to judge that there should be a unified principle of composition for all kinds of things; but our judgments on

particular cases do not live up to that abstract judgment. Likewise, Merricks' argument from causal over-determination might be seen as revealing a clash between the abstract judgment that over-determination is unacceptable and judgments on particular cases, such as the judgment that the ball causes the breaking of the window and that the ball-particles cause the breaking of the window. Perhaps this could be seen as a tension within our concept of causality.

How each argument is best analysed, in the light of this account of revisionary ontology – as revealing problems with our concepts and proposing revisions – deserves further inquiry, but is outside the scope of this thesis. My focus here is on showing how this account, no matter how it is to be fleshed out for each argument, meets the adequacy conditions I have set up: explaining the dual reaction (the sense of destabilization and the sense of entitlement) and explaining the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology. I have already addressed how this account explains the dual reaction. The sense of entitlement can be explained by our awareness that our conceptual competence (in combination with uncontroversial assumptions and inferences) licenses the relevant judgments. And the sense of destabilization can be explained with the recognition that the revisionary ontologists' arguments show problems with the concepts that license these judgments. Often, the problem is that the concepts license inconsistent judgments. However, in some cases the problem with the concepts could be something a bit different – for example, that the concepts license insufficiently systematic judgments (perhaps this is the problem that van Inwagen's argument reveals). Now, how is the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology to be explained, on this account?

So far, I have said that revisionary ontologists' arguments alert us to theoretical problems with concepts. I have also supposed that the epistemic significance of the ontologists' arguments must consist in an improvement in the audience's beliefs. The question to be asked, then, is: how can showing theoretical problems with our concepts improve our beliefs? As I explained at the beginning in this section, beliefs are plausibly thought of as attitudes towards propositions, and these propositions are "cast in" certain concepts. Perhaps the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, then, consists in pointing to the problems with those concepts that we use to form beliefs. Pointing to the problems is the first step on the way to devising better concepts and thus forming better beliefs. An account along those lines has been suggested by Sider (2011). I will now give an overview of Sider's suggestion, before criticizing it and providing an improved account in the next section.

According to Sider's (2011, 61–62) suggestion, revisionary ontologists' arguments give us a reason to revise our *true* beliefs. This is because good beliefs, the kind of beliefs we ought to have, are not just true, but also cast in joint-carving concepts. In more detail, the reasoning would be the following.

- (1) The puzzles presented by revisionary ontologists show that the conceptual scheme employed in forming ordinary ontological beliefs is less than ideally theoretically virtuous (consistent, simple, elegant, etc.).

- (2) Less than ideally theoretically virtuous conceptual schemes are less than ideally joint-carving (they do not perfectly reflect the objective structure of reality).
- (3) Beliefs that are formed employing a less than ideally joint-carving conceptual scheme are non-ideal beliefs.
- (4) So ordinary ontological beliefs are non-ideal beliefs.
- (5) Non-ideal beliefs should be revised, if possible.
- (6) So ordinary ontological beliefs should be revised, if possible.

Sider does not have much to say on why less than perfectly joint-carving beliefs are not ideal as beliefs, which is unfortunate, since this is what my criticism will focus on. What he says is that “beliefs aim to conform to the world”; and “if belief and the world are both structured, belief aims not just at truth, but also at the right structure” (Sider 2011, 62). Before getting to some criticism on this point, I will briefly describe how Sider’s account would explain the ontologists’ arguments’ epistemic significance.

The explanation of epistemic significance is rather similar to that of simple incompatibilism. The audience’s old beliefs were unsatisfactory (or in any case, less than ideal – they did not fully meet the success condition(s) of beliefs), so the audience should replace the beliefs with better ones. Revisionary ontologists’ puzzles alert us to our beliefs’ failure to fully meet their success conditions and advises us about how to revise the beliefs. The Siderian account is an incompatibilist one: what the ontologists argue, on this account, speaks against the audience’s current beliefs about what there is. However, simple incompatibilism differs from Siderian incompatibilism with respect to the success-condition of beliefs that the accounts appeal to. In both cases, the beliefs are considered unsatisfactory or at least non-ideal, because they do not meet an important success-condition for beliefs. But for Siderian incompatibilism, the relevant success condition is not (mere) truth, but instead conformity with the objective structure of the world.¹⁵ That is a success condition that appears to admit of degrees; and so we cannot say that ordinary ontological beliefs simply fail to meet the relevant success-condition, on Sider’s account, but that they do not meet it perfectly. If more joint-carving concepts are available, then we should prefer those in belief formation.

In sum, the Siderian account seems to explain the dual reaction and the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology. The problem with the account is just the implausible ethics of belief that the account relies upon. This is the topic of the next subsection.

¹⁵ Some may not agree with how Sider thinks about truth. Perhaps such objectors would want to insist that true beliefs are precisely those that conform perfectly to the world, and Sider’s thin notion of truth – truth in the language we happen to be speaking – should rather be called “correctness” or something along those lines. For example, Horgan and Potrč (2008) make a distinction between two kinds of truth, “direct” and “indirect” correspondence with the world, that seems to be close to Sider’s proposal in spirit, if not in terminology. But I smell a merely terminological issue here and I find that adopting Sider’s terminology is helpful for setting his account apart from simple compatibilism.

4.5.2. The problem: implausible ethics of belief

I agree with Sider that truth (in the thin sense – truth in the language we happen to be speaking) is not the only relevant evaluation criterion for beliefs.¹⁶ Indeed, we should also evaluate the concepts that the beliefs are cast in. But I disagree with the view, if it is his view, that the best concepts, for all belief formation, are the joint-carving ones.

First, some points on whether it is indeed Sider's view, before I turn to why it is not a plausible view (regardless of whether it is Sider's or not). The main reasons to think that it is his view is (1) that he sometimes makes unqualified statements about the superior epistemic value of joint-carving concepts, and (2) his previously mentioned proposal that it is constitutive of belief that it aims at conforming to the world – an aim that is more fully achieved by beliefs cast in joint-carving concepts, as opposed to merely true beliefs. An example of Sider's unqualified claims about the epistemic value of joint-carving concepts is the following: "it's *better* to think and speak in joint-carving terms. We ought not to speak the 'grue' language, nor think the thoughts expressed by its simple sentences" (Sider 2011, 61). But he sometimes also ties this talk of the superior value to the context of "inquiry", e.g. in the following passage:

The goal of inquiry is not merely to believe truly (or to know). Achieving the goal of inquiry requires that one's belief state reflect the world, which in addition to lack of error requires one to think of the world *in its terms*, to carve the world at its joints. Wielders of non-joint-carving concepts are worse inquirers. (Sider 2011, 61)

Such statements may make one wonder whether he might restrict the superior value of joint-carving concepts to the context of "inquiry", which might mean something narrower than the context of belief formation. Perhaps not all belief formation is inquiry. Then, Sider might not be affirming the superior value of joint-carving concepts for all belief formation, but only some sub-portion thereof, the belief formation taking place in the context of "inquiry". However, Sider also explicitly states that beliefs qua beliefs should fully conform to the world, which involves carving at the joints, without restricting this to any particular kind of belief or context of belief formation. He writes of joint-carving as "a constitutive aim of the practice of forming beliefs" (Sider 2011, 61) and that the value of joint-carving derives from the fact that "beliefs aim to *conform to the world*" (Sider 2011, 62).

¹⁶ A necessary qualification is that not everyone agrees that truth in this thin sense (truth in the language we happen to be speaking) is always required of beliefs. And indeed, sometimes, false beliefs may be good for the belief-bearer. However, most would agree that most of the time, a (thinly) true belief is better than a false one, and this is enough here. It is only in special circumstances that we gain from false beliefs. My focus is on what else is normally needed in addition to thin truth.

If we take this talk of joint-carving as an important desideratum for all beliefs seriously, then Sider's argument for his ethics of belief seems to be the following. Beliefs' job is to represent the world accurately. Joint-carving true beliefs represent the world more accurately than merely true beliefs. So joint-carving true beliefs do the job of beliefs better. So they are better beliefs. Now, I agree that beliefs have a job to do, and that in pursuing epistemic progress, we should evaluate beliefs according to how well they do that job. I even agree that beliefs' job is to represent the world (generally) accurately. However, I disagree with Sider about how to assess whether a belief does that job well. Here is an argument analogous to Sider's: "A knife's job is to cut. So the better it cuts the better a knife is. The sharpest knife cuts the best. So the best knives are the sharpest knives." Something goes wrong there. It is true that the knife's job is to cut; but when we evaluate how well something does its job, we need to consider the context in which the job is done: this gives us a more fine-grained job description (the thing's context-specific job) and we can then more precisely evaluate how well the job is done. In order to evaluate how good a knife is as a knife, for example, we need to ask (a) what that particular knife is used to cut or (b) what we most often use knives for. The sharpest knives are often not optimal for practical purposes; for example, the sharpest knives presumably have very thin blades, which may break, when cutting something hard. Hence, we should not replace all our "unsatisfactory" (or non-ideal) knives for the sharpest ones.

So what is the most common job-in-context of our beliefs? Beliefs are most often formed and employed for practical purposes. Their job-in-context, then, is to represent the world accurately so as to serve such practical purposes. By "practical purposes", I mean the attainment of the belief-bearer's non-cognitive aims: aims like avoiding early death, but also some more ambitious aims, such as running a marathon or feeding a family. Such practical aims generally make accurate beliefs desirable. For example, if a bear is about to attack me, then it is good to form the accurate representation that a bear is about to attack me, so that I can lie down, feign death and survive (assuming that this is the most survival conducive response to a looming bear attack). If I would instead form the representation that a big brown bunny is about to hug me, then I would not respond as I would to a bear attack, but might instead go along with the presumed hug; and then I would not survive. The accurate belief is better than the inaccurate one, given the belief's job-in-context, because the former's accurate representation of the world performs better at keeping me alive and well.

Most of our beliefs serve purposes that are relevantly similar to the purpose of surviving potential bear attacks. So beliefs' most common job-in-context is to represent accurately in order to serve practical purposes. Further, the job-in-context of the beliefs about ordinary objects – the beliefs that revisionary ontologists seem to condemn – is also representing accurately for practical purposes. Beliefs about ordinary objects normally help us orient ourselves in our environment by keeping track of the location, number, colour and so on of chunks of reality that are easily observable (as opposed to indivisible atoms or

the universe) and practically salient (as opposed to the sum of my nose and the Eiffel tower). Given this context-specific job of beliefs, then, should we require joint-carving from them? Requiring joint-carving (conformity to the objective structure of the world) is more than just requiring general accuracy. I do not see why joint-carving true beliefs would always perform better than merely true (generally accurate) beliefs, when the job is accurate representation that helps to attain the belief-bearer's practical goals. In fact, joint-carving beliefs might well perform worse. It is sometimes noted that we should not rely too much on our intuitions or experiences in metaphysics, because these are affected by our ordinary concepts, and our ordinary concepts have evolved for non-metaphysical purposes – purposes like keeping us alive and well.¹⁷ The sense that time flows, for example, or the unshakable impression that macro-physical objects persist through time and change, might give no insight to the structure of reality, because our concepts of time and objecthood have evolved to help us survive and procreate. Granted, such impressions and judgments are not always attributed to the evolution of our *concepts*, but rather cognitive faculties more generally. For example, Schaffer writes:

Evolution suggests that human cognition is a powerful but flawed tool. On the one hand it is plausible that many of our cognitive faculties evolved to help us with the four 'F's (feeding, fighting, fleeing, and reproduction), and plausible that this pressured our ancestors towards reliably tracking the environment. On the other hand it is equally plausible that many of our cognitive faculties evolved to give us quick and dirty heuristics reliable only for limited purposes in evolutionarily salient contexts. (Schaffer 2016, 342)

However, at least one plausible way of understanding the relevant evolved features of the cognitive system is that they are hard-wired concepts, or the dispositions to form certain kinds of concepts rather than others. But now suppose that four-dimensionalists are right about the structure of reality and that our intuitions and experience indeed lead us astray, due to these evolutionary influences on our cognitive systems, or more precisely, on our concepts of time and objecthood. Then it would seem that evolution has proven the metaphysically inferior concepts of time and objecthood to be practically superior. And since our beliefs about ordinary objects serve practical purposes, we should surely continue to employ those practically superior, although metaphysically inferior, concepts in our belief formation.

So this is one reason to wonder whether joint-carving concepts are especially conducive to the practical aims of belief. Other reasons can be found by considering the particular functions served by the concepts that are found to be theoretically problematic by ontologists; or more precisely, by considering the functions served by the very features that are found to be problematic in those concepts. I have in mind the feature of vagueness. Wright, for example,

¹⁷ For example, see Scholl (2007) and Benovsky (2015).

suggests that vague concepts – concepts such that a minute difference in the object does not make a difference to whether they apply or not – serve important practical purposes. We want to be able to tell whether a predicate applies by a quick look, when we need to take appropriate action in a timely fashion. To facilitate such timeliness, “single changes too slight to be detected by casual observation cannot be permitted to generate doubt about the application of such a predicate” (Wright 1975, 337). On the other hand, this practically advantageous feature of vague concepts is precisely what generates the theoretical problems with these concepts. Again, it looks like theoretical superiority (and the superior joint-carvingness that, as we are granting, accompanies it) and practical advantages of concepts can come apart.

Sider might reply: so what? Good beliefs are not the ones that it is practically advantageous to have. Good beliefs are those that conform perfectly to the world, because that is just what beliefs *do*. If evolution has shaped our beliefs to serve practical ends, then we must be aware of such influences and resist them. But I find this hypothetical reply strangely dogmatic. Suppose that a furniture salesman gave you this sales pitch: “I know you already have a lot of furniture, but are you sure that it is the best furniture? After all, when you bought it, you took into account various practical considerations: how comfortable it is, the space available at your house, what you can afford to buy, and so on. This probably led you astray from the goal of identifying and obtaining the *best* furniture – which is exactly what I am now offering to you.” This would sound weird because it seems that these are exactly the considerations that you *should* take into account when buying furniture. Now suppose that the revisionary ontologist comes along with this sales pitch: “I know that you already have beliefs about what there is and these beliefs are even true, so they are not completely disastrous to have. But are you sure that these are the *best* beliefs available about what there is? After all, when you formed those beliefs, you used concepts that evolved to make you more likely to survive in your environment. So you ended up using concepts that were influenced by considerations like cognitive processing efficiency and practical salience. But I can offer you the truly *best* beliefs, beliefs that conform to the objective structure of reality. Yes, they come with a slightly smaller chance of survival, but this is nothing: you will have the best beliefs!” We should respond to the revisionary ontologist just as we should respond to the furniture salesman: “Get out of here! These practical considerations are exactly those that I *should* have taken into account. The beliefs I have are *better* than what you are offering.”

How would one even go about justifying the claim that the best beliefs are *really* the perfectly joint-carving ones? It is surely not enough to just say that reflecting reality is what beliefs *do*. One option for saying something further is to say that the original purpose of belief-forming was reflecting reality, and it was only later that humans started to employ the beliefs for practical purposes. The belief salesman would then be saying that we have forgotten about what beliefs were supposed to do, what their original function is. No matter what the merits of this reply otherwise are, it fails most obviously because it gets things

the wrong way around. The original function of belief-forming, most probably, is getting by and getting ahead in the world. It was not nature's intention to make us metaphysicians. More plausibly, belief forming caught on because it facilitated things like surviving potential bear attacks. To offer a speculative story about the origin of belief: perhaps it all began with Gendler's (2008) "aliefs", i.e. belief-like attitudes that motivate behaviour without being consciously recognized at all. Then came conscious awareness and reflection, which further facilitated representational accuracy and thereby the achievement of practical aims. As a by-product of these developments, reflection was sometimes over-employed and representational accuracy was pursued to an extent that was no longer practical. Given this story, the sorts of beliefs that Sider is concerned with – beliefs that aim only at reflecting the world – would be a mere evolutionary by-product of fitness-enhancing beliefs.

I am not committed to this story about the origin of belief. I merely take it to be more plausible than supposing that beliefs' original purpose was to conform perfectly to the world. Further, I do not in any case find much merit in the idea that beliefs' original purpose can override current context-specific purposes when we evaluate how well a belief does its job. Perhaps some other case could be made for the conclusion that beliefs that perfectly conform to the objective structure of the world are better beliefs. Then, I would say that we should sometimes choose worse beliefs over better ones; and the choice of beliefs about ordinary objects like tables is one of those cases. Even if from some objective point of view, beliefs that conform fully to the world are *better* beliefs, it is not rational for a person to give up the (objectively worse) beliefs that serve her purposes better.

In fact, I find it more plausible that the objectively good beliefs just are the ones that we should adopt, all things considered, and a different notion of objectively good belief cannot be defended. But I need not suppose this. Recall why we are discussing the nature of good beliefs here. We are asking about the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology. Now, suppose revisionary ontology only informed us about what objectively good beliefs would be like, without the implication that the audience should adopt these beliefs. This would leave the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology obscure. One might suggest that the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, on this account, would be knowledge of objectively good ontological beliefs (that we need not adopt); but this does not seem like especially worthwhile knowledge. Suppose that moral philosophy told us that the objectively good person would kill one to save five, but there is no implication that anyone actually *should* act like this. It might be of *some* epistemic significance to gain such knowledge from philosophy, but one would hope for more.

I believe that revisionary ontologists can indeed hope for more than just informing people about objectively good beliefs that they, as limited human beings in the world they are actually inhabiting, should not in fact adopt. The important thing to notice is that not all our beliefs are formed for practical purposes – even if the original purpose of belief-forming was practical, most

belief-forming currently is practical, and most belief-forming about what exists is practical. At least some people attest that they also form beliefs merely out of intellectual or metaphysical curiosity, or more broadly, to excel as epistemic agents. Might revisionary ontology improve our ordinary concepts for the purpose of forming *those* beliefs? I will elaborate on this option shortly, and this is indeed the account that I defend. Before that, however, I will take a look at a different account that builds on Sider's and that might seem to avoid the charge of an implausible ethics of belief. That is what I call the "revolutionary fictionalist version of Siderian incompatibilism".

4.5.3. Against the revolutionary fictionalist¹⁸ version of Siderian incompatibilism

According to revolutionary fictionalism, one need not completely do away with current, theoretically problematic ways of thinking about the world, especially if these ways of thinking are cognitively or otherwise advantageous. One can instead transform one's attitudes towards the relevant propositions into some kind of quasi-beliefs or "pretenseful acceptances", instead of full, proper beliefs. Daly describes the view thus:

Fictionalism so understood [revolutionary fictionalism] ... is an account of what attitude we should take to the sentences of S. It says that we should not believe them. We should regard those sentences as telling (something relevantly like) a fictional story. (Daly 2008, 424)

Dorr and Rosen (2002) defend revolutionary fictionalism regarding ordinary discourse (in so far as it involves quantification over composite objects – which is certainly a significant part of ordinary discourse). They apparently recommend revolutionary fictionalism as a preventative measure, because the discourse *might* turn out to be false, if there are no composite objects; and they take this issue to be resolvable by metaphysical argumentation, if resolvable at all. Here, however, I wish to consider a revolutionary fictionalist version of Sider's view, because one might think that it can escape the problems facing Siderian incompatibilism. I think it cannot actually escape the main problem with Siderian incompatibilism i.e. the implausible ethics of belief. It also faces an additional problem: it involves an odd, under-motivated notion of "belief".

The revolutionary fictionalist version of Siderian incompatibilism is the following. Appealing to Sider's ethics of belief, the ontologist can insist that one should believe that *p* only if *p* conforms perfectly to the world. But the

¹⁸ The label "revolutionary fictionalism" was introduced with this meaning by Stanley (2001). It is contrasted with "hermeneutic fictionalism", according to which our *current* attitude towards the relevant discourse is not that of belief, but pretenseful acceptance. If hermeneutic fictionalism is true about an area of discourse, then revolutionary fictionalism about that area of discourse is unmotivated, of course.

response to recognizing that p does not conform perfectly to the world need not be revising concepts and acquiring different, joint-carving beliefs. Instead, the response could be to transform the belief into a different, less “respectful” attitude. The fictionalist twist helps to address the problem that the non-joint-carving concepts might be practically useful and therefore worth preserving, because the fictionalist only requests an attitude change, not a conceptual change.

However, I do not believe that the fictionalist actually escapes the problem with the Siderian account, described in the previous subsection. The account still lacks motivation for positing the aim of conformity with the world as the aim of (all) belief, and thus it lacks motivation for requiring one to withhold belief in the propositions cast in the problematic concepts. Further, a new problem that arises for the revolutionary fictionalist is: what does this prescribed attitude revision actually require from the agent, behaviourally or phenomenologically? Looking more closely at the fictionalist’s prescription, we find that what she describes as the *belief* to be withdrawn from propositions like “There are chairs” is a rather particular kind of belief-like attitude. And although it is plausible that most people believe that there are chairs, it is not quite so plausible that they believe it in the fictionalist’s sense of “belief”. Take the following example by Dorr and Rosen, about the contrast between belief and the kind of attitude they recommend towards ordinary discourse:

Consider the mariner who knows full well that Copernicus was right. When he is navigating he speaks and thinks in Ptolemaic terms. In the midst of a storm, when things are urgent, he may have no conscious reservations about what he says or thinks. Nonetheless, when he says “If Venus has crossed the moon, we’re off course” he is not committed to its truth. His official view, his genuine view, is that Copernicus was right and that his Ptolemaic remark is a useful fiction. (Dorr and Rosen 2002, 171)

Based on this quote (illustrating the difference between belief and the fictionalist’s prescribed attitude), Dorr and Rosen apparently take the revolutionary fictionalist’s prescription “Do not *believe*, but only pretensefully *accept p*” to mean something like the following: “Do not endorse p as your official, genuine view; but feel free to rely on the representation that p in deliberating on your actions, without conscious reservation (especially when in a hurry).” However, plausibly, most people do not endorse it as their “official, genuine view” that chairs exist. Plausibly, most people just think of the world in terms of tables, chairs and other ordinary objects as they go along, and when they are asked whether there are chairs, they find it quite natural to answer affirmatively. When they are asked, further, “Is it your *official, genuine view* that there are chairs?” then if they do answer affirmatively, I suppose that they would have formed their official, genuine view on this matter there and then, instead of reporting an official, genuine view that they already had, prior to hearing the question. This is, first, because in order for one to have the *official* view that p , it seems that

one must have thought about whether p and come to the conclusion that p , rather than simply acting and reasoning as if p or taking it for granted that p . Second, “official, genuine view” just sounds like a more serious and solemn attitude than the kind of beliefs we would expect most people to hold about the existence of chairs, prior to considering the issue in a philosophical spirit. Now, the prescription to *no longer* endorse it as one’s official, genuine view that chairs exist does not make much sense, if one never held it as such.

This might be taken to suggest that most people do not really *believe* that there are chairs (since, as I am claiming, it is not their official, genuine view that there are chairs); but this strikes me as an inflated notion of belief. For example, I believe that there is a coffee cup on the table in front of me as I am writing this. I would not necessarily say that this is my official, genuine view on the matter (at least, it was not my official, genuine view until I paused to think about it); but it is nevertheless a belief.

A remark that helps to capture a relevant distinction between the different kinds of attitudes that we call “beliefs”, is Scholl’s. “Many intuitions, after all, are not appreciated in an abstract, Platonic sense, but are rather part of how we experience and imagine the world,” he writes, questioning whether we should take intuitions seriously in metaphysical theorizing (Scholl 2007, 582). “Intuitions” in this quote could well be replaced with “beliefs”. The belief of the mariner when he navigates the ocean, that the Venus has crossed the moon, seems like a “part of how we experience and imagine the world”, whereas the mariner’s official, genuine Copernican view is “appreciated in an abstract, Platonic sense”. I find that both of these have a good claim to be called beliefs; and so I cannot accept the revolutionary fictionalist Siderian’s claim that belief should be withheld from non-joint-carving propositions. A certain *kind* of belief (“theoretical belief”, as I shall call it) should be withheld, perhaps, but not belief as such. I will elaborate on and defend this idea in the next section.

4.6. The modified Siderian account: revisionary ontology can improve theoretical beliefs

A “belief” can be generally characterized as “the attitude we have, roughly, whenever we take something to be the case or regard it as true” (Schwitzgebel 2015). In other words, when we believe a proposition, we have a certain sort of affirmative attitude towards it. Further, this is not just any affirmative attitude: for example, it is not the attitude of wanting the world to be as the proposition represents it. It is rather the attitude of *taking* the world to be as the proposition represents it. There are, further, different ways in which we can take the world to be as represented by the proposition, or in other words, different ways in which we can endorse a representation: for example, we can consciously affirm that the world is a certain way or we can act on the assumption that the world is that way.

The main division that I draw within beliefs, however, is not based upon the kind of endorsement of the representation that is involved, but the purpose of forming the endorsed representation. Some of our beliefs are formed to represent the world so as to guide our actions in pursuit of ultimately non-epistemic aims, while the forming of others is motivated by the desire for intrinsically worthwhile epistemic excellence. I will call the former kind of beliefs “practical beliefs” and the latter “theoretical beliefs”; and my view is that what I have presented as Sider’s ethics of “belief” might apply to theoretical beliefs, but not to practical beliefs. I also find that most people rather uncontroversially have the practical belief that there are chairs and tables, but it is a more contentious issue whether they have such a theoretical belief. An important methodological point here is that when we discuss whether most people *have* certain beliefs, for example, about whether there are chairs, and when we discuss whether it is epistemically *permissible or ideal to have* such beliefs, we must take care to make sure to talk about “belief” in the same sense, in both cases. Only then can we hope to come to a justified view on the capacity of revisionary ontology to criticize and otherwise make prescriptions regarding folk belief. An upshot of drawing such distinctions will be that the epistemic significance that this modified Siderian account allows to revisionary ontology is rather limited.

4.6.1. The distinction between theoretical and practical beliefs, and how it helps

In defence of the Siderian account, in light of the criticism put forth in the previous section, one may want to say that surely *some* beliefs are not formed for practical purposes, even if the original and overwhelming purpose of belief-forming is practical. There are also beliefs motivated by “metaphysical curiosity”, for example. Metaphysicians seem to be forming beliefs about what there is for such impractical purposes; and perhaps others might want to do so, as well. I agree: I see no reason to doubt the self-knowledge of the many people who say that they sometimes form beliefs just to satisfy metaphysical or intellectual curiosity. I might even be one of them. Belief-forming is not all about practical purposes; but it is still about practical purposes most of the time. Now we need to get clearer on how to modify Sider’s account, in this light. My proposal, again, is that the revisionary ontologists should distinguish between theoretical and practical beliefs and maintain that revisionary ontologists target the concepts that we use to form theoretical beliefs. In this section, I aim to make clearer the distinction between the two kinds of beliefs.

First, this proposal needs to be distinguished from a similar one made by Hazlett (manuscript). According to Hazlett, in order to understand the epistemic aim of limning structure, we need to posit the attitude of *theorizing*. In order for theorizing that *p* to be correct, according to Hazlett, *p* must be both true and “structural” (i.e. cast in joint-carving concepts). This is because of the kind of

attitude that theorizing is: “Just as belief aims at truth, theorizing aims at truth and structure” (Hazlett manuscript, 9). My notion of theoretical belief is different from Hazlett’s “theorizing”. I do not take theoretical beliefs’ correctness conditions to involve joint-carving, as a matter of how “theoretical belief” is defined; i.e. I do not take it to be constitutive of a theoretical belief that it aims at structure and is therefore correct if and only if it is both true and joint-carving. Instead, the correctness conditions are whatever they need to be in order to meet the aim of theoretical beliefs: the aim of achieving epistemic excellence for its own sake.

Epistemic excellence need not be understood in terms of mirroring the objective structure of the world. It may instead be understood in terms of the internal coherence of the agent’s belief system, for example; or it may require a subjectively felt state of understanding. An agent could in principle mirror the world’s structure perfectly without being subjectively aware of it; and one might want to say that this constitutes a shortcoming in epistemic excellence. This addition might have important ramifications for Sider’s approach; for example, it would complicate comparing the epistemic excellence of agents, since someone might lukewarmly affirm propositions cast in more perfectly joint-carving concepts, whereas someone else might have a higher degree of subjective affirmation towards the relevant propositions, whereas these are cast in less perfectly joint-carving concepts. I will not discuss these ramifications further, however, since I am not putting this view of epistemic excellence forward as my own view, but only as an option, to exemplify how one could hold that epistemic excellence is not only about true joint-carving belief.

So I do not define “theoretical beliefs” as those that must reflect the structure of the world, in order to be correct or successful. Someone who says that a theoretical belief must reflect the objective structure of the world would, on my view, be putting forth a substantive position on what epistemic excellence requires. I prefer this approach to defining “theoretical belief”, because positing a kind of attitude that has exactly the correctness conditions that are needed, in order to make sense of the epistemic significance of limning the structure, seems a bit *ad hoc*. The distinction between kinds of beliefs corresponding to aims of belief appears to be better motivated.

Distinctions between “practical” and “theoretical” beliefs are not unheard of, but I have not come across one that would similarly base the division primarily upon the purpose of forming the belief. For example, O’Leary-Hawthorne and Howard-Snyder, in the context of analysing the nature of theists’ belief in God, draw a distinction between “practical” and “theoretical” beliefs as follows: “At a first gloss, theoretical beliefs are commitments to the world’s being a certain way, whereas practical beliefs are commitments to certain pictures to live by” (O’Leary-Hawthorne and Howard-Snyder 1996, 234). They further explain this as follows:

According to this conception of things, human beings have a ‘theoretical voice,’ which expresses their views concerning how things really are, and a ‘practical

voice,’ which expresses the views which they deploy as guides to acting in the world. Both deserve to be called beliefs – and yet the verdict of the ‘theoretical voice’ on some matter may be quite different from that of the ‘practical voice’. (O’Leary-Hawthorne and Howard-Snyder 1996, 234)

There are important differences between the taxonomy of beliefs described in this quote and my taxonomy of beliefs. First, unlike O’Leary and Howard-Snyder in the first quote, I do not tie the notion of belief to the notion of commitment. Central to believing is representing the world in a certain way and taking the world to be as represented, i.e. endorsing the representation as true in some way. The endorsement may consist in being disposed to sincerely make certain assertions or in acting in accordance with the representation, for example – there are different kinds of relevant endorsement. Perhaps “commitment” could be understood as another name for endorsement, in this broad sense, but this is not important here.

A more important issue with O’Leary-Hawthorne and Howard-Snyder’s characterization of theoretical and practical beliefs is that it is misleading to say that practical beliefs, in contrast to theoretical beliefs, are “guides to acting in the world”. Theoretical beliefs, like practical beliefs, are the basis for various actions. (In my (Kitsik 2018a) I call these “research actions”.) For example, having certain metaphysical beliefs might dispose me to make certain assertions, to go to certain conferences and avoid others, to seek out certain publications and read them, and so on. So theoretical beliefs can be guides to acting in the world, while they are also about “how things really are”. Further, it is not clear why our practical beliefs would not be about “how things really are”: most of the time, we want our practical beliefs to represent the world accurately as well. So I propose not making the distinction based on whether the aim of the belief is to represent or to guide action: this is a false dilemma, as both practical and theoretical beliefs represent the world and guide actions. Instead, I base the distinction upon whether the aim of belief is epistemic excellence for its own sake or the aim of belief is to facilitate the belief-bearer’s or somebody else’s practical interests. In this chapter, I focus on the belief-bearer’s non-epistemic interests (for example, survival) as the central constraint on the concepts used to form practical beliefs. In the next chapter, when I discuss feminist metaphysics of gender as a project of conceptual engineering, I will bring up the idea that somebody else’s non-epistemic interests might be relevant for how the belief-bearer ought to revise the concepts that she uses to form beliefs.

While the distinction between practical and theoretical beliefs certainly has initial appeal, one is bound to notice ramifications when examining the matter more closely. First, for some inquiries – some projects of belief-forming – it is unclear whether they are pursued for the sake of epistemic excellence (such as gaining intrinsically valuable knowledge or understanding) or for practical purposes or both. For example, artificial intelligence research seems to have both theoretical and practical aims: the aim of gaining a better understanding of

the human mind, by analogy with AI systems, and of pursuing technological innovations to enhance human well-being. Further, even with “theoretical” physics, it is not clear whether it is ultimately (only) theoretical. For example, Anderson writes, challenging the idea of physics as a “pure” science, that certain significant questions for physics have become significant because “states have conceived a political interest in building nuclear weapons and have funded most research in physics with military ends in mind” (Anderson 1995, 43).

However, is it necessary, in order to say that revisionary ontologists improve the concepts used for forming theoretical beliefs, to be able to say about each inquiry whether it is about forming practical or theoretical beliefs? I think not. It might well be that some projects are both about forming practical and theoretical beliefs, or perhaps it is indeterminate which beliefs are being formed in some project. The important point here is rather that (mainstream) revisionary ontology seems not to be such a project. It seems *only* aimed at forming theoretical beliefs. Even if it should turn out that these beliefs have some practical use as well, such possible practical benefits do not seem to guide or constrain the construction of those beliefs. So the unforeseen practical applications of these theoretical beliefs do not threaten the division, because the division is not based upon what use the beliefs can be put to, or even what use they are in fact put to; the division is based upon the considerations that guide and constrain the formation and revision of the beliefs. In the case of purely theoretical beliefs, the beliefs targeted by revisionary ontologists, non-epistemic desiderata (or non-cognitive, non-theoretical, or non-evidential desiderata) do not constrain the formation or revision of the beliefs, given the aim of these beliefs: intrinsically valuable epistemic excellence.

Another issue that might be posed in connection with this division of beliefs into two kinds that appear to be isolated from one another (so that we can pursue distinct projects of conceptual engineering, for each kind of belief) is that the distinction implies a certain kind of self-fragmentation. Although O’Leary-Hawthorne and Howard-Snyder’s gloss on practical and theoretical beliefs is rather different from mine, the problem of self-fragmentation that they recognize is also relevant for my purposes: “this tradition appears to fragment the self: the practical self that guides action is to a considerable degree autonomous from the theoretical self that pursues an understanding of the world” (O’Leary-Hawthorne and Howard-Snyder 1996, 234). I am not convinced that such fragmentation into the practical self and the theoretical self should be seen as a problem; but the issue is outside the scope of this thesis. (I suspect, however, that whether the self-fragmentation should be seen as a serious problem depends on how we should understand epistemic excellence, in particular, whether epistemic excellence for its own sake can be pursued in an isolated part of the mind, as it were.)

One might also wonder whether something as potentially controversial as the distinction between practical and theoretical beliefs, understood as two kinds of belief, is really needed here: perhaps there are just beliefs, sometimes formed for theoretical and sometimes for practical purposes. However, first, I do not

think that the view that there is a single kind of thing rightly called “belief” is the default, uncontroversial view here. There is much recent discussion on how the term “belief” is used to denote different kinds of dispositional profiles (e.g. the disposition to sincerely assert that p versus dispositions to act and feel as if p).¹⁹ I think it may well be the default position, not the uncontroversial one, that “belief” is a messy term, as ordinary-language terms tend to be, and it is used to denote importantly different kinds of states. Most of the literature on those different kinds of states currently seems to be concerned with the different dispositions and accordingly different kinds of endorsement of p that we may be attributing to someone when we say that she believes that p . I focus on another dimension of difference (which I think may also underlie the difference between the different kinds of endorsement): the different reasons for which we form beliefs.

I do recognize that there is something not quite satisfactory in speaking as if beliefs were discrete countable entities in our minds, such that we can point to one and ask: is this one a theoretical or a practical one or something in between? If we went more deeply into the metaphysics of the mind, I suspect that notions like belief may need to be discarded. However, this is not the place for taking a stand on the metaphysical status of folk psychology. Many of the problems that arise for my way of talking about beliefs arise for belief talk generally: whether we can ask how many beliefs a person has, how to individuate and locate them, and so on. Regardless of what may be the standing of folk psychology as a metaphysical theory, I am operating under the assumption that belief-talk can be usefully employed when we try to understand the epistemic significance of a given field of inquiry (i.e. how the inquiry improves our beliefs). And I am proposing that the variety of belief-talk that would be particularly useful, for this purpose, is the kind of belief-talk that draws the suggested distinction between theoretical and practical beliefs.

But still, one might ask, why not phrase my proposal about the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology as follows: revisionary ontology can plausibly improve our beliefs for theoretical purposes, and there is no reason to assume that it can improve our beliefs for practical purposes. The problem with this way of speaking would be that it is ambiguous between my proposed view and what might be called the “compromise view”. According to the compromise view, the very same beliefs should serve both theoretical and practical purposes and, accordingly, we may need to weigh the relevant theoretical and practical desiderata against one another. For example, if the concept of table turns out to be inconsistent and therefore theoretically problematic, then this theoretical shortcoming may have to be weighed against the practical benefits of using the concept of table in belief formation. My view is that there is no need for such weighing and compromising: we can engineer concepts for theoretical beliefs without worrying about such practical disadvantages. However, I do not defend this view in detail in this thesis. (I do touch on it in the next chapter,

¹⁹ See e.g. Schwitzgebel (2010).

when I discuss the irrelevance of sorites arguments for the issue of whether we should use a concept of ‘woman’ for feminist purposes.)

So I qualify the nature of my claims about the distinction between practical and theoretical beliefs: I am not making claims about the ultimate metaphysics of the mind, but about a useful way of speaking for the purposes of understanding the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, and potentially, other fields of inquiry. I also wish to qualify the strength of my claims: I do not consider this to be the only way one could possibly think about beliefs, when one is explaining the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology. It is only the most promising way that I have come up with, so far – and still far from an unproblematic one.

Now, with all that said, why should we say that the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology consists in improving our theoretical beliefs, but not our practical beliefs? The reason is that when it comes to theoretical beliefs, it is plausible that the more fully they conform to reality, the better they are as beliefs – or more precisely, the better they are as the kind of beliefs that they are. Again, one might have a different conception of epistemic excellence, but beliefs’ conforming perfectly to reality is at least a credible contender as a conception of epistemic excellence. If it is indeed the right conception of epistemic excellence, then conforming to reality is the only job of theoretical beliefs, and matters like cognitive processing efficiency need not be taken into account. Revisionary ontologists’ purpose would then be to facilitate the improvement of theoretical beliefs, by alerting us to the shortcomings of our ordinary conceptual scheme and providing us with a more coherent and elegant, and hence more joint-carving alternative, to employ in forming theoretical beliefs. For example, perhaps we might be advised to give up concepts like ‘table’ when we form theoretical beliefs about the world, since the concept commits us to practically innocent but theoretically unacceptable inconsistencies. On this account, revisionary ontology would have nothing to say about what kind of practical beliefs we should have, however. We may still use the concept ‘table’ in forming practical beliefs and hence there is still a sense in which we may believe that there are tables. This is the account of revisionary ontology that, in broad outline, I accept. It still needs to be clarified whether the epistemic improvement in question is somehow “objective”. I will return to this shortly. But before this, I need to address how the account explains the sense of entitlement and the sense of destabilization.

The sense of entitlement and the sense of destabilization can be explained similarly to how they were explained in the Siderian account considered in the previous section. However, on the current account, we are entitled to the beliefs cast in ordinary concepts, not only because they are true in the language we happen to be speaking (as it was on the original Siderian account), but because they are good (practical) beliefs. They do their practical job well: there is nothing wrong with the concepts they are cast in, given the purpose that the beliefs are formed for. Regarding the sense of destabilization, one option is to explain it as a by-product of the norms governing practical belief formation. To

a certain extent, pursuing a theoretically virtuous conceptual scheme is desirable even for practically oriented beliefs. But such considerations are to be weighed against others, such as cognitive processing efficiency and perhaps moral considerations. We might have the mistaken impression that as epistemic agents, we must pursue the theoretical virtues – logical coherence, in particular – without qualification. And perhaps the sense of destabilization, in response to revisionary ontologists’ arguments, is an outcome of this mistaken impression. Another possible explanation is that those who feel the sense of destabilization are concerned with forming good theoretical beliefs, and what gets destabilized are their theoretical beliefs, not their practical beliefs. The formers of theoretical beliefs would then be responding appropriately to the norms governing theoretical beliefs. Finally, the destabilization might occur because the audience is confused about whether the arguments address their theoretical or their practical beliefs: they might not clearly distinguish between the two. In any case, both the sense of entitlement and the sense of destabilization can be explained, on this account.

4.6.2. Limiting the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology

Let us return to the central issue: the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology. The suggestion above was that revisionary ontology can improve our theoretical beliefs, but not our practical beliefs. This claim must now be qualified. The claim that revisionary ontology can improve *our* theoretical beliefs and is therefore epistemically significant implies that *we* have theoretical beliefs or are interested in having them. But I have not shown, nor do I intend to show, that all humans aim to form theoretical beliefs or that forming good theoretical beliefs is objectively good. Improving practical beliefs is good for all humans because all humans form practical beliefs: we all need to form generally accurate representations of the world in order to pursue our non-cognitive aims. But not all humans must form theoretical beliefs. There are presumably some who claim to have no interest in achieving epistemic excellence for its own sake. One option for the revisionary ontologist is to insist that humans just *are* formers of theoretical beliefs by nature, whether they recognize it or not. But this would need some justification.

In response, revisionary ontologists might want to insist that their metaphysical curiosity, or more generally, interest in epistemic excellence, seems to signal something of objective epistemic value.²⁰ This would require the revisionary ontologists to accept that there is not just objective structure in reality and objective facts about the epistemic value of forming representations of that reality, but also that they have intuitive access to those value facts. These are

²⁰ Brady, for example, holds that curiosity defeasibly alerts us to “interesting or fascinating subjects” and the interesting or fascinating character of those subjects does not derive from the fact that we happen to be curious about them (Brady 2009, 282).

substantial commitments to take on. So I would rather recommend the revisionary philosophers to rest content with the view that if someone is interested in forming good theoretical beliefs, then revisionary ontology can potentially improve her theoretical beliefs. This is a rather limited kind of epistemic significance: there are no strong reasons to think that the belief former's epistemic standing is objectively improved.

Another issue concerning the limitations of the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, on this account, is that theoretical beliefs would seem to make up only a very small sub-class of all beliefs. (Let us pretend for a moment that we can count beliefs and compare the sizes of sets of beliefs.) However, I do not think that we can immediately draw any interesting conclusions about the epistemic significance of a project, based on the number of beliefs that it potentially affects. Although revisionary ontology, on the view defended here, would leave most of our total belief system intact, it would significantly affect one kind of relation to the world that we can call "belief": how we represent the world when we represent it just for the sake of epistemic excellence. (For a comparison, suppose that somebody said that a burglary you suffered was rather insignificant, because the burglar only took away the things that you have accumulated in your apartment because you consider them intrinsically, rather than instrumentally valuable; and such things only make up a very small sub-class of all the things in your apartment.) So I do not consider this – the small number of beliefs affected – to be a major threat to the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, on this account.

4.6.3. Which beliefs are the real beliefs?

A thorny issue that I have avoided so far concerns which of the two kinds of beliefs discussed here really deserves the label "belief". Some philosophers might deny that practical beliefs are really beliefs. Genuine belief, they would say, is what we affirm when we think about what is really the case in the world, when we distance ourselves from the everyday hassle. On that view, belief is our "official, genuine view", rather than a representation formed in pursuit of ultimately non-epistemic aims. But one might also have just the opposite idea of "real beliefs". I suppose that what distinguishes "belief" from other kinds of representations, such as those of imaginings, is that in the case of belief, we not just represent the world in a certain way, but we take it to be as represented. Now, let us think about why we first started representing the world around us and why and in what sense it was originally important to take the world to be as represented. Plausibly, we started forming these kinds of representations of the world for ultimately non-epistemic purposes, such as survival, and it was important to "take the world to be as represented" in the sense of perceiving the world in the relevant way and acting in accordance with the representation. Following that reasoning, one could insist that practical beliefs are the "original" beliefs.

I am content, however, to call both kinds of states “beliefs”. In this regard, my attitude is similar to the one expressed by Chalmers here:

[I]nstead of asking “What is a belief? What is it to believe?” and expecting a determinate answer, one can instead focus on the various roles one wants belief to play and say, here are some interesting states: B1 can play these roles, B2 can play these roles, B3 can play these roles. Not much hangs on the residual verbal question of which is really belief. (Chalmers 2011, 538)

Further, the practical/theoretical distinction might not be the only distinction to be made among beliefs (in the broad sense of “belief” as a state that involves representing the world in a certain way and taking the world to be as represented). There might be even more “real beliefs”. However, this is the distinction that I take to be relevant for understanding the nature and epistemic significance of revisionary ontology.

4.7. Chapter summary

The aim of the chapter was to interpret revisionary ontology from the ontologists’ own point of view. I set the following adequacy conditions for the account: explaining the sense of destabilization and the sense of entitlement (as common responses to the ontologists’ arguments) and explaining the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology.

An account that can straightforwardly explain the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology is what I called the “simple incompatibilist” account. According to this account, the revisionary ontologists’ puzzling arguments show that (certain of) our ordinary beliefs about what exists are false. Since beliefs are good when they are true and bad when they are false, identifying false beliefs and replacing them with true ones is an improvement in beliefs. I found that this account has trouble explaining the sense of entitlement to the beliefs – the sense of entitlement that remains, despite the sense of destabilization that the arguments give rise to. I also suggested that the best explanation for the sense of entitlement is that we are aware of maintaining a certain kind of justification for the beliefs: we can form these beliefs via the highly truth-conducive process of applying concepts that we are competent with and drawing simple inferences of a kind that we are competent with.

I then considered some compatibilist contenders for simple incompatibilism. These were Socratic compatibilism, indifference compatibilism, and linguistic variance compatibilism. The first two are in tension with the sense of entitlement and the sense of destabilization. According to Socratic compatibilism, we have believed revisionary ontologists’ theses, for example that there are no tables, all along; their arguments only make us aware of the belief. The problem with this view is that the objects of the sense of entitlement and the sense of destabilization are beliefs like the belief that there are tables – so it is hard to

see how we could have believed the opposite all along. According to indifference compatibilism, we did not have beliefs about whether tables and the like exist, until revisionary ontologists came along. This is again in tension with the sense of entitlement and the sense destabilization, in a way that is similar to the way that Socratic compatibilism is in tension with these phenomena. Finally, linguistic variance compatibilism can explain the sense of entitlement (it can adopt the “best explanation” I have suggested above), but faces trouble when explaining the sense of destabilization and the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology.

I then considered what I called “Siderian incompatibilism”. The central idea here is that revisionary ontology alerts the audience to problems with their concepts, rather than false beliefs. Further, the theoretical problems with the concepts (e.g. licensing inconsistent judgments), on this view, indicate that the concepts are not “joint-carving”, i.e. they do not reflect the objective structure of the world. Hence, they should not be used in belief formation. The assumption there is that the concepts used in forming beliefs should be joint-carving – and Sider indeed explicitly affirms this assumption, basing this assumption on the idea that beliefs are supposed to conform to reality, and joint-carving concepts (rather than mere truth) are needed for perfect conformity.

The problem with the Siderian account is the implausible assumption about what beliefs are supposed to do. Plausibly, beliefs (or at any rate, many of our beliefs) are supposed to help us survive and prosper (non-epistemically), and joint-carving concepts might not be the best concepts for that. However, arguably we do sometimes form beliefs just for the sake of epistemic excellence; and the case of forming metaphysical beliefs plausibly falls into this category. In light of this, I amended Sider’s suggested account as follows: the aim of revisionary ontology is to improve the concepts that we use to improve our *theoretical* beliefs, but not those that we use to form our practical beliefs. This is the explanation for the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, then. It is a limited kind of epistemic significance, unless one can show that it is objectively good for the audience to form good theoretical beliefs – that regardless of whether or not they happen to be interested in forming good theoretical beliefs, they should be.

5. APPLYING THE ACCOUNT TO THE METAPHYSICS OF GENDER

5.1. Chapter introduction

The previous chapters are bound to raise questions about how broadly the theoretical metalinguistic account applies. In this chapter I will show how this account can be applied to interpret what is sometimes called the “feminist metaphysics of gender” and what might also be called “feminist revisionary ontology of gender”, in an extended sense of “revisionary ontology”. This feminist project has at least some superficial similarity to the kind of revisionary ontology previously considered. Some philosophers, such as Barnes (2014, 2017) and Mikkola (2015, 2017), think that the similarity is not merely superficial. This chapter, however, rather serves to undermine the appearance of similarity. “Metaphysics has spent a lot of time asking whether there are tables, rather less time asking whether there are genders,” remarks Barnes (2014, 335). But is it really the same “metaphysics” that has been asking each question? And are these the same kind of question about what there is? I aim to undermine the view that these are the same kind of question, as well as to show how my general approach to interpreting ontology (as a project of improving concepts to improve beliefs) applies in this case. I will argue that social constructivist claims about gender, such as Haslanger’s claim that women are those who are oppressed in virtue of their real or imagined biological features, should be understood not as claims (exclusively) about facts. Instead, these claims should be understood as claims about how we should revise our concepts in order to improve our *practical* beliefs, as opposed to the theoretical beliefs targeted by mainstream revisionary ontology.

So I will defend an account of feminist metaphysics of gender and mainstream revisionary ontology as distinct projects of conceptual engineering. The consensus that has emerged in the debate between Barnes (2014, 2017), Mikkola (2015, 2017), Sider (2017), and Schaffer (2017) seems to be that the inquiries into the existence of tables and into that of genders belong to the same bigger project of investigating reality in a philosophical manner. Defending this view, feminist philosophers like Barnes and Mikkola have also found that there are too few fruitful interactions between the metaphysicians concerned with things like tables and those concerned with genders. A factor in this, they have suggested, is that mainstream metaphysicians, such as Sider (2011) or Schaffer (2009), exclude or marginalize feminist metaphysics in their characterizations of what metaphysics is and does. In his response, Sider (2017) agreed that feminist metaphysics is an important kind of metaphysics and this is not well enough recognized. He insisted, however, that his account of metaphysics (as the study of the fundamental structure of reality) can actually accommodate feminist metaphysics. Similarly, in his response, Schaffer (2017) argued that his conception of metaphysics (as the study of what grounds what) is hospitable to

feminist metaphysics. Barnes, Mikkola, Sider, and Schaffer all focus on constructivist metaphysics of gender as the central example of “feminist metaphysics”; this will also be the focus of the current chapter.

Leaving aside the disagreement about what Sider’s and Schaffer’s accounts of metaphysics imply for feminist metaphysics, I will take issue with the consensus that has emerged between Sider and Schaffer, on the one hand, and Barnes and Mikkola, on the other. Barnes, Mikkola, Sider, and Schaffer all seem to agree that feminist metaphysics of gender is just as much in the business of investigating reality as mainstream metaphysics. All four seem to hold that feminist philosophers providing constructivist analyses of gender, such as Haslanger (2000) and Sveinsdóttir (2013), are investigating reality, i.e. worldly facts, just as much as mainstream metaphysicians like Unger (1979), van Inwagen (1990), or Merricks (2001). I will call this view the Factual Interpretation. I will criticize the Factual Interpretation and provide an alternative account of feminist metaphysics of gender and its relationship to mainstream metaphysics. Central to that alternative account is the view that mainstream revisionary ontology and feminist metaphysics of gender both seek to improve the ordinary conceptual scheme that we employ when we form beliefs about the world. However, the two projects target concepts used in forming different kinds of beliefs. The feminist project mainly targets the beliefs that we unreflectively form upon perception and that are meant to inform much of our behaviour. The mainstream project exclusively targets the beliefs that we form when we reflect on the world from a practically detached point of view, in pursuit of epistemic excellence for its own sake. The upshot is that the two projects do not belong to the same bigger project of investigating reality.

I will proceed as follows. I will begin, in section 5.2, by criticizing the Factual Interpretation. Then, in section 5.3, I will provide an initial alternative to it: in contrast to mainstream metaphysics, feminist metaphysics does not investigate reality, but instead seeks to revise our gender concepts in line with feminist ethical and political goals. It would seem, then, that mainstream and feminist metaphysics are not in the same intellectual business. I will raise a problem for this assessment of matters, in section 5.4: much of mainstream metaphysics is also plausibly viewed as a project of conceptual engineering. Perhaps the two projects are in the same business, after all – although as competitors rather than allies. In section 5.5, I will reject this view as well, arguing that we should recognize different kinds of beliefs, targeted by the two projects of conceptual engineering. The ultimate conclusion, then, is that the two projects do not belong to the same intellectual business and it is not particularly problematic that they are pursued in relative isolation from one another.

5.2. Against the Factual Interpretation

While a remarkable body of literature has accumulated on feminist methodology in philosophy and science more generally, not much has been said

specifically about the relationship between feminist and mainstream metaphysics, before the recent discussion between Barnes, Mikkola, Sider, and Schaffer. I propose my account as an alternative to the consensus between these four. This consensus is the Factual Interpretation of feminist metaphysics: the view that mainstream and feminist metaphysics both investigate reality, that is, worldly facts (as opposed to, say, facts about our concepts). In this section, I will pose a problem for the Factual Interpretation: it is in tension with a certain plausible assumption, which I will call the Relevance thesis. The Relevance thesis says that appeals to certain kinds of ethical considerations are relevant in feminist metaphysics; for example, Jenkins' (2016) objection to Haslanger (2000) is a relevant one. I will further argue, in this section, that if I am right that the Factual Interpretation (or more precisely, the variant that I call Strong Factual Interpretation) is incorrect for at least some variety of feminist metaphysics, then it is *prima facie* problematic to call that variety of feminist metaphysics by the name "metaphysics". And terminology aside, it is then in any case problematic to consider that variety of feminist metaphysics a part of the intellectual project also involving mainstream metaphysics.

5.2.1. Background: the debate between Barnes, Mikkola, Sider, and Schaffer

I cannot, at this point, give a substantive characterization of "feminist" and "mainstream" metaphysics: what, if anything, distinguishes them (be it subject matter, method, or something else) is at issue in what follows. So I define the relevant kind of feminist and mainstream metaphysics, the interpretation of which I will be concerned with, by reference to paradigmatic examples. Feminist metaphysics involves, centrally, discussion of the existence and nature of genders (or sexes), as conducted, for example, by Haslanger (2000) and Sveinsdóttir (2013). Mainstream metaphysics is not limited to a characteristic subject matter; authors and works exemplifying this project include Unger (1979), van Inwagen (1990), Merricks (2001) – the "mainstream revisionary ontology" I have considered so far in this thesis. Others may mean something else by "mainstream metaphysics" and "feminist metaphysics". I am characterizing the projects like this because these are the projects that I am concerned with and the projects that Barnes and others seem to have in mind when they talk about the metaphysicians who study the existence of tables and those who study the existence and nature of genders.

Now, to put my interpretive proposal into the context of the discussion between Barnes, Mikkola, Sider, and Schaffer (focusing on Barnes and Sider), let us begin with Sider's account of metaphysics and Barnes' criticism thereof. Central to Sider's (2011) account is the idea that the world has an objective structure that can be "reflected" or "captured" to different extents by different conceptual schemes. The aim of metaphysics is to capture that objective structure, or to "carve nature at its joints", by seeking the most structure-

reflecting, joint-carving conceptual scheme. We find the most joint-carving conceptual scheme by looking for the most theoretically virtuous one – the most consistent, simple, elegant, explanatorily powerful one.

Sider also calls the joint-carving or structure-reflecting concepts “fundamental” concepts and the structure that they capture the “fundamental” structure of reality. For example: “Metaphysics, at bottom, is about the fundamental structure of reality” (Sider 2011, 1). This has caused some confusion, leading to the criticism that he does not consider the study of non-fundamental aspects of reality “metaphysics” (Barnes 2014). And since feminist metaphysics is precisely concerned with such non-fundamental aspects, Sider appears to exclude feminist metaphysics from “metaphysics” in his sense (*ibid.*). However, as Sider explains in his response (Sider 2017), the “fundamental” structure studied by metaphysics is not necessarily the bottom-most level of reality. Sider allows concepts to be joint-carving, and thus “fundamental”, without being, say, the concepts of fundamental physics. What matters is rather that the concept must play an indispensable role in an explanatory causal theory of the world; and such theories can be about non-basic aspects of the world. Explanatory causal theories are provided, for example, by economists and psychologists, and not just physicists; and feminist theories about gender can be considered such explanatory causal theories as well. For example, Sider (2017, 2472–2473) suggests that drawing a distinction between sex and gender might be required by the world’s causal or explanatory structure, and hence sex and gender can be joint-carving (“fundamental”) notions.

Let us now leave aside the question of whether Sider’s account, with its emphasis on fundamentality and natural joints, threatens to exclude feminist metaphysics from “proper” metaphysics. I will focus instead on the consensus that emerges between Sider and Barnes: the Factual Interpretation of feminist metaphysics. According to the Factual Interpretation, metaphysics is the study of reality and feminist metaphysics studies certain non-fundamental aspects of reality. Sider is apologetic about having suggested that feminist metaphysics is not a part of metaphysics: “Metaphysics certainly includes many questions other than those about fundamental reality, questions about the nature of race and gender among them, and I wish I hadn’t suggested otherwise” (Sider 2017, 2468). Further, a description of the world “in and of itself” – the description pursued by metaphysics – may include “facts about socially constructed gender and race” (Sider 2017, 2477). Barnes assents to the Factual Interpretation when she writes that social metaphysics, including feminist metaphysics, studies “social kinds which can be real and objective, but are not part of ‘the basic furniture of the universe’” (Barnes 2014, 347). Mikkola (2015, 2017), whose more specific views I will not discuss at length here, is likewise concerned with the marginalization of feminist metaphysics, and likewise seems to support the Factual Interpretation. Schaffer (2017) argues that his conception of metaphysics as the study of what grounds what is a helpful framework for constructivist metaphysics of gender, allowing to integrate “social construction into a systematic account of how reality is structured” (Schaffer 2017, 2456).

Schaffer's acceptance of the Factual Interpretation is also clear, at least in so far as social constructivism about gender is concerned.

5.2.2. The argument against the Factual Interpretation

I am dissatisfied with the Factual Interpretation because, as I will argue, it is tension with the plausible thesis that I will call Relevance.

Relevance: Arguments like Jenkins' (2016) are relevant in feminist metaphysics, for objecting to social constructivist claims about gender.

Let us also explicitly define the Factual Interpretation.

Factual Interpretation: The central aim of feminist metaphysics, just like that of mainstream metaphysics, is to investigate reality, i.e. worldly facts. Accordingly, the central claims in feminist metaphysics are claims about reality, i.e. worldly facts.

One may apply the Factual Interpretation only to some subdomain of feminist metaphysics. Here, I will be primarily concerned with whether the Factual Interpretation applies to the feminist social constructivist analyses of gender, such as Haslanger (2000) and Sveinsdóttir (2013).

In order to understand the Relevance thesis and the Factual Interpretation better, we need to look at social constructivist accounts of gender and Jenkins' objection. For now, I will use Haslanger's view as an example of social constructivist accounts, since this is the one that Jenkins directly objects to. I will then show how the objection generalizes. According to Haslanger (2000, 235), then, *S* is a woman if and only if *S*, for the most part, functions as a woman; and *S* functions as a woman if and only if she is oppressed because of her real or imagined physical features that are associated with femaleness. Jenkins objected that this analysis is unfair to trans women, excluding them unjustly from the extension of "woman": "Failure to respect the gender identifications of trans people is a serious harm and is conceptually linked to forms of transphobic oppression and even violence" (Jenkins 2016, 296). Why and how is this exclusion of trans women unjust, exactly? My construal differs from Barnes' (2017), in this regard. Barnes, commenting on arguments like Jenkins', writes as follows:

A successful account of gender ought to say that trans women are women; it would be unjust not to classify trans women as women. But at least part of that injustice, on most accounts, consists in failing to treat trans women as what they are. That is, it's unjust to say that trans women aren't women because trans women really are women. (Barnes 2017, 2420)

However, I do not see Jenkins arguing that the injustice consists partly or wholly in failing to acknowledge the *fact* that trans women are women. Perhaps one might construe the objection like this because one cannot see what else could be unjust about not treating trans women as women, if not that they *are* women. Indeed, not being treated as what one (really) is can constitute an injustice. However, there are other reasons why it might be unjust not to classify trans women as women. One could hold that it is a general imperative to respect certain self-categorizations that have emotional significance, where there is no overriding reason to deny the self-categorization. The reason further underlying the imperative might simply be that we should not inflict needless psychological harm that would arise for trans women from others believing that they are not women and acting accordingly.

There are alternative reasons, then, to include trans women among “women”, other than the fact that they *are* women. Note that the idea here is not that trans women are *not* really women, but we should pretend that they are, because otherwise it will cause unnecessary psychological harm. The idea is rather that there might be no relevant deep fact of the matter as to whether trans women are *really* women (apart from shallow facts like who counts as a woman in ordinary language); but we should in any case categorize them as women because otherwise we would cause unnecessary psychological harm. Now, suppose that Jenkins (against appearances) was not appealing to such unnecessary harm and, as Barnes suggests, she was indeed appealing to what she thought was a *fact* about trans women: that they *are* women. A reason to doubt this interpretive claim is that Jenkins gives no arguments that support the contentious claim that trans women *are* women – a claim that, on Barnes’ construal, would be a crucial premise in her case against Haslanger’s account. Instead, Jenkins emphasizes that “trans people in general are a severely disadvantaged and marginalized group in society, suffering oppression and injustice in multiple respects” (Jenkins 2016, 396). If the issue, for Jenkins, was simply that trans people are the gender they identify as and Haslanger misclassifies them, it is hard to see how the disadvantage and marginalization of trans people would be relevant to the argument.

However, let us suppose that this is indeed how Jenkins reasoned: trans women should be treated as women because they *are* women; and Haslanger’s account is unjust to trans women because it does not treat them as what they are. But now imagine another possible opponent to Haslanger, let us call her Jenkins*. Jenkins*, let us suppose, explicitly says that she is not appealing to the fact that trans women *are* women. Further, she explicitly says that failing to categorize trans women as women would bring unnecessary harm and that is why we should categorize them as women. She also says that there might be no relevant deep metaphysical fact about whether trans women are women. There might only be shallow facts about whom current ordinary English categorizes and fails to categorize as women (but quite possibly, there is enough divergence in this regard among ordinary speakers, so that even such shallow facts are hard to establish). It would seem that feminist metaphysicians should not dismiss the

objection from Jenkins*. To dismiss it would be to simply ignore needless psychological harm that they might cause to trans women. If Barnes' construal of Jenkins' objection was correct, I would modify the Relevance thesis as follows:

*Relevance**: Arguments like that of Jenkins* are relevant in feminist metaphysics, for objecting to constructivist accounts of gender.

I would then argue that the Factual Interpretation must be rejected because it is in tension with the plausible Relevance* thesis. However, I will continue to speak of Jenkins, not of Jenkins*, and of Relevance, not of Relevance*, since I consider my interpretation of Jenkins' argument the stronger version of her case and thus, I hope, I do not do her injustice by attributing the argument to her name. But it should make no difference to my argument whether anyone has actually put forth an argument like that of Jenkins*. What is important is that feminist metaphysicians need to affirm the relevance of such an argument for objecting to constructivist analyses of gender.

I take Relevance to be a highly plausible claim that is in tension with the Factual Interpretation, a less plausible claim. On this basis, I suggest that the Factual Interpretation should be rejected. What is the tension, then, between Relevance and the Factual Interpretation of the constructivist accounts of gender? According to the Factual Interpretation, Haslanger, for example, would be claiming that the following fact F1 (roughly) obtains.

F1: Women are those who are oppressed because of their real or imagined physical features associated with femaleness.

To take another example, Sveinsdóttir (2013) would be claiming that the following fact F2 (roughly) obtains.

F2: Women are those who are conferred the property of womanhood by the subjects in the context (e.g. party guests) who perceive them to have a relevant grounding property.

According to my construal of Jenkins' objection, she appeals to ethical considerations – in particular, needless harm – and not metaphysical facts, to object to social constructivist claims about gender (Haslanger's, in particular; but her objection seems to generalize). So combining my construal of Jenkins' objection and the Factual Interpretation's construal of the constructivist claims about gender, Jenkins' reasoning would have to go along the following lines.

Reasoning 1: Does F1 or F2 (or some similar constructivist account, factually interpreted) obtain? If it does, then we will needlessly harm trans women. But we should not needlessly harm trans women. Therefore, F1 or F2 (or some similar constructivist account, factually interpreted) does not obtain.

One must admit that this is a rather strange way to reason: the reasoning apparently presupposes that the ethically objectionable consequences of a purported fact can be evidence that the fact does not obtain. I believe that feminist metaphysicians, when they give an account of what they are doing, should avoid this commitment, unless they can further defend it. Of course, I am not attributing Reasoning 1 to Jenkins (since I do not think that she accepts the Factual Interpretation). I am objecting to the Factual Interpretation, by pointing out an unacceptable implication that results from combining the Factual Interpretation with the plausible Relevance thesis. The unacceptable implication is that Reasoning 1 is an appropriate way to reason in feminist metaphysics. This implication is unacceptable because Reasoning 1 does not seem rationally compelling at all. It seems to fall into a broader category of reasoning that does not make much sense, namely citing the undesirable consequences of a purported fact as evidence that the fact does not obtain. Such reasoning is also known as “wishful thinking”. Reasoning 1 is structurally analogous to the following instance of wishful thinking, for example: “Hunger in Africa would be ethically objectionable, bringing about death and suffering for innocents. So there is no hunger in Africa.” This is abhorrently bad reasoning. Why should we think, then, that such reasoning is legitimate when it comes to investigating social reality?

I do not rule it out that feminist metaphysicians or somebody else might be able to explain why such reasoning is appropriate in the study of social reality, as opposed to the study of other kinds of facts, or perhaps even in the study of all facts. To the best of my knowledge, however, no such explanation has been provided so far. Needless to say, it will not suffice to say something to the effect that non-evidential values do and should play a role in investigating facts. This is uncontroversial in so far as it concerns, for example, the choice of what areas of reality to study in the first place and which research methods to use. For example, respecting the autonomy of research subjects is not an evidential value, and yet it is a relevant consideration when investigating facts. But these uncontroversial claims are a long way from showing that the undesirable consequences of a purported fact can be evidence against the fact’s obtaining.

One may respond that Jenkins’ objection need not be construed as pointing to potential harm as *evidence* against the purported fact, even when we construe the claim that she is objecting to as a factual claim. Perhaps factual claims can be to a certain extent under-determined by evidence. If so, then feminist metaphysicians can mostly be guided by evidential considerations, like the explanatory value of their claims, and hence these claims can be considered factual; but there can still be room for objecting to the claims by appeal to harm, in so far as evidence under-determines some issues, for example, the issue of whether trans women are women. We could thus recognize the possibility that feminist metaphysicians are concerned with factual claims, but at the same time they are liable to take into account objections from harm, in so far as evidence under-determines the issue.

It would indeed make the worry about wishful thinking less pressing for the Factual Interpretation, if we could concede that factual claims can be partly under-determined by evidence and objections from harm are then appropriate. However, that would still mean that there are important qualifications to be made in any warranted acceptance of the Factual Interpretation. Feminist metaphysicians' evaluation criteria for their central claims would then still not only involve the question of whether these claims get the facts right. Other, not purely epistemic considerations (such as avoiding harm) would be relevant in evaluating the claims. That makes the sense in which the claims are "factual" different from the sense in which mainstream revisionary ontologists' claims are "factual". Although broadly speaking, both might be concerned with investigating reality responsively to evidence (looking for the most explanatory hypotheses, etc.), the feminist metaphysicians would not be concerned *only* with that. So they would at least have to reject what I will call the Strong Factual Interpretation.

Strong Factual Interpretation: The only guiding aim of feminist metaphysics, just like that of mainstream metaphysics, is to investigate reality, i.e. worldly facts. Accordingly, the central claims in feminist metaphysics are claims that are responsive only to reality, i.e. worldly facts.

I suppose that feminist metaphysicians would not and should not reject Relevance, i.e. the thesis that objections like that of Jenkins' (or Jenkins*) are relevant; and that they would be more open to rejecting, and indeed should reject, the Strong Factual Interpretation, i.e. the view that feminist metaphysicians like Haslanger or Sveinsdóttir should be taken to be exclusively concerned with investigating reality, in providing their constructivist analyses. And that already seems to drive a wedge between the character of mainstream revisionary ontologists' central claims (e.g. that there are no tables) and the feminist metaphysicians' central claims.

5.2.3. How far does the point extend?

How far into feminist metaphysics does this point extend? The "point", again, is that the Strong Factual Interpretation must be rejected. The point is certainly likely to cover constructivist accounts of "woman" that place the status of someone as a woman in the hands of other people and/or institutions, rather than something like the person's own lived identity or experience. The latter kind of account is apparently needed, to include trans women. The point extends further, however. One could also object to accounts of "woman" that are based on lived identity by appeal to ethically undesirable consequences, such as allowing privileged persons to unfairly assume a victimized role. If the objection is relevant (which is not to say that it is decisive, but that it should be taken seriously by feminist metaphysicians and given a response) and the

identity-based accounts in question are interpreted (strongly) factually, then wishful thinking again appears to come out as an appropriate mode of reasoning in feminist metaphysics.

Further, the whole project of giving *some* analysis of “woman”, for feminists, is often motivated by the need to identify the “women” whose interests feminists are to defend. For example, Jenkins (2016, 394) writes: “Leaving the concept [of woman] undefined, however, calls into question the project of feminism – supposedly a movement to end the oppression of ‘women’.” Suppose that we take this to be an argument to the conclusion that *there are* women, as a matter of a (metaphysical) fact. The reasoning would go as follows: “If there were no women, then feminists would not be able to pursue their aim of defending the interests of women. This would be a bad result for feminists. Therefore, there are women.” It is the same *prima facie* unacceptable pattern of wishful thinking again, and again it arises from accepting both the Factual Interpretation of the feminist metaphysicians’ central claims and the relevance of desirable/undesirable consequences for defending or objecting to these claims.

I have argued so far that feminist metaphysicians of gender should reject the (Strong) Factual Interpretation of their central claims. This is because (1) they should recognize the relevance of arguments from unethical consequences in favour and against such claims and (2) they should reject the idea that wishful thinking is an appropriate way to reason in their area (or any area), unless they can make better sense of the method, as applied to the instances of reasoning considered here. Now, if feminist metaphysicians do reject the (Strong) Factual Interpretation, then they need an alternative account of what feminist metaphysics does and how it relates to mainstream metaphysics. I will provide such an alternative in what follows. (I will also look into what remains of the idea that feminist metaphysics is metaphysics.)

5.3. The initial solution: feminist metaphysics as a project of conceptual engineering

We need not look far for an alternative account of feminist metaphysics. Haslanger and Jenkins have provided it themselves, in (some of) their characterizations of what they are doing: their question is not a theoretical one about the facts that obtain, but a practical one about the concepts that we should use. And indeed, it makes perfect sense to appeal to good or bad consequences when the question is about what we should do. Suppose that I ask: “Should we do X?”. My interlocutor can very well answer that (1) if we do X, then we must do Y (or are likely to do Y), and (2) since it is not alright to do Y, we should not do X. For example, if we get drunk, we might act recklessly. Behaving recklessly is bad; so we should not get drunk. But suppose that I asked instead: “Are we drunk?”. Now, it is not alright to answer: “If we are drunk, then we might act recklessly. But we should not act recklessly. So we are not drunk.”

Again, the practical question that I take Haslanger and Jenkins to be asking is: which concepts should we use? More specifically, the question is about which concept, if any, we shall pair with the existing term “woman” that already has a certain role in our practices and brings about certain associations in human minds. So instead of the strange Reasoning 1 above, Jenkins’ objection would go as follows.

Reasoning 2: Who should we classify as ‘women’? If we use Haslanger’s criterion, then we will unnecessarily harm trans women. We should not unnecessarily harm trans women. Therefore, we should not use Haslanger’s criterion.

Haslanger (2000) explicitly frames her question as one about how to improve our concept of woman; and Jenkins explicitly follows suit. However, not all feminist metaphysicians frame the question like this; indeed, Haslanger herself has sometimes given a metaphysical gloss to her analysis. Nevertheless, the issue is what feminist metaphysicians would do well to maintain about their project, not what they have maintained so far. They would do well to maintain that theirs is a project of conceptual engineering, because then they can admit the relevance of arguments from (un)ethical consequences for and against their central claims, while not admitting the appropriateness of wishful thinking in feminist metaphysics. Can they then also maintain that theirs is a project of *metaphysics*? And should they be interested in maintaining this?

It is a fairly uncontroversial view that the aim of investigating reality is a necessary feature of any metaphysical project; and on my suggested account, feminist metaphysics (of gender) is not a project (exclusively) aimed at investigating reality. This is not because a project of conceptual engineering cannot be a project of investigating reality. I think it can; the account of mainstream revisionary ontology provided in the previous chapters involves precisely the claim that mainstream revisionary ontology is both a project of conceptual engineering and a project aimed at investigating reality. It is possible, I suppose, to investigate reality by discussing what concepts would best reflect the structure of reality. However, my suggested account of feminist metaphysics as a project of conceptual engineering rejects the Factual Interpretation of feminist metaphysics (or at least the Strong Factual Interpretation). The very motivation for interpreting feminist metaphysics as a project of conceptual engineering is the rejection of the Factual Interpretation of it. Because of that, I would rather say that feminist metaphysics (at least the part including the instances I have discussed and relevantly similar instances of it) is not metaphysics; but I do not think that this particular question of terminology is terribly important (although questions of terminology, of course, can be important).

A few clarifications are in order. First, it is not *entirely* uncontroversial that metaphysics must be centrally or exclusively concerned with the study of reality. Some may want to call the mere study of our concepts “metaphysics”; Strawson’s descriptive metaphysics (Strawson 1959) is a case in point. However, it is still as close to uncontroversial as one can get, when charac-

terizing metaphysics. Second, it must be emphasized that “studying reality” can only be a *necessary* (but not sufficient) condition for something being metaphysics: various non-metaphysical sciences (such as physics, biology, chemistry, and psychology) also study reality, it would seem. Third, it is not quite enough to say that metaphysics must “study reality”. What else is there to study? The relevant specification seems to be that metaphysics has its eye turned outward, not inward: it does not study (just) our concepts or thoughts, but the world beyond us. Studying our concepts is also the study of reality, the way things really are (with our concepts), but it is not the study of *outside* reality. Fourth, it is important to emphasize that studying outside reality must be *the* aim of the project. I do not mean to suggest that feminist metaphysicians are not at all concerned with establishing facts that obtain in the world, in defending their central claims like “Women are those who...” or “Women exist” or “Women do not exist”. Finally, it is important to focus not just on “reality”, but also “studies” (or “investigates”), to distinguish metaphysics from practically oriented projects of conceptual engineering, such as feminist metaphysics. Not just any kind of concern with reality is relevant.

To explain this last point: as Thomasson (2017) observes, practically oriented projects of conceptual engineering are “worldly” in their orientation, as opposed to being *just* about our concepts. The concepts have a function in the society. Therefore, how we shape our concepts shapes our lives in the society. Whether we count waterboarding as torture, for example, is not just a linguistic matter, because it affects whether waterboarding is considered acceptable or not. Practically oriented projects of conceptual engineering, then, are concerned with the world. However, this is a different kind of concern with the world, not the kind of concern that we have with the world when we “study” or “investigate” it. It has a different direction of fit. Metaphysics aims to fit our representations to reality, not to fit the world to our representations. This assumption about metaphysics captures the self-conception and ambitions of most, but not all of mainstream metaphysics. If we take this assumption on board, then feminist metaphysics, understood as a project of practically oriented conceptual engineering, is not metaphysics. Instead of trying to fit our representations to reality as it is, the feminist metaphysicians’ aim is rather to transform reality for the better, by shaping the concepts that we use to represent reality.

If feminist philosophers have good reasons, unknown to me so far, to insist on the label “metaphysics”, then I do not mind much. The concept paired with the term “metaphysics”, just as the concepts paired with other terms, is open to revision as the need may be. A more important question, for current purposes, concerns the relationship between feminist metaphysics, understood as a project of conceptual engineering, and mainstream metaphysics of the sort I have been concerned with in this thesis. In light of the discussion in this chapter so far, it might seem like mainstream metaphysicians and feminist metaphysicians are doing rather different things, and so there is no particular reason to expect much intellectual interaction between them. The mainstream project studies what

reality is like, whereas the feminist project (or at least a central part of it) is primarily concerned with improving concepts to make reality better. These seem like compatible projects that can be pursued relatively independently from one another.

Things are not so simple, however. The problem is that it makes good sense to understand much of mainstream metaphysics as conceptual engineering as well. This is indeed what I have argued in the previous chapters, specifically about revisionary ontology. In the next section, I show how this suggests that mainstream metaphysics and feminist metaphysics share the same subject matter, after all: both are about how we should improve the ordinary conceptual scheme that we employ in forming beliefs about the world.

5.4. But what if mainstream metaphysics is also a project of conceptual engineering?

The hypothesis that emerged in the previous section was that mainstream metaphysics studies reality and feminist metaphysics seeks to revise our ordinary concepts. Now, the problem with this view is that mainstream metaphysics is also plausibly seeking to revise our ordinary concepts. In particular, this applies to the sort of project with which Barnes compares the metaphysics of gender in the quotation at the beginning of the chapter. I have defended and elaborated upon this conceptual engineering view of mainstream revisionary ontology in the previous chapters. Again, this approach can be traced back at least to Carnap (1950b).

Carnap emphasized that ontological questions, understood as questions about concept revision, are “practical”, not “theoretical” ones. But in supposing that dichotomy, he seemed to miss an option: perhaps ontologists are asking how to revise our language *so that it would reflect the objective structure of the world?* If this is indeed a question that can be sensibly asked, then it seems like a good candidate for the question that ontologists might be asking. Further, it seems like a *theoretical* enough question, being about the structure of the world, while it is also a practical question about what we ought to do with our concepts, so as to reflect that structure. This view of mainstream metaphysics as a project of conceptual engineering rejects not just the dichotomy between theoretical questions and practical questions, but also the dichotomy that Barnes suggests when she says that metaphysical realists “think disputes in metaphysics are disputes about the world, not about our concepts” (Barnes 2017, 2418). A metaphysical realist who thinks of metaphysics as the project of finding the most joint-carving conceptual scheme can allow that disputes in metaphysics are about the world as well as our concepts: not about what our concepts are like, but how we should revise them, so as to reflect the objective structure of the world.

An account along these lines, I suppose, is the best way to think about mainstream metaphysics, at least when it comes to issues like the existence of

tables. (It might not be the best way to think about mainstream metaphysics when it comes to issues like the existence of free will; I will have a few words to say about this at the very end of this chapter.) Again, this also seems to be more or less how Sider (2011) views ontological questions: ontology is about finding the best language for describing the objective structure of the world.²¹ The central desiderata in such language revision are theoretical virtues, such as coherence, elegance, and simplicity. For example, the language revision should avoid the typical puzzles raised by revisionary ontologists, such as the Ship of Theseus or the sorites paradoxes – puzzles that reveal the well-hidden theoretical imperfections of the ordinary conceptual scheme. The hope is that the pursuit of theoretical virtues will lead to a conceptual scheme that better captures the objective structure of the world (“carves at the joints”).

Assuming that this account of mainstream metaphysics as conceptual engineering is a good one, I ask: if mainstream metaphysics and feminist metaphysics are both projects of conceptual engineering, then perhaps they are part of the same bigger project, after all? This would not be the project of investigating reality (that is a concern only for mainstream metaphysics), but the project of revising the ordinary conceptual scheme that we employ in belief formation. Further, it would seem that mainstream metaphysicians and feminist metaphysicians are not allies but competitors in this business of improving the ordinary conceptual scheme. This is because the camps have different ideas of what the scheme should be improved *for*. The demands that mainstream metaphysicians appeal to, as they make prescriptions on our conceptual scheme, are the “demands of reason”, or (presumably) “evidential” considerations, such as consistency, elegance, and simplicity. It is all in the name of carving at the joints; ethics has no place here. And, as I am supposing (by insisting on the Relevance thesis), ethical considerations are relevant for feminist metaphysics, in defending and objecting to their central claims, which on my interpretation are about which concepts we should use.

This contrast in assumptions about the relevant desiderata for concepts would not be a problem if feminist metaphysics and mainstream metaphysics were developing conceptual schemes for distinct areas of discourse. However, this does not appear to be the case. On the face of it, both projects, if they are indeed projects of conceptual engineering, are developing an alternative to the ordinary conceptual scheme that people employ to form beliefs about the world. ‘Man’ and ‘woman’, like ‘chair’ and ‘table’, are in the folk conceptual repertoire. It does not seem that the philosophers’ concern, in either case, is only with how these ordinary concepts should be employed in a specific specialized context.

²¹ Matters are complicated by the fact that Sider is also sympathetic to Lewis’s idea of reference magnetism, so he thinks that in natural language there is a certain pull towards objective joints. But he also accepts the possibility that this pull can be intentionally cancelled or weakened by language users.

The last claim might not be entirely obvious. Both camps sometimes leave the impression that they are concerned with a specific area of discourse: feminist discourse, in the case of feminist metaphysics; or how we think and speak in the “ontology room”, in the case of mainstream metaphysics. However, it does not actually make much sense to construe the project of conceptual engineering as intended for such limited contexts, in either case. First, let us look at the possibility that feminist engineering of concepts like ‘woman’ is intended just for feminist discourse. Haslanger suggests this when she says that her “analysis is intended to capture a meaningful political category for critical feminist efforts” (Haslanger 2000, 46). She also warns that “[t]he point is not to legislate what terms to use in all contexts, but to offer resources that should be used judiciously” (ibid., 48). However, the general ethos of feminist re-thinking of gender concepts is that this re-thinking affects us all, since we all have these concepts and employ them to categorize the persons that we ordinarily encounter and interact with, and even ourselves. Indeed, Haslanger acknowledges in the same article that “the terminological shift calls us to reconsider who we think we are” (Haslanger 2000, 47) and that “we should refuse to be gendered man or woman, refuse to be raced. This goes beyond denying essentialist claims about one’s embodiment and involves an active political commitment to live one’s life differently” (Haslanger 2000, 48).

Just as it is implausible that feminist conceptual engineering only targets the concepts to be employed in feminist theorizing, it is also implausible that the conceptual engineering of mainstream metaphysics only targets the concepts to be employed in the ontology room. If the problems with ordinary concepts, revealed by metaphysicians’ clever puzzles, are indeed problems, and it is an epistemic advantage to overcome them, then why is it not an advantage for everyone, regardless of whether they happen to be academic metaphysicians or currently in the business of discussing metaphysics? Unlike feminist metaphysicians, mainstream metaphysicians would presumably say that we need not worry *too* much about employing the metaphysically best conceptual scheme in everyday contexts (and this difference will prove significant and will be further explored shortly). But still, it is not just the metaphysicians as they do metaphysics, but also the rest of us, all the time, who are not supposed to really *believe* that there are tables, according to the eliminativist.

It seems, then, that both feminist metaphysicians and mainstream metaphysicians make demands on our beliefs – and the “us” is not just fellow feminists or fellow mainstream metaphysicians. The feminists and the mainstreamers seem to be involved in the same project, after all, although they start off from quite different assumptions about how to pursue this project. Whose advice should we follow, then? Should we seek a conceptual scheme that respects the demands of reason and reflects the objective structure of the world or one that avoids unnecessary harm? One might respond that we may not need to choose; perhaps the most theoretically virtuous and joint-carving conceptual scheme is also the most fair one. But I do not see why this *should* be so. Indeed, there are reasons to think it is not so.

For example, Unger (1979) has argued, by appeal to the sort of sorites argument that is typical of mainstream metaphysics, that there are no people, i.e. persons. On my construal of mainstream metaphysics, he has argued that we should not employ the concept ‘person’ when we form beliefs about the world. One might make a very similar argument against the concepts of man and woman, bringing to light the inconsistent or incomplete application conditions of the words “man” and “woman” in ordinary language. Consider these two claims: (1) We can remove a particle from any man and he would still be a man; and (2) Ten particles do not make up a man. These claims are inconsistent, since we can get down to ten particles by removing one at a time; and if we remove just one particle from a man, we should always end up with a man. But the two inconsistent claims seem to be warranted by our competence with the concept ‘man’. A possible conclusion, then, is that a theoretically unacceptable inconsistency is built into the application conditions for “man”. And the same story could be told for “woman”.

Now, the question is: do feminist philosophers need to take on challenges like this? Do they need to show that ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are not inconsistent concepts, after all, or that they can be made consistent, while serving their current useful purposes? To some extent, feminists might find such arguments appealing. They might want to cite them as one more reason against dividing people into men and women, if they are already against the division, for ethical and political reasons. But those who want to keep gender categories – for example, to identify an oppressed group whose interests are to be defended – will have little patience for metaphysical riddles that work against the existence of chairs and tables just as well as they work against the existence of men and women. Likewise, mainstream metaphysicians offering sorites paradoxes against the existence of persons, men, or women, will have little patience for ethical and pragmatic arguments for preserving the concepts. And the lack of patience seems right. Such ethical or pragmatic arguments just seem to miss the point, if the point is to develop the epistemically best theory of the world.

My judgment (that I expect to be shared by at least some others, although not by everyone), then, is that philosophers like Unger need not worry about the important social purposes of the concept ‘person’ when they discuss its theoretical vices. And likewise, philosophers like Haslanger need not worry about the purely theoretical problems with concepts like ‘man’ and ‘woman’. If this judgement is correct, then this suggests that the demands of reason and the demands of ethics are not all in the same pool of relevant reasons when we think about how to revise our ordinary conceptual scheme. In a certain respect, the two projects are still different projects, and can ignore certain kinds of arguments characteristic of the other project, arguments that have only illusory relevance. But how can this be, when both projects are about how to revise ordinary concepts to form better beliefs about the world?

5.5. Not the same project, after all: two kinds of belief

I have argued that both feminist metaphysicians and mainstream metaphysicians seek to improve the ordinary conceptual scheme that people employ in belief formation. On the other hand, I have pointed out that feminist metaphysicians may apparently ignore mainstream metaphysicians' appeals to reason, and mainstream metaphysicians may ignore the feminist metaphysicians' appeals to ethics, even as they are considering the virtues and vices of the very same concepts (e.g. 'man' and 'woman'). So how can the two projects of conceptual engineering run in independent tracks like this, while they are both concerned with improving the ordinary conceptual scheme for the purpose of forming beliefs about the world? I will suggest that there is an ambiguity in the expression "beliefs about the world". Feminist and mainstream metaphysicians target different kinds of belief-like states. So the two projects are not in the same business (neither as allies nor as competitors), after all.

I mentioned above that mainstream metaphysicians are generally forgiving when it comes to the folk temporarily forgetting about metaphysical truths, in the midst of everyday life. Everything is alright as long as we employ the right concepts at the moments when we take particular care to get things right, to describe the world as it really is. On the other hand, for feminist metaphysicians, it is important that we constantly *live* by the conclusions they argue for. Recall again Haslanger saying that "we should refuse to be gendered man or woman, refuse to be raced. This goes beyond denying essentialist claims about one's embodiment and involves an active political commitment to live one's life differently" (Haslanger 2000, 48). She refers to John Stoltenberg, from whom the words "refusing to be a man" originate. It is worth looking at how Stoltenberg puts the idea:

Sexual identity – the belief that there is maleness and femaleness and that therefore one is either man or woman – is among the most fundamental ideas with which we interpret our experience. ... With the idea of sexual identity in our head, we see things and feel things and learn things in terms of it. (Stoltenberg 2000, 2)

Stoltenberg, like Haslanger, wants these ways of seeing and thinking and feeling to be changed. For Stoltenberg, this is because he relates these ways of seeing and thinking and feeling to problematic behaviours and attitudes, ranging from rape and objectification to war. For mainstream metaphysics, again, it is not a problem if we cannot change how we *perceive* the world in ordinary day-to-day situations. It is alright if we intellectually acknowledge that there are only particles arranged table-wise, even though every time we look at a collection of particles arranged table-wise, what we immediately see is a *table*. Consider again Dorr and Rosen's paragraph about the mariner who believes that Copernicus was right about astronomy and Ptolemy was wrong:

Consider the mariner who knows full well that Copernicus was right. When he is navigating he speaks and thinks in Ptolemaic terms. In the midst of a storm, when things are urgent, he may have no conscious reservations about what he says or thinks. Nonetheless, when he says ‘If Venus has crossed the moon, we’re off course’ he is not committed to its truth. His official view, his genuine view, is that Copernicus was right and that his Ptolemaic remark is a useful fiction. (Dorr and Rosen 2002, 171)

For Dorr and Rosen, like most other mainstream metaphysicians, it is no problem if, in the midst of the daily hassle, we talk and think of table-wise arranged particles as tables, just as the mariner thinks and talks of the Venus as crossing the moon. It is alright, as long as we correct ourselves when asked about our “official, genuine view”. By contrast, when feminists talk about changing our gender concepts, it is crucial to change who *strikes* us as a woman or a man, and what it is that they strike us as when they strike us as a man or a woman. For example, it is crucial for the gender eliminativists that whenever we encounter a person, we would not categorize them as a man or a woman; and it is crucial for someone who wants to include trans women among women that we do not habitually refer to trans women by the male pronoun. Having the correct “official, genuine view” is not enough for feminist metaphysicians. It would not satisfy Jenkins, for example, if people immediately thought of a trans woman as a man when they encountered her, and spoke and behaved accordingly, yet gladly classified trans women as women when asked about their official, genuine views.

As one may guess already, I am again trying to get at the distinction between theoretical and practical beliefs. Here, the emphasis is not on the purpose for which the beliefs are formed (although this is still the ultimate basis for the distinction), but the different kind of endorsement of the relevant representations that the two kinds of beliefs involve. The beliefs that primarily concern feminist “metaphysicians” like Haslanger and Jenkins are those that we unreflectively form when we encounter or think about other people and that we likewise unreflectively act upon. These beliefs concern feminists because they inform much of our behaviour (rather than merely those actions that I have described as “research actions” in the previous chapter). The mainstream metaphysicians, on the other hand, do not care about these sorts of unreflective beliefs. They care about the beliefs that we endorse on reflection and that we can call our “ultimate theory of the world”. They sometimes call these our genuine, real beliefs; but again, I do not find it fruitful to designate either kind of belief as our “real” belief.

To make matters a bit less obscure, let me say again what I mean by “beliefs” in general. Roughly, when we believe that p , we represent the world in a certain way, and we take the world to be as represented. One may represent the world in a certain way without taking it to be as represented, for example, when one imagines or dreams; but not when one believes. What matters for both mainstream metaphysicians and feminist metaphysicians is how people

represent the world when they take it to be as represented. In that sense, they both target our beliefs. However, there are (at least) two ways of taking the world to be as represented. One way is to *perceive* the world as represented and to *act* on the basis of this perception; another is to reflectively *endorse* that the world is as represented. Feminist metaphysicians have reason to care about the first sort of belief (because it informs action); mainstream metaphysicians, however, care about the second kind of belief, because that is the kind of belief that presumably matters for intrinsically worthwhile epistemic excellence.

Mainstream metaphysicians, like feminist metaphysicians, then, care about how people represent the world when they take it to be as represented. But for mainstream metaphysicians, the reason to care about such representations is not that people are likely to act on them. Instead, the reason is that it is an intrinsically worthy goal, an epistemic achievement, to take the world to be a certain way if and only if it indeed is that way. Now, these different reasons for caring about what people believe also plausibly warrant different standards for the beliefs and, accordingly, the concepts used to form beliefs. For the mainstream metaphysicians, who only care about the intrinsically valuable epistemic achievement, getting it right is all that matters; and so it is natural that they want the conceptual scheme to get it *maximally* right. For the feminist metaphysicians, getting it right matters primarily in so far as it facilitates the right action. Accordingly, they are completely within their rights to ignore the sorts of considerations that mainstream metaphysicians routinely bring up, such as deeply hidden, practically irrelevant inconsistencies in our conceptual scheme. We need not worry about these when we choose the right concepts for forming practical beliefs.

Of course, one and the same person may form both sorts of beliefs: those that are meant to inform action in pursuit of ultimately non-epistemic aims and those that are meant to represent the world accurately merely for the sake of the epistemic achievement. The person might then also host two different conceptual schemes, one for forming “practical beliefs” and one for forming “theoretical beliefs”. One might believe, then, that there are no macroscopic objects, and no persons, no women and men, in one sense of “belief”; and believe that there are women (an oppressed group whose interests must be defended) in another sense of “belief”. Neither sort of belief would be a mere pretenseful acceptance: one would really take the world to be such that there are men and women, and one would really take the world to be such that there are no men and women. Again, these are two different senses of “taking the world to be as represented”: taking the representation as basis for action, and endorsing the representation on reflection, as a part of one’s ultimate theory of the world. But there need not and should not be any pretence involved in either case.

A possible objection is that on my account, it is still the mainstream metaphysicians who investigate what there really, ultimately is, while the practical beliefs targeted by feminist metaphysicians have only a second-rate status, informing our day-to-day decisions, but not how we ultimately think about the

world. My account would marginalize feminist metaphysics, then. Feminist metaphysicians want their claims to be taken as seriously as the claims of mainstream metaphysics. But on my account, it may turn out that the recognition that “trans women are really women” is like “the sun is rising”: a statement to be affirmed in the hurry of everyday life, but possibly to be retracted at a moment of serious reflection. My response is that I do not intend there to be a hierarchy between the two sorts of beliefs. Informing action is an important role for beliefs to play. Representing reality accurately merely for the sake of the epistemic achievement is also an important role.

Another possible objection is that my account does not hold up when we consider a more diverse variety of examples either from feminist metaphysics or mainstream metaphysics or both. For example, the discussions of free will and personal identity, which are surely debates in mainstream metaphysics, do not seem to be mere attempts to reflect the joints of reality by developing the most theoretically virtuous conceptual scheme. Instead, they seem to concern how we think of ourselves, how we act every day, and how we organize our institutions, quite similarly with the metaphysics of gender.²² In response, I grant that some debates in what we would be inclined to call “mainstream metaphysics” may turn out to be concerned with shaping the concepts that we use to form our practically oriented beliefs and not exclusively concerned with the study of reality, or more broadly, epistemic excellence for its own sake. I would then find it *prima facie* problematic to call these debates “metaphysics”, for the reasons outlined previously (essentially, because metaphysics must be centrally or even exclusively aimed at studying reality). If someone insists that “mainstream metaphysics” would still be a good label for some projects of (at least partly) practically oriented conceptual engineering, then, again, I am fairly flexible with labels. My main intention has been to motivate and flesh out an important distinction in what may look like a uniform cluster of metaphysical projects, against the consensus that has emerged in the discussion between Barnes, Mikkola, Sider, and Schaffer. Which issues and authors fall on each side of my proposed division and which labels best describe each camp is something I cannot hope to discuss fully here.

5.6. Chapter summary

On my view, the metaphysicians who discuss the existence of tables and those who discuss the existence and nature of genders are involved in importantly distinct projects. They do have something in common: both camps try to improve the ordinary conceptual scheme that we all use in forming beliefs about the world. But according to the view proposed here, each project targets a different kind of belief. Feminist metaphysicians target the sort of beliefs that

²² These are the sorts of debates that Thomasson analyses as practically oriented projects of conceptual engineering, or “metalinguistic negotiations”, in her (Thomasson 2017).

we unreflectively form on the basis of perception and that we act upon. Mainstream metaphysicians target beliefs that we endorse at rare moments of deep reflection and that are formed merely for the sake of the epistemic achievement of representing reality as it is. These categories appear to correspond to the distinction between theoretical and practical beliefs that I have defended in the previous chapter. So we can say that mainstream metaphysicians target theoretical beliefs and feminist metaphysicians target practical beliefs. (Again, the generalizations intended by the labels “feminist” and “mainstream” metaphysics, here, are not as sweeping as they may seem.)

Ultimately, the conclusion is a conciliatory one, undermining the appearance of conflict between mainstream and feminist metaphysics – the appearance that arises when we view both projects as projects of conceptual engineering. However, while I have argued that the two camps of “metaphysicians” need not be foes, I have also argued that there is no particular reason to expect them to be friends.

6. CONCLUSION

This thesis has addressed the interpretation question about revisionary ontology: what are revisionary ontologists really doing, what is revisionary ontology about? I distinguished this metaontological interpretation question from the evaluation question (is ontology worthwhile, is it a valuable enterprise?) and the recommendation question (whether and how should ontology proceed?). As an answer to the interpretation question, I defended a “theoretical” metalinguistic account of revisionary ontology, according to which revisionary ontology is about how to improve ordinary concepts in order to improve beliefs. In contrast to “practical” metalinguistic accounts (e.g. Thomasson 2017), my account allows that revisionary ontology is still about investigating what the world is really like. However, this issue – of what the world is really like – is discussed by discussing the best concepts for describing the world, i.e. the concepts that would reflect the structure of the world, or “carve nature at its joints”. The general idea of ontology as the search for a joint-carving conceptual scheme draws on Sider (2011), although he puts this idea forth as a response to the recommendation question, rather than the interpretation question; and his recommendation is for the ontologists to actually *speak* a joint-carving language (by stipulation), rather than speaking *about* what that language would be like.

I first defended this theoretical metalinguistic account of revisionary ontology from the point of view of the “quizzical observer”, and then from the revisionary ontologists’ own point of view. Methodologically, I strived to put forth clear and well-motivated central adequacy conditions for the account sought, keeping in mind the interpreters’ interests and the data available. I assessed how various candidate accounts fare in light of these adequacy conditions, arguing that my proposed account fares better than the alternatives. While I focused on a limited range of examples of revisionary ontology in chapters 2, 3, and 4, I showed how my approach is also fruitful for understanding what might be called “feminist revisionary ontology”, in chapter 5.

Main contributions

The main contributions of this thesis are the following.

(1) I have provided a systematic defence of the “theoretical metalinguistic view”, i.e. the account of revisionary ontology as a project of engineering concepts for theoretical purposes. The systematicity is achieved by departing from clearly specified and motivated adequacy conditions for the account and considering how my account fares against the alternatives, in meeting these adequacy conditions.

(2) I have provided a novel account of the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, given the theoretical metalinguistic view. According to my account, revisionary ontology can potentially improve our *theoretical* beliefs (as opposed to our practical beliefs), by improving the concepts used to form those beliefs.

Theoretical beliefs are formed for the sake of intrinsically valuable epistemic excellence and practical beliefs are formed to serve the belief-bearers' and/or other people's non-epistemic interests.

(3) I have shown how this conception of revisionary ontology (and the distinction between theoretical and practical beliefs that the conception involves) can illuminate the relationship between feminist metaphysics of gender and mainstream metaphysics. I defended the view that what is sometimes called “feminist metaphysics of gender” (for example, as practiced by Haslanger (2000) and Svendsdóttir (2013)) should be seen as a project of improving concepts in order to improve *practical* beliefs, whereas mainstream revisionary ontology should be seen as a project of improving concepts in order to improve *theoretical* beliefs. This is a contribution to the emerging debate about the relationship between feminist and mainstream metaphysics (Barnes 2014, 2017, Mikkola 2015, 2017, Sider 2017, Schaffer 2017).

In the rest of the conclusion, I will provide a more detailed overview of the contents of the thesis (excluding the introduction and the conclusion), before I end with thoughts about further research that this thesis calls for.

Chapter 2, “Interpreting revisionary ontology from the quizzical observer’s point of view”

In chapter 2, I found the interpretation question itself to be in need of interpretation. First, there are different ways in which one might fix the object of interpretation and occasionally, the referent of “ontology” or “revisionary ontology” is left obscure. Sometimes, the object of interpretation, evaluation and recommendation in metaontology is characterized as involving “existence questions” and sometimes it is characterized as involving “ontological disputes”. I found that neither characterization is adequate, as it stands. Metaontology is not and should not be concerned simply with what existence questions mean, whether they can be answered and how they should be answered. When we observe discussions in the field known as “metaontology”, we mostly do not see the discussion of such very general questions. And this is for good reason: there is insufficient overlap between all kinds of existence questions that one might ask in various contexts, for us to give a single informative account (involving interpretation, evaluation, and recommendation) for all of them. It is not the metaontologists’ concern, for example, to interpret and evaluate the practice of naïve tourists asking questions like “Are there really bigfoots?” and to make recommendations on how tourist information centres should go about addressing such questions. Instead, the proper object of metaontological concern, I suggested, concerns the practice of asking existence questions in a certain kind of context, which involves certain kinds of assumptions about the nature of these questions and the proper method for addressing them. I characterized these assumptions in chapter 2.

It is also unsatisfactory to specify the object of interpretation as involving only “ontological disputes”. This gets a bit closer to a satisfactory description

than “existence questions”, because this specification correctly suggests that metaontology concerns discussions among philosophers, namely ontologists, rather than just any discussions of existence questions. However, it is mistaken to limit the object of interpretation to *disputes*, as opposed to ontological *discussions* more generally. In chapter 3 in my thesis, I do focus on disputes, rather than discussions more generally, partly because I address some arguments and positions there that only pertain to disputes (e.g. Hirsch 2009). However, other arguments and positions such as Thomasson’s (2015) and Chalmers’ (2009) apply also to discussions that are not disputes, and thus such discussions should not be left out of the purview of metaontology.

I further restricted the main object of interpretation in this thesis to paradigmatic discussions of *revisionary* ontology: works where the authors seem to argue for surprising claims about what exists or what there is. I discussed the ramifications involved in this specification. For example, I drew the distinction between the assumption that these works in revisionary ontology are *really* in conflict with what most people believe (an assumption that I want to avoid, when I characterize revisionary ontology to fix the object of interpretation) and the assumption that these works in revisionary ontology *appear* to be in conflict with what most people believe (an assumption that I do adopt at the outset). I then reconstructed some of the more famous arguments in revisionary ontology, in order to fix the object of interpretation. These were the arguments by Unger (1979, 1980), Merricks (2001), van Inwagen (1990) and Horgan and Potrč (2008).

Having thus specified the object of interpretation, I then went on, in the remainder of chapter 2, to clarify what it means to *interpret* revisionary ontology. I take this to mean asking what revisionary ontologists are really doing, as opposed to what they appear to be doing. But this still leaves room for interpretation. On the one hand, our interest could be in what the revisionary ontologists are really *trying* to do, or what their conscious intentions are. On the other hand, it is possible to (really) do something without trying to do it. For some purposes, it might be more relevant to ask what the ontologists are trying to do. However, I argued that given the interpretive points of view in question, reported conscious intentions may need to be discounted. For example, the quizzical observer might need to discount the ontologists’ conscious intentions, when respecting these intentions would require attributing a severely inferior rational or linguistic capacity to the participants. Further, the revisionary ontologists themselves may need to discount their conscious intentions so far, to best serve their aim of showing why their practice deserves to be esteemed and continued (and continued by themselves, rather than by somebody else, such as semanticists, who might be better qualified to fulfil their conscious intentions).

Chapter 3, “Interpreting revisionary ontology from the ontologists’ point of view”

Having thus laid the groundwork in chapter 2, I continued to address the interpretation question from the “outsiders” and “insiders” point of view. More

precisely, in chapter 3, I took up the point of view of a particular kind of outsider, whom I called a “quizzical observer”. Quizzical observers find themselves in a situation that calls for explanation: they feel what I called a “sense of pointlessness” regarding disputes between their peers. I found that the quizzical observer’s interpretive situation dictates two central adequacy conditions for the account sought: (1) it should explain the quizzical observer’s sense of pointlessness, upon observing or thinking about the disputes; and (2) it should respect the presumption of peerhood, i.e. the presumption that the disputants are roughly equal to the quizzical observer in terms of their rational, linguistic, and reflective capacities.

I first considered three deflationist accounts: the verbalist account (Hirsch 2009), the easy-ontological account (Thomasson 2015), and the deflationist primitivist account (Chalmers 2009). I found these all to suffer from the same general flaw: while they are tailored to explain the sense of pointlessness, they fail to respect the presumption of peerhood. Further, I found that in all three cases, the failure to recognize the presumption of peerhood can be seen to consist in attributing severe shortcomings in rational capacities, in comparison with the quizzical observer herself; and these rational deficits, in all three accounts, appear to be grounded in linguistic deficits. On the verbalist account, the parties inexplicably continue to engage in an activity (a dispute) that has a characteristic aim (agreement by convergence on truth or the right course of action), while that aim is already achieved. The mistake is apparently grounded in a linguistic deficit: the failure to interpret charitably, while charity (on Hirsch’s account as well as more generally) is thought to be a foundational linguistic capacity. On the easy-ontological account, the disputants address their issues (ordinary-language existence questions) by strikingly inadequate means (appealing to theoretical virtues and the like, instead of engaging in conceptual analysis and straightforward empirical observation). This deficit in rationality – choosing inadequate means to one’s ends – is again apparently grounded in a linguistic failure, namely misinterpreting the existence questions. Finally, on the deflationist primitivist account, the disputants use a semantically empty existence-concept and fail to make truth-apt claims. Here, the rational failure is directing one’s efforts at an ill-defined, non-existent goal; and this failure is grounded in the linguistic failure involved in using the empty existence concept.

While these three deflationist accounts disrespect the presumption of peerhood by attributing *inferior* capacities to the disputants, the realist primitivist account, instead, disrespects the presumption of peerhood by attributing a *surplus* of the relevant capacities. In particular, the account attributes a superior *linguistic* capacity to the disputants, who are supposed to have acquired the primitive metaphysical existence concept that the quizzical observer is unable to acquire by exposure to the same kind of environment (metaphysics books and conversations and so on).

Next, I proposed that a metalinguistic account, on which the discussants argue about how to use or revise language (in a context), could meet both adequacy conditions. However, here we need to consider carefully which kind

of metalinguistic account to recommend for the quizzical observer. Thomasson (2017) and Belleri (2017) both have proposed metalinguistic accounts of ontological disputes (or more broadly, metaphysical disputes), but their accounts emphasize practical (or pragmatic or aesthetic) considerations as the motivating concerns for the disputants. I found that these “practical” metalinguistic accounts disrespect the presumption of peerhood by attributing an inferior reflective capacity to the disputants. I suggested instead a “theoretical” metalinguistic account, according to which the disputants argue about which concepts are the best for reflecting the objective structure of the world. I argued that this account meets both adequacy conditions. On this account, the disputants really disagree, namely, about which concepts are the best for the purpose described. Further, on this account, the disputants pursue their issues by appropriate methods, or at least methods that could be thought to be appropriate by rational, reasonable persons – assuming that theoretical virtues are indicative of joint-carving, or at least can be thought to be so by persons who are not severely inferior in their cognitive capacities. Finally, even if the quizzical observer finds that the disputants’ aim (joint-carving conceptualization of the world) is in principle unachievable, because there are no relevant facts of the matter, then the mistake that the disputants make, in this regard, is again one that reasonable persons can make.

My account may be suspected of attributing a superior linguistic ability to the disputants, if the quizzical observer finds herself unable to understand terms like “structure” and “joint-carving”. I conceded that such a quizzical observer may indeed not find the best solution in my account, but I do not expect the failure to understand these terms to be a universal disposition among quizzical observers. Further, I proposed that the introduction of these terms constitutes an advance in intelligibility, over primitivist accounts, and should help quizzical observers to alleviate the worry of having to attribute a superior linguistic capacity to the disputants.

My account may also be suspected of attributing inferior reflective capacities (i.e. an inferior ability to understand and adequately describe what one is doing) to the disputants. The disputants take themselves to be talking about what the world is really like, while on the proposed view, they are actually talking about which concepts to use. I responded that the disputants’ self-conception is in fact not thoroughly mistaken: they *are* ultimately talking about what the world is like, but they discuss this issue by discussing the best concepts for describing the world.

These were my main considerations for supposing that my account respects the presumption of peerhood, at least more so than the competing accounts. There might be different ways to explain the sense of pointlessness, on the theoretical metalinguistic account, but the option that I focused on is that according to which the quizzical observer’s sense of pointlessness is invoked by her epistemicist judgments. “Epistemicism”, as a metaontological position, was introduced by Bennett (2009). The idea is that for certain ontological disputes, the correct option among the competing theories cannot be established – not

because there is no fact of the matter, but because we are not in a position to choose between the theories, which all seem to meet the relevant desiderata equally well. Such epistemicist judgments about a dispute do not require one to attribute inferior capacities to the disputants – whether the theories are indeed on a par or not is an issue that rational persons can reasonably disagree upon.

Chapter 4, “Interpreting revisionary ontology from the ontologists’ point of view”

In chapter 4, I took up the interpretation question from the “inside”: how should the revisionary ontologists themselves explain what they are doing? I proposed and motivated the following adequacy conditions for such an account. First, the account should explain the sense of destabilization, that is, the audience’s feeling that the arguments show that there is something wrong with their beliefs. Second, the account should explain the sense of entitlement that remains, despite the sense of destabilization. The sense of entitlement is the audience’s feeling that they remain entitled to their relevant beliefs, such as the belief that there are tables, and that this entitlement has something to do with what they can perceive. Third, the account should explain the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, or in other words, how the revisionary ontologists’ arguments can improve the audience’s beliefs.

First, I considered the account that I called “simple incompatibilism”. According to simple incompatibilism, most people believe, for example, that tables exist, and revisionary ontologists argue that (in the very same, literal ordinary-language sense of all the words) tables do not exist, i.e. they argue that the ordinary belief is false. On this account, revisionary ontologists would improve the audience’s beliefs by identifying false beliefs and replacing them with true beliefs on the same subject matter. This is an improvement of beliefs because, of course, beliefs are good when they are true and bad when they are false.

The problem with simple incompatibilism, I argued, is the failure to properly account for the sense of entitlement. The best explanation for the sense of entitlement, I proposed, is that we are aware of our competence in applying the relevant terms in perceptual judgments, such as “There is exactly one table in this situation”, and of our competence to make inferences from such perceptual judgments to judgments like “There are tables and there are not millions of them in each situation where there is at least one”. So we can form the relevant beliefs (such as the belief that there are tables and there are not millions of them in each situation where there is at least one) by a highly truth-conducive method: applying concepts that we are competent with, to make perceptual judgments. and drawing further inferences of a kind that we are competent with. Simple incompatibilism, as it stands, does not seem to accommodate this explanation for the sense of entitlement, nor does it provide an alternative explanation.

I then looked at the kinds of compatibilist accounts that are usually adopted by those revisionary ontologists who reject simple incompatibilism. According

to “Socratic compatibilism”, most people have believed the revisionary ontologists’ theses (for example, that there are no tables) all along; and, accordingly, they have not believed the negations of these theses (for example, that there are tables). On this account, one can explain the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, for example, by appeal to the idea that people are not aware of what their beliefs on this subject matter are, before encountering the arguments, and a consciously endorsed true belief is better than a mere true belief that is not so endorsed. However, Socratic compatibilism is *prima facie* incompatible with the sense of entitlement and the sense of destabilization, which present the relevant beliefs that Socratic compatibilism denies that we have (such as the belief that there are tables) as the objects of entitlement and destabilization.

According to “indifference compatibilism”, most people do not have beliefs about whether there are tables and the like: they are indifferent on the subject. On this view, the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology can consist in providing the audience with new true beliefs on a subject matter on which they were previously neutral. Van Inwagen (1990) appears to present a case for the conclusion that in their everyday speech (in saying things like “There are two chairs in the next room”) people are indifferent about matters like whether there are chairs – their talk is ontologically non-committing. Further, he apparently takes this view about everyday discourse – the view that Eklund (2005) calls “hermeneutic indifferentism” – to support indifference compatibilism. However, the latter is a view about beliefs, not about the commitments inherent in everyday speech. And we seem to have independent evidence for the presence of beliefs like the belief that there are tables. If not elsewhere, then evidence can be found, again, in the sense of entitlement and destabilization, which presents the audience with these beliefs as the objects of entitlement and destabilization.

The third kind of compatibilism that I considered was “linguistic variance compatibilism”. According to this view, which van Inwagen apparently adopts in (van Inwagen 2014), most people do believe that there are, for example, tables and chairs; but revisionary ontologists discuss whether there are tables and chairs in a different sense of “There are tables and chairs”; and in that sense of “There are tables and chairs”, most people do not have beliefs about the matter. This view explains the sense of entitlement: we remain entitled to the ordinary-language belief, and this entitlement can be explained in accordance with my proposed “best explanation”. However, linguistic variance compatibilism is in trouble with respect to its capacity to account for the sense of destabilization and the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology. The ontologists’ arguments seem to show that there is something wrong with ordinary beliefs (hence the sense of destabilization), but it is not clear how the arguments can show this, if they are directed at a subject matter that most people do not have beliefs about. Further, it is unclear what the epistemic significance of revisionary ontology would be, on this account. The arguments would provide us with new true beliefs; but on the other hand, these true beliefs would be about parts of the world that we already had true beliefs about.

I then turned to what I called “Siderian incompatibilism”. On this view, rather than revealing false beliefs, the arguments show that there are theoretical problems with the concepts that we use to form beliefs. A central one, among such problems, is that the concepts license inconsistent judgments. This account can explain both the sense of entitlement and the sense of destabilization: we feel entitled to the ordinary beliefs about what there is because we can form them by correctly applying our concepts; and the beliefs are destabilized because the arguments show problems with the concepts. The epistemic significance of revisionary ontology, on this account, is explained by appeal to Sider’s idea that the aim of beliefs is to conform to reality and hence they should not just be true, but cast in joint-carving concepts. The concepts without theoretical problems (like licensing inconsistent judgments), on this view, are more likely to be joint-carving.

The problem with Siderian incompatibilism is that it assumes, implausibly, that all beliefs aim to conform to reality, as perfectly as possible, and there are no relevant considerations that might trump this desideratum of conformity. However, as I argued, most of the time we form beliefs for ultimately non-epistemic purposes. I called the beliefs formed (at least in part) for such non-epistemic purposes “practical beliefs” and those formed solely for the sake of epistemic excellence “theoretical beliefs”. Perfect conformity with reality is one way to understand epistemic excellence. I did not dispute this assumption about epistemic excellence, in the thesis. (I point to an alternative way of understanding epistemic excellence, as also involving understanding the connections between the facts known to the agent, in my (Kitsik 2018b). There, I develop a different kind of criticism of Sider’s views from the one considered here.) Based on this distinction between practical and theoretical beliefs, I developed my account of revisionary ontology as a project of improving concepts to improve theoretical beliefs. On that account, revisionary ontology has a limited kind of epistemic significance: it can potentially improve the audience’s theoretical beliefs, but even then only on the assumption that the audience has theoretical beliefs or is interested in having them.

Chapter 5, “Applying the account to the metaphysics of gender”

In chapter 5, I showed how my approach to interpreting revisionary ontology can contribute to the recent discussion about the relationship between feminist and mainstream metaphysics (Barnes 2014, 2017, Mikkola 2015, 2017, Sider 2017, Schaffer 2017). I argued that constructivist analyses of the term “woman” (such as Haslanger 2000, Sveinsdóttir 2013) can be seen as aimed at improving concepts to improve *practical* beliefs, whereas the mainstream revisionary ontology that I analysed in the previous chapters is aimed at improving concepts to improve *theoretical* beliefs.

I began by arguing against the Factual Interpretation of the constructivist analyses of “woman”, according to which these are attempts to discover the metaphysical nature of women, or in other words, the analyses are taken to be statements about worldly facts. I argued that in combination with the plausible

Relevance thesis, the Factual Interpretation (or at least its strong form) has the unacceptable implication that a certain variety of wishful thinking is appropriate in feminist metaphysics. According to the Relevance thesis, arguments like that of Jenkins (2016) – arguments that I take to appeal to harm, as an objection to the feminist metaphysicians’ central theses – are relevant. Such arguments may not be decisive, but they need to be taken seriously, according to the Relevance thesis. However, when the Factual Interpretation of the constructivist theses about “woman” is combined with the plausible Relevance thesis, it seems to follow that one can appropriately object to a factual claim by pointing to the undesirable consequences of the purported fact. This is an implication that feminist metaphysicians would presumably want to avoid, and because of that, they should reject the Factual Interpretation (assuming that they will not reject the Relevance thesis).

I suggested that instead of the Factual Interpretation, the relevant claims about “woman” should be understood as claims about how we should revise the concept associated with “woman”. Since, as I have previously argued, (mainstream) revisionary ontology should be seen as a project of conceptual engineering as well, it might now seem like the revisionary ontologists and feminist metaphysicians are both trying to improve concepts to improve beliefs, and further, they have different ideas about the relevant desiderata for the concepts. However, this is inconsistent with the plausible idea that the mainstreamers and the feminists can legitimately ignore certain kinds of arguments that would be relevant for the other camp. For example, feminist metaphysicians can ignore sorites arguments to the conclusion that there are no women, and mainstream revisionary ontologists who provide such arguments need not recognize the practical importance of the concept ‘woman’ as a legitimate objection to their reasoning. In order to make sense of this apparent independence of the two projects from one another, I again invoked the distinction between theoretical and practical beliefs, suggesting that the “feminist metaphysicians” in question target the concepts used to form practical beliefs and the “mainstream metaphysicians” (or in any case, the revisionary ontologists of the kind discussed in the previous chapters) target the concepts used to form theoretical beliefs. This suggestion is further supported by the observation that we can analyse “belief” as representing the world in a certain way and taking the world to be as represented; and that while “mainstream” revisionary ontologists have reason to care about “how we take the world to be” in the sense of “what we endorse on conscious reflection, in isolation from practical concerns”, “feminist” revisionary ontologists have more reason to care about “how we take the world to be” in the sense of “how we experience the world and how we are disposed to act based on what we perceive”.

Prospects for future research

Firstly and most importantly, further research is needed into the roles and kinds of belief, in order to better understand and pursue various projects of conceptual engineering, including that of revisionary ontology. The distinction that I have

drawn between theoretical beliefs (those formed for the sake of epistemic excellence) and practical beliefs (those formed ultimately for non-epistemic purposes), while not without appeal, is bound to raise to questions. Does each belief or each project of belief formation fall into one of these categories? For example, it is unclear whether moral philosophers are concerned with forming good practical or theoretical beliefs about morality, or both. Further, distinctions within what I have called “practical beliefs” deserve to be examined more closely. On the one hand, such beliefs may be formed to serve the belief-bearer’s non-epistemic aims, such as survival and (non-epistemic) well-being. On the other hand, we may have (ultimately non-epistemic) reason to care about what other people believe, and we may be able to make legitimate conceptual prescriptions for other people’s belief formation. I have only suggested this in my analysis of feminist metaphysics of gender, but the issue deserves further consideration.

Secondly, as I stated in the introduction, the investigation into the interpretation question is motivated by interest in the evaluation and recommendation questions about revisionary ontology; but the thesis remains largely silent on what the implications of the proposed account for evaluation and recommendation precisely are. This depends on various further issues that are beyond the scope of this thesis. For example, this involves questions about whether there is any principled way of measuring how well the competing theories embody theoretical virtues and meet any other relevant desiderata. Further, even if the theoretical virtues can be compared, one may question whether this really tells us anything about the extent to which the competing theories reflect the objective structure of the world. These are, of course, not new questions raised by the thesis: they are rather the big and perennial background questions that I had to put aside here.

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SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Revideeriv ontoloogia: mõistete parandamine uskumuste parandamiseks

Doktoritöö käsitleb küsimust, kuidas revideerivat ontoloogiagat tõlgendada: mida revideerivad ontoloogid tegelikult teevad, millest nad räägivad? Revideerivad ontoloogid (nende seas Peter van Inwagen, Trenton Merricks, Peter Unger, Terence Horgan ja Matjaž Potrč) paistavad kaitsvat tavamõtlemisega sobimatuid väiteid selle kohta, mis on olemas – näiteks väidet, et toole ja laudu pole olemas. Eristasin metaontoloogilise tõlgendamisküsimuse hindamisküsimusest (kas ontoloogia on mõttekas, väärtuslik ettevõtmine?) ja soovitamisküsimusest (kas ja kuidas peaks ontoloogid oma tegevust jätkama?). Revideeriva ontoloogia kohta käivale tõlgendamisküsimusele vastates kaitsesin “teoreetilist” metalingvistilist vaadet, mille järgi on revideeriv ontoloogia tavamõistete parandamine uskumuste parandamiseks. Erinevalt „praktilistest“ metalingvistilistest vaadetest (nagu Amie Thomassoni vaade artiklis „Metaphysical Disputes and Metalinguistic Negotiation” (2017)), on minu vaate kohaselt revideeriva ontoloogia eesmärgiks siiski uurida, milline maailm tegelikult on. Seda teemat – milline maailm tegelikult on – uuritakse aga, arutledes selle üle, millised on parimad mõisted maailma kirjeldamiseks, s.t mõisted, mis peegeldavad maailma objektiivset struktuuri või „lõikavad maailma liigestest“. Üldine idee ontoloogiast kui liigestest lõikava mõisteskeemi otsingust toetub Theodore Siderile, kes esitas selle idee aga pigem vastusena metaontoloogilisele soovitamisküsimusele (kas ja kuidas peaks ontoloogid oma tegevust jätkama?), mitte tõlgendamisküsimusele (mida revideerivad ontoloogid tegelikult teevad, millest nad räägivad?); ja tema soovitus on, et ontoloogid peaksid liigestest lõikavat keelt *kõnelema* (stipulatsiooni teel), selmet arutada, milline see keel *oleks*.

Kaitsesin kirjeldatud teoreetilist metalingvistilist vaadet revideeriva ontoloogia kohta kõigepealt „kahtleva vaatleja“ vaatepunktist ja seejärel revideerivate ontoloogide endi vaatepunktist. Püüdsin esitada otsitavale tõlgendusele selged ja põhjendatud adekvaatsustingimused, pidades silmas tõlgendajate eesmäärke ja nende kasutuses olevaid andmeid. Hindasin võistlevaid vaateid nende adekvaatsustingimuste valguses, põhjendades oma vaate paremust alternatiivide ees. Teises, kolmandas ja neljandas peatükis keskendusin piiratud hulgale näidetele nn peavoolu revideerivast ontoloogiast ning viiendas näitasin, kuidas mu lähenemisest on kasu ka nn feministliku revideeriva ontoloogia mõistmisel.

Doktoritöö originaalne panus seisneb eelkõige järgnevas.

(1) Kaitsesin süstemaatilisel moel teoreetilist metalingvistilist vaadet, mille järgi revideeriv ontoloogia on teoreetilistel eesmärkidel mõistete parandamise projekt. Süstemaatilise saavutamiseks lähtusin selgelt määratletud ja põhjendatud adekvaatsustingimustest ja kaalusin, kuidas minu vaade võrreldes alternatiividega nendele adekvaatsustingimustele vastab.

(2) Kirjeldatud teoreetilise metalingvistilise vaate raames kaitsesin uudset teesi revideeriva ontoloogia episteemilise tähtsuse kohta. Minu vaate järgi võib revideeriv ontoloogia parandada meie *teoreetilisi* uskumusi (mitte meie praktilisi uskumusi), parandades mõisteid, mida nende uskumuste moodustamisel kasutatakse. Teoreetilised uskumused on need, mida moodustatakse pelgalt episteemilise täiuse nimel, samas kui praktilisi uskumusi moodustatakse uskumuse kandja ja/või teiste inimeste mitte-episteemiliste eesmärkide teenimiseks.

(3) Näitasin, kuidas see arusaam revideerivast ontoloogiast ning teoreetiliste ja praktiliste uskumuste eristus valgustab ka feministliku soometafüüsika ja peavoolumetafüüsika suhet. Kaitsesin vaadet, et vahel „feministlikuks soometafüüsikaks“ nimetatut (näiteks Sally Haslangeri ja Asta Sveinsdottiri selleteemalisi kirjutisi) peaks nägema projektina, mille eesmärk on parandada mõisteid *praktiliste* uskumuste parandamiseks. Sellega andsin sisendi hiljuti hoogu saanud feministliku ja peavoolu metafüüsika suhte teemalisse debatti, mille peaosalised on Elizabeth Barnes, Mari Mikkola, Theodore Sider ja Jonathan Schaffer.

Kokkuvõtte järelejäanud osas esitan täielikuma ülevaate doktoritöö sisust ja lõpetan mõtetega edasisest uurimistööst.

Töö sissejuhatuses avasin töö põhiküsimuse ja -väited ning oma peamise panuse uurimisteema käsitluse. Põhiküsimus on revideeriva ontoloogia kohta käiv tõlgendamisküsimus ja põhiväited on järgnevad.

- (1) Paljud kesksed arutelud nii „peavoolu“ kui ka „feministlikus“ revideerivas ontoloogias käivad selle kohta, kuidas parandada uskumuste moodustamisel kasutatavaid mõisteid.
- (2) Kui revideerivat ontoloogiat tuleks tõesti nii mõista, siis oleks sellest projektist (või nendest projektidest) aru saamiseks vaja uurida uskumuste rolle ja liike.
- (3) Relevantne eristus seejuures on eristus teoreetiliste ja praktiliste uskumuste vahel.
- (4) Peavoolu revideeriva ontoloogia eesmärk on parandada mõisteid, mida kasutatakse teoreetiliste uskumuste moodustamisel.
- (5) Arvestades teesi (4), on peavoolu revideerival ontoloogial piiratud episteemiline tähtsus: see võib parandada publiku teoreetilisi uskumusi, aga mitte nende praktilisi uskumusi.
- (6) Feministliku revideeriva ontoloogia eesmärk on parandada praktiliste uskumuste moodustamisel kasutatavaid mõisteid.
- (7) Arvestades teese (4) ja (6), on peavoolu ja feministlik revideeriv ontoloogia üksteisest märkimisväärselt sõltumatud.

Teises peatükis määratlesin lähemalt tõlgendamisküsimuse sisu, vaadeldes, mis konkreetsemalt on selle doktoritöö puhul tõlgendamisobjekt, kuidas mõistan „tõlgendamist“ ning miks seejuures on oluline lähtuda kindlast tõlgendaja vaatepunktist. Seejärel kaitsesin kolmandas ja neljandas peatükis oma teoreetilist metalingvistilist vaadet (väide 1). Tegin seda kõigepealt „kahtleva vaat-

leja“ vaatepunktist (kahtlev vaateleja on revideerivate ontoloogide vaidlustega hästi tuttav, ent tunneb neid vaadeldes siiski teatud „mõttetustunnet“) ja seejärel revideerivate ontoloogide endi vaatepunktist. Neljandas peatükis kaitsesin ka väiteid (2), (3), (4) ja (5). Viiendas peatükis vaatlesin oma teoreetilise meta-lingvistilise vaate ning teoreetiliste ja praktiliste uskumuste eristuse valguses peavoolu revideeriva ontoloogia ja feministliku soometafüüsika suhet, kaitses väiteid (6) ja (7).

Järgnevalt esitan põhjalikuma ülevaate peatükkide sisust (jättes välja sissejuhatuse ja kokkuvõtte).

2. peatükk, „Tõlgendamisküsimuse tõlgendamine“

Leidsin, et metaontoloogiline tõlgendamisküsimus ise vajab tõlgendamist. On erinevaid viise tõlgendamisobjekti määratlenda ning samuti pole selge, mida tähendab „tõlgendamine“ ja kuidas seda teha. Vaatlesin kõigepealt tõlgendamisobjekti ja seejärel tõlgendamist ennast puudutavat küsimust.

Metaontoloogilise tõlgendamise, hindamise ja soovitamise objektina räägitakse mõnikord „olemasoluküsimustest“ ja mõnikord „ontoloogilistest vaidlustest“. Leidsin, et sellisel kujul ei sobi kumbki iseloomustus. Metaontoloogia ei huvitu ega peaks huvituma lihtsalt sellest, mida olemasoluküsimused tähendavad, kas neile on võimalik ja vajalik vastata ning kuidas seda teha. „Metaontoloogiana“ tuntud arutelusid vaadeldes ei näe me tavaliselt, et keskendutaks seesugustele väga üldistele küsimustele. Ja see on nii hea põhjusega: kõigil olemasoluküsimustel, mida võidakse erinevates kontekstides küsida, on liiga vähe ühisosa, et nende kohta (tõlgenduse, hindamise ja soovituse osas) ühtset seisukohta otsida. Näiteks pole metaontoloogi asi tõlgendada ja hinnata naiivse turist küsimust „Kas lumeinimesed on päriselt olemas?“ ja anda soovitusi, kuidas turistiinfopunktid peaksid sellistele küsimustele vastama. Metaontolooge huvitab olemasoluküsimuste küsimine teatud kontekstis, mis hõlmab eeldusi nende küsimuste ja neile vastamise viisi kohta. Iseloomustasin neid eeldusi lähemalt 2. peatükis.

Samuti ei saa määratlenda tõlgendamise, hindamise ja soovitamise objektina ainult „ontoloogilisi vaidlusi“. See on uurimisobjekti rahuldavale kirjeldusele veidi lähemal kui „olemasoluküsimused“, sest terminist „ontoloogilised vaidlused“ võib välja lugeda, et metaontoloogia puudutab filosoofide, täpsemalt ontoloogide arutlusi, mitte mis tahes olemasoluküsimuste teemalisi arutlusi. Kuid ei paista olevat põhjust piirata metaontoloogia uurimisala vaid *vaidlustega*, kuna mitmed asjakohased argumendid puudutavad olemasoluküsimuste (teatud eeldustega) arutlusi laiemalt. Doktoritöö 3. peatükis keskendun siiski vaidlustele, kuna käsitlen seal osalt argumente ja seisukohti, mis puudutavad vaid vaidlusi (näiteks Hirschi seisukoht, et mõned ontoloogide vahelised vaidlused on „pelgalt terminoloogilised“).

Piirasin doktoritöö tõlgendamisobjekti veelgi täpsemalt teatud kesksetele aruteludele nn revideerivas ontoloogias, nimelt argumentidele, mille autorid paistavad kaitsvat tavaarusaamadega sobimatuid väiteid selle kohta, mis on olemas või eksisteerib. Arutasin selle piiranguga seotud komplikatsioone, näi-

teks eristasin eeldust, et need revideeriva ontoloogia teosed on *tegelikult* tavauskumustega sobimatud (eeldus, mida soovin vältida, kui kirjeldan revideerivat ontoloogiat tõlgendamisobjekti fikseerimiseks), pelgast eeldusest, et revideeriva ontoloogia teosed *paistavad* olevat tavauskumustega sobimatud (viimane on eeldus, mille algusest peale omaks võtan). Seejärel jätkasin tõlgendamisobjekti fikseerimist, rekonstrueerides mõned kuulsamad argumendid revideerivast ontoloogiast (Peter Unger, Trenton Merricks, Peter van Inwageni ning Terence Horgani ja Matjaž Potrč'i argumenid).

Olles nõnda tõlgendamisobjekti määratlenud, jätkasin 2. peatükki, selgitades, mida tähendab revideeriva ontoloogia *tõlgendamine*. Mõistan tõlgendamisküsimust küsimusena selle kohta, mida revideerivad ontoloogid päriselt teevad (vastandades seda küsimusele, mida nad pelgalt näivad tegevat). Kuid see jätab siiski tõlgendamisruumi. Ühest küljest võiks meid huvitada küsimus, mida ontoloogid päriselt *proovivad* teha ehk mis on nende teadlik kavatsus. Teisalt on võimalik midagi (päriselt) teha ka kavatsemata seda teha. Mõnes olukorras võib tegutseja vaatepunktist relevantne viis mõista küsimust „Mida ta teeb?“ kui küsimust selle kohta, mida ta proovib teha (näiteks kui tegutseja on valmis oma meetodeid täielikult muutma, et soovitud eesmärki saavutada). Doktoritöös kõne all olevate vaatepunktide seisukohalt ei peaks aga teadvustatud kavatsustele otsustavat rolli andma. Näiteks võib olla kahtleval vaatlejal vaja omistada revideerivatele ontoloogidele tegevus, mis ei vasta nende teadvustatud kavatsusele, kui kavatsusest lähtumisel peaks tõlgendaja ontoloogidele omistama tõsiselt puudulikke ratsionaalseid või keelelisi võimeid. Revideerivatel ontoloogidel endil võib aga olla vaja oma senistele kavatsustele mitte otsustavat rolli anda, teenimaks eesmärki näidata, miks nende tegevust peaks hinnatama ja jätkatama (ning miks seda peaks jätkama nemad ise, mitte keegi teine, näiteks mõni semantik, kes võiks olla paremini kvalifitseeritud nende teadvustatud kavatsusi täide viima). Peatüki lõpus kirjeldasin peamisi viise tõlgendamisküsimusele vastamiseks.

3. peatükk, „Revideeriva ontoloogia tõlgendamine kahtleva vaatleja vaatepunktist“

Olles loonud teises peatükis tõlgendamisküsimuse käsitlemiseks vajaliku raamistikku, jätkasin tõlgendamisküsimuse käsitlemist kolmandas peatükis kõrvalseisja (täpsemalt „kahtleva vaatleja“) ja seejärel neljandas peatükis osalejate ehk revideerivate ontoloogide endi perspektiivist. Kahtlevad vaatlejad leiavad end seletust nõudvat olukorrast: nad tunnevad, et nendega episteemiliselt umbes samaväärsete inimeste vahelised vaidlused on iseäralikult mõttetud. Leidsin, et kahtleva vaatleja olukord seab otsitud tõlgendusele kaks kesket tingimust: (1) tõlgendus peaks seletama kahtleva vaatleja mõttetustunnet seoses vaadeldud vaidlustega ja (2) tõlgendus peaks austama lähtekohana samaväärsuse eeldust (*presumption of peerhood*), s.t eeldust, et vaidlejad on oma ratsionaalsete, keeleliste ja reflektiivsete võimete poolest kahtleva vaatlejaga enam-vähem samal tasemel.

Kaalusin nende adekvaatsustingimuste valguses kõigepealt kolme deflatsioonistlikku vaadet: verbalismi (Eli Hirsch), „lihtsat ontoloogiat“ (Amie Thomasson) ja primitivismi deflatsioonistlikku versiooni (David Chalmers). Leidsin, et neil kõigil on üks viga: nad on loodud seletama vaatleja mõttetustunnet, kuid nad ei austa samaväärsuse eeldust. Leidsin ka, et kõigil kolmel juhul võib näha samaväärsuse eeldusest möödavaatamist selles, et tõlgendaja omistab tõlgendatuile enesega võrreldes suured ratsionaalsuse puudujäägid, mis omakorda näivad põhinevat keeleliste võimete puudujäägil. Verbalistliku vaate järgi jätkavad osapooled seletamatult teatud tegevust (vaidlust), millel on oma iseloomulik eesmärk (üksmeel tõe või õige teguviisi osas), kuid see iseloomulik eesmärk on tegevusest hoolimata juba saavutatud. See osapoolte irratsionaalsus omakorda põhineb nähtavasti nende keelelisel suutmatusel, nimelt oskamatusel heatahtlikult tõlgendada – samas kui heatahtlikult tõlgendamist peetakse fundamentaalseks keeleliseks võimeks. Lihtontoloogilise vaate järgi käsitlevad vaidlejad oma küsimusi (tavakeelseid olemasoluküsimusi) täiesti ebaadekvaatsel moel, nimelt toetudes „teoreetilistele voorustele“ ja muule säärasele, selle asemel et teha mõisteanalüüsi ja tavalisi empiirilisi vaatlusi. See ratsionaalsuse puudujääk – ebasobivate vahendite valimine oma eesmärkide täitmiseks – põhineb omakorda jälle ilmselt keelelisel suutmatusel, nimelt emakeelsete olemasoluküsimuste valesti tõlgendamisel. Viimaks, primitivismi deflatsioonistliku versiooni järgi kasutavad vaidlejad semantiliselt tühja olemasolumõistet ja seetõttu ei õnnestu neil esitada tõeväärtusega väiteid. Siin seisneb ratsionaalne eksimus püüdluses ebapiisavalt määratletud, olematu eesmärgi poole; ja see viga rajaneb taas keelelisel veal, milleks seekord on tühja olemasolumõiste kasutamine.

Eelnevalt kirjeldatud kolm deflatsioonistlikku vaadet eiravad kõik samaväärsuse eeldust, omistades vaidlejatele tõlgendajast endast oluliselt *madalmaid* ratsionaalseid ja keelelisi võimeid; „realistlik primitivism“ seevastu eirab samaväärsuse eeldust, omistades vaidlejatele tõlgendajast oluliselt *kõrgemaid* võimeid. Täpsemalt omistab realistlik primitivism vaidlejatele kõrgema keelelise võimekuse: vaidlejad on selle vaate kohaselt omandanud primitiivse metafüüsilise olemasolu mõiste, samas kui kahtlev vaatleja, kes on puutunud kokku samasuguste relevantsete oludega (lugenud metafüüsikaraamatuid, kuulnud pealt metafüüsikute vestlusi jne), pole suutnud seda primitiivset olemasolumõistet omandada.

Seejärel esitasin alternatiivina metalingvistilise vaate, mille järgi ontoloogid vaidlevad selle üle, kuidas keelt (teatud konteksti puhul) kasutada või revideerida. Väitsin, et see vaade (õigemini, teatud versioon sellest: „teoreetiline“ metalingvistiline vaade) rahuldab mõlemat kesket adekvaatsustingimust: see seletab kahtleva vaatleja mõttetustunnet ja austab samaväärsuse eeldust. Ka Amie Thomasson ja Delia Belleri on ontoloogiliste (või laiemalt metafüüsiliste) vaidluste osas metalingvistilist vaadet kaitsnud, kuid nemad toovad vaidlejaid motiveerivate kaalutlustena esile praktilisi (või pragmaatilisi või esteetilisi) kaalutlusi. Leidsin, et need „praktilised“ metalingvistilised vaated ei austa samaväärsuse eeldust, kuna omistavad vaidlejatele alaväärse reflektiivse võimekuse ehk võimekuse õigesti mõista ja kirjeldada, mida nad teevad. Soo-

vitasi alternatiivina niisiis „teoreetilist“ metalingvistilist vaadet, mille järgi vaidlevad osalised selle üle, millised mõisted peegeldavad kõige paremini maailma objektiivset struktuuri. Väitsin, et see teoreetiline metalingvistiline vaade rahuldab mõlemat adekvaatsustingimust. Selle vaate järgi on vaidlejate vahel tõeline lahkarvamus, nimelt selle üle, missugused mõisted on maailma objektiivse struktuuri peegeldamiseks kõige paremad. Lisaks käsitlevad vaidlejad selle vaate järgi oma küsimusi kohaste meetoditega, või vähemalt meetoditega, mida ratsionaalsed, mõistlikud inimesed võiks kohaseks pidada – eeldades, et teoreetilised voorused on tõendiks selle kohta, et teooria „lõikab maailma liigestest“, või vähemalt võivad nii arvata inimesed, kes pole tõsiselt puudulike kognitiivsete võimetega. Isegi kui kahtlev vaatleja leiab, et vaidlejate eesmärk (maailma liigestest lõikav mõisteskeem) on põhimõtteliselt kättesaamatu, sest pole lihtsalt asjakohaseid fakte, siis on vaidlejate selles osas tehtud viga taas selline, mida mõistlikud inimesed võiksid teha.

Minu vaate puhul võidakse aga kahtlustada, et ka see (sarnaselt realistliku primitivismiga) omistab vaidlejatele tõlgendajast oluliselt suurema keelelise võimekuse – seda juhul, kui kahtlev vaatleja ei suuda mõista termineid nagu „objektiivne struktuur“ ja „liigestest lõikamine“. Nõustusin, et sellisele kahtlevale vaatlejale ei pruugi minu pakutav vaade tõesti parim lahendus olla, kuid eeldan, et mitte kõik kahtlevad vaatlejad pole võimetud neid termineid mõistma. Leian, et nende terminite mängu toomine edendab arusaadavust, võrreldes primitivistliku vaatega, ja peaks seega aitama kahtlevatel vaadeldajatel vähendada muret, et peavad vaidlejatele erilisi keelelisi võimeid omistama.

Need olid peamised põhjused, miks pean oma vaadet kirjeldatud alternatiividega võrreldes enam samaväärsuse eeldust austavaks. Leidsin, et kaitsjav vaade võimaldab seletada ka kahtleva vaatleja mõttetustunnet. Seda mõttetustunnet võib teoreetilise metalingvistilise vaate raames mitmeti seletada, kuid keskendusin võimalusele, et kahtleva vaatleja mõttetustunde kutsuvad esile tema täielikult teadvustamata epistemistslikud otsustused. „Epistemitsismi“ metaontoloogilise seisukohana on kaitsnud Karen Bennett. Epistemitsismi keskne idee on, et teatud ontoloogiliste vaidluste puhul ei saa õiget teooriat alternatiivide seast kindlaks teha – mitte seetõttu, et pole asjakohast fakti, vaid kuna meil pole võimalik teooriate vahel valida, sest nad kõik näivad olulisi kriteeriume sama hästi täitvat. Seesugune epistemistslik otsustus ei nõua vaidlejatele madalamate võimete omistamist: küsimus, kas teooriad on tõesti võrdväärsed või mitte, on miski, mille osas ratsionaalsed inimesed võivad eriarvamusel olla.

4. peatükk, „Revideeriva ontoloogia tõlgendamine ontoloogide vaatepunktist“

Neljandas peatükis vaatlesin tõlgendamisküsimust „seestpoolt“, tõlgendatute endi vaatepunktist: kuidas peaksid revideerivad ontoloogid ise seletama, mida nad teevad? Seadsin otsitavale seletusele järgmised adekvaatsustingimused. Esiteks peaks see seletama destabiliseerimistunnet, s.t publiku tunnet, et argumendid näitavad, et nende uskumustega on midagi valesti. Teiseks on vaja

seletada „õigustustunnet“ (*sense of entitlement*), mis hoolimata destabiliseerumistundest säilib. See on publiku tunne, et neil on endiselt õigus oma asjakohastele uskumustele, näiteks uskumusele, et on olemas lauad, ja et sellel õigustusel on midagi pistmist sellega, mida publik näeb (või laiemalt, tajub). Kolmandaks on vaja seletada revideeriva ontoloogia episteemilist tähtsust ehk seda, kuidas see projekt võiks õnnestumise korral publiku uskumusi parandada.

Kõigepealt kaalusin nn lihtsat inkompatibilismi. Selle vaate järgi usub enamik inimesi (näiteks) laudade olemasolu ning revideerivad ontoloogid kaitsevad väidet, et (kõigi sõnade samas, otseses tavakeelses tähenduses) pole laudu olemas, s.t tavauskumus on väär. Lihtsa inkompatibilismi järgi parandab revideeriv ontoloogia publiku uskumusi, tehes kindlaks valed uskumused ja asendades need sama teema kohta käivate tõeste uskumustega. See tähendab uskumuste parandamist, sest uskumused on head, kui nad on tõesed, ja halvad, kui nad on väärad. Leidsin, et lihtsa inkompatibilismi probleem on suutmatus seletada õigustustunnet. Pakkusin, et õigustustunde parim seletus on see, et oleme teadlikud oma pädevusest asjakohaste terminite rakendamisel tajutotsustustes, nagu „Selles olukorras on täpselt üks laud“, ning oma pädevusest sellistest tajuotsustustest järeldada otsustusi nagu „Lauad on olemas“. Niisiis saame asjakohaseid uskumusi (nagu uskumus, et lauad on olemas) moodustada äärmiselt hästi tõeni jõudmist soodustava meetodi abil: rakendades mõisteid, mille kasutamisel oleme pädevad, tajuotsustuste tegemiseks, ja tehes täiendavaid järeldusi, millesuguste tegemisel oleme samuti pädevad. Lihtne inkompatibilism kirjeldatud kujul ei näi olevat kooskõlas selle seletusega õigustustundele, samuti ei paku see alternatiivset seletust.

Seejärel vaatlesin neid kompatibilistlikke vaateid, mille revideerivad ontoloogid tavaliselt omaks võtavad, kui nad lihtsa inkompatibilismi tagasi lükkavad. „Sokraatilise kompatibilismi“ järgi on enamik inimesi kogu aeg revideerivate ontoloogide teese (näiteks, et laudu pole olemas) uskunud; ja seega pole nad seni uskunud nende teeside eitusi (näiteks, et lauad on olemas). Selle vaate järgi saab revideeriva ontoloogia episteemilist tähtsust seletada näiteks sellega, et inimesed pole enne argumentidega tutvumist oma asjakohastest uskumustest teadlikud ning teadvustatult heaks kiidetud tõene uskumus on parem kui pelk tõene uskumus, mida uskumuse omaja teadvustatult heaks ei kiida. Sokraatiline kompatibilism on aga vähemalt esmapilgul vastuolus õigustustunde ja destabilisteerumistundega: need tunded esitavad kõnealuseid uskumusi, mida meil sokraatilise kompatibilismi järgi pole, õigustuse ja destabiliseerimise objektina.

„Ükskõiksuskompatibilismi“ järgi seevastu pole enamikul inimestel üldse uskumusi küsimuses, kas lauad ja muud sarnased asjad on olemas: nad on selle teema suhtes ükskõiksed. Selle vaate järgi võib revideeriva ontoloogia episteemiline tähtsus seisneda publikule uute tõeste uskumuste pakkumises teemal, mille osas nad olid varem neutraalsed. Selle vaate omistasin Peter van Inwagenile. Ta näib argumenteerivat, et oma igapäevakõnes (öeldes näiteks, et „Teises toas on kaks tooli“) on inimesed ükskõiksed küsimustes nagu küsimus, kas on olemas toolid – nende kõne pole ontoloogiliselt siduv. Van Inwagen näib

arvavat, et see vaade – mida Matti Eklund nimetab „hermeneutiliseks ükskõiksuseks“ (*hermeneutic indifferentism*) – toetab ükskõiksuskompatibilismi. Viimane on aga vaade uskumuste kohta, mitte igapäevase kõne sidumuste kohta. Meil näib olevat igapäevakõne tõlgendamisest sõltumatut tõendmaterjali, mis kinnitab, et meil tõesti on uskumused nagu uskumus, et toolid on olemas. Kui mitte mujalt, siis leiame tõendmaterjali õigustus- ja destabiliseerumistundes, mis esitavad neid uskumusi publikule nende õigustustunde ja destabiliseerumistunde objektidena.

Kolmandat liiki kompatibilism, mida kaalusin, oli „keelelise varieerumise kompatibilism“. Selle vaate järgi, mida näib van Inwagen pooldavat oma hiljutises kirjutises, usub enamik inimesi näiteks seda, et on olemas lauad ja toolid; revideerivad ontoloogid aga arutavad, kas on olemas lauad ja toolid lause „Lauad ja toolid on olemas“ mingis muus, metafüüsilises tähenduses. Ja lause metafüüsilises tähenduses pole inimestel selleteemalisi uskumusi. See vaade seletab õigustustunnet: meil on endiselt õigus oma tavakeelsele uskumusele ja seda õigustust saab seletada kooskõlas minu pakutud „parima seletusega“ õigustustundele. Kuid keelelise varieeruvuse kompatibilismil on raskusi destabiliseerumistunde ja revideeriva ontoloogia episteemilise tähtsuse seletamisega. Ontoloogide argumendid paistavad näitavat, et tavauskumustega on midagi valesti (sellest destabiliseerumistunne), kuid pole selge, kuidas need argumendid saavad seda näidata, kui nad käivad teema kohta, mille osas enamikul inimestel uskumusi pole. Samuti on ebaselge, mis oleks keelelise varieerumise kompatibilismi kohaselt revideeriva ontoloogia episteemiline tähtsus. Tõsi, argumendid pakuksid meile uusi tõeseid uskumusi; kuid teisalt käiks need tõesed uskumused maailma osade kohta, mille kohta meil juba on tõesed uskumused. Paistab, et õpime vaid maailma teises keeles kirjeldama.

Pöördusin seejärel „Sideri inkompatibilismi“ juurde. Selle vaate järgi ei paljasta argumendid mitte vääri uskumusi, vaid näitavad, et meie uskumuste moodustamiseks kasutatavatel mõistetel on teatud teoreetilised probleemid. Keskne probleem seisneb selles, et kõnealused mõisted lubavad vasturääkivaid otsustusi. Sideri inkompatibilism suudab seletada nii õigustustunnet kui ka destabiliseerumistunnet: tunneme, et meil on uskumustele õigus, sest saame neid moodustada, rakendades mõisteid, mille kasutamisel oleme pädevad; ja uskumused on destabiliseeritud, sest argumendid näitavad probleeme seoses nende mõistetega, mille abil uskumused on moodustatud. Revideeriva ontoloogia episteemilist tähtsust seletab see vaade, apelleerides Sideri mõttele, et uskumuste eesmärk on olla vastavuses maailmaga ja seetõttu ei peaks uskumused olema mitte ainult tõesed, vaid vormitud maailma objektiivset struktuuri peegeldavate mõistete abil. Kui mõistetel on aga sedalaadi teoreetilised probleemid, mida ontoloogid paljastavad, siis pole tegemist teoreetiliselt voorusliku mõisteskeemiga, mis omakorda annab alust arvata, et tegemist pole maailma „liigestest lõikava“ mõisteskeemiga.

Sideri inkompatibilismi viga on, et see eeldab – ebausutavalt – et kõigi uskumuste eesmärk on olla vastavuses reaalsusega, nii täiuslikult kui võimalik, ja puuduvad muud asjakohased kaalutlused, mis võiks selle vastavuseesmärgi

üles kaaluda. Leidsin, et enamasti moodustame uskumusi (lõpuks) mitte-episteemilistel eesmärkidel. Nimetasin mitte-episteemilistel eesmärkidel moodustatud uskumusi „praktilisteks uskumusteks“ ja pelgalt episteemilise täiuse nimel moodustatud uskumusi „teoreetilisteks uskumusteks“. Täiuslik vastavus reaalsusele on üks viis episteemilist täiust mõista (ma ei vaidlusta doktoritöös seda eeldust episteemilise täiuse kohta, aga pean seda siiski vaid *üheks* viisiks episteemilist täiust mõista). Tuginedes kirjeldatud eristusele praktiliste ja teoreetiliste uskumuste vahel, arendasin välja oma vaate revideerivast ontoloogiast kui mõistete parandamisest teoreetiliste uskumuste parandamiseks. Selle vaate järgi on revideerival ontoloogial vaid piiratud episteemiline tähtsus: revideeriv ontoloogia võib parandada ainult publiku teoreetilisi uskumusi ja sedagi vaid eeldusel, et publikul on teoreetilised uskumused või nad on huvitatud nende omandamisest.

5. peatükk, „Kaitstud vaate rakendamine soometafüüsikale“

Viiendas peatükis näitasin, kuidas mu lähenemine revideeriva ontoloogia tõlgendamisele võib panustada hiljuti hoogu saanud arutellu feministliku ja peavoolu metafüüsika vahelise suhte kohta. Nimetatud arutelu on toimunud eelkõige Elizabeth Barnesi, Mari Mikkola, Ted Sideri ja Jonathan Schafferi vahel. Kaitsesin vaadet, et sõna „naine“ konstruktivistlikud analüüsid (näiteks Sally Haslangeri ja Asta Sveinsdóttiri omad) on käsitletavad püüdlusena parandada mõisteid *praktiliste* uskumuste parandamiseks, samas kui eelnevates peatükkides analüüsitud revideeriva ontoloogia eesmärk on parandada mõisteid, et parandada *teoreetilisi* uskumusi.

Kritiseerisin kõigepealt „naise“ konstruktivistlike analüüside „faktilist tõlgendust“, mille kohaselt need analüüsid on katse avastada naiste metafüüsiline loomus, s.t analüüse nähakse väidetena maailma faktide kohta. Argumenteerisin, et koos usutava „relevantsusteega“ on faktilisel tõlgendusel mitteaktsepteeritav implikatsioon, et teatud laadi soovmõtlemine on feministlikus metafüüsikas aktsepteeritav. Relevantsusteesi järgi on argumendid nagu Katharine Jenkinsi oma – argumendid, mis mu tõlgenduse järgi apelleerivad kahjule, vastuväitena feministlike metafüüsikute kesksetele teesidele – feministlikus metafüüsikas relevantssed. Jenkinsi stiilis argumendid võivad mitte olla otsustavad, kuid relevantsusteesi järgi peab neid tõsiselt võtma. Kuid kui konstruktivistlikud teesid „naise“ kohta kombineerida usutava relevantsusteega, näib järelduvat, et faktiväitele on kohane vastu vaielda, osutades väidetava fakti soovimatutele tagajärgedele. Feministlikud metafüüsikud tahaksid seda implikatsiooni eeldatavasti vältida ning seetõttu peaksid nad faktilise tõlgenduse (või vähemalt teatud tugeva versiooni faktilisest tõlgendusest) tagasi lükkama – eeldades, et nad ei lükka tagasi relevantsusteesi.

Seejärel pakkusin, et faktilise tõlgenduse asemel võiks väiteid „naise“ kohta mõista väidetena selle kohta, kuidas peaksime muutma selle sõnaga seotud mõistete. Kuna eelnevates peatükkides kaitsesin vaadet, et ka peavoolu revideerivat ontoloogiat ontoloogiat peaks käsitlema mõisteparandusprojektina, võib nüüd paista, nagu püüaks nii peavoolu revideerivad ontoloogid kui ka femi-

nistlikud metafüüsikud ühtviisi uskumuste moodustamiseks kasutatavaid mõisteid parandada, pidades seejuures relevantseks erinevaid kriteeriume. Nimelt peavad peavoolu revideerivad ontoloogid oluliseks vaid teoreetilisi voorusi, mida peavad omakorda tõendmaterjaliks, et mõisteskeem peegeldab maailma objektiivset struktuuri. Samas feministlike metafüüsikute jaoks on olulised ka eetilised kaalutlused. See vaade, mille järgi on feministlikud ja peavoolumetafüüsikud konkureerivad osapooled samas laiemas projektis (mõistete parandamine uskumuste parandamiseks), on aga vastuolus usutava ideega, et peavooluontoloogid ja feministlikud metafüüsikud võivad õigupäraselt eirata teatud argumente, mis teisele osapoolle oleksid relevantssed. Näiteks võivad feministlikud metafüüsikud eirata nn kuhja-argumente, mille järeldus on, et naisi pole olemas, ja peavoolu revideerivad ontoloogid, kes selliseid argumente esitavad, ei pea tunnistama 'naise' mõiste praktilist tähtsust kui asjakohast vastuväidet nende argumentidele.

Et kahe projekti üksteisest sõltumatust mõista, kasutasin jälle eristust teoreetiliste ja praktiliste uskumuste vahel. Leidsin, et kõnealused „feministlikud metafüüsikud“ püüavad parandada praktiliste uskumuste moodustamisel kasutatavaid mõisteid ja „peavoolu metafüüsikud“ (või igatahes revideerivad ontoloogid, keda käsitlesin eelmistes peatükkides) püüavad parandada teoreetiliste uskumuste moodustamisel kasutatavaid mõisteid. Seda vaadet toetab ka tähelepanek, et „uskumust“ saab analüüsida maailma representeerimisena teatud viisil ja maailma pidamisena representeeritud viisil olevaks. „Peavoolu“ revideerivatel ontoloogidel on põhjust hoolida, kuidas me „peame maailma representeeritud viisil olevaks“ tähenduses „mida me teadlikul reflekteerimisel tõeks tunnistame“, samas kui feministlikel metafüüsikutel on põhjust hoolida, kuidas me maailma representeerime, kui „peame maailma representeeritud viisil olevaks“ tähenduses „kuidas me maailma kogeme ja kuidas kaldume tajutu põhjal käituma“.

Võimalusi edasiseks uurimistööks

Eelkõige on vaja uurida põhjalikumalt uskumuste rolle ja liike, mõistmaks ja edendamaks erinevaid mõisteparanduse projekte, sealhulgas revideerivat ontoloogiat. Teoreetiliste uskumuste (ehk puhtalt episteemilise täiuse nimel moodustatud uskumuste) ja praktiliste uskumuste (ehk uskumuste, mille moodustamise lõppeesmärk pole episteemiline) eristus näib küll midagi olulist tabavat, ent tekitab samas küsimusi. Mis ikkagi on „episteemiline täius“ kui uskumuse eesmärk? Ja mis on kõnealused mitte-episteemilised eesmärgid? Kas iga uskumus või uskumuste moodustamise projekt kuulub ühte neist kategooritest? Näiteks pole selge, kas moraalifilosoofid püüavad moodustada häid teoreetilisi või praktilisi uskumusi moraali kohta või mõlemaid. Samuti peaks lähemalt uurima eristusi „praktiliste uskumuste“ sees. Ühest küljest moodustatakse need uskumused uskumuse kandja mitte-episteemiliste eesmärkide tarvis, nagu ellujäämine ja (mitte-episteemiline) heaolu. Teisalt võib meil olla (viimaks mitte-episteemilisi) aluseid hoolida mitte üksnes sellest, mis mõisted on uskumuse kandja huvide seisukohast kõige tõhusamad: meil võib olla võimalik teha oma

huvidest lähtuvalt õigustatud ettekirjutusi mõistete osas, mida *teised* inimesed oma praktiliste uskumuste moodustamisel kasutavad. Olen sellele võimalusele oma feministliku soometafüüsika analüüsis ainult osutanud, ent seda peaks edasi uurima, kaaludes näiteks võimalikke eesmärgikonflikte, mis tekivad, kui uskumuse kandja huvidest lähtuvalt oleksid õigustatud ühed mõisted, aga teiste inimeste huvidest lähtuvalt peaks ta kasutama teisi mõisteid.

Teine teemadering, mis edasist uurimist vajab, on otsesemalt seotud meta-ontoloogiaga, täpsemalt sellega, kuidas revideerivat ontoloogiat kui intellektuaalset projekti *hinnata*, kui on omaks võetud siin kaitstud *tõlgendus*. Põhjendasin tõlgendamisküsimuse uurimist just nimelt huviga hindamis- ja soovitamisküsimuste osas, kuid doktoritöö suuresti vaikib ses osas, mis täpselt on kaitstud vaate vastavad implikatsioonid. See sõltub mitmetest küsimustest, mis jäävad doktoritöö haardest välja. Näiteks ei käsitle doktoritöö küsimust, kas on mingit viisi süstemaatiliselt mõõta, kuivõrd on võistlevad teooriad teoreetiliselt vooruslikud ja täidavad teisi asjakohaseid kriteeriume. Isegi kui teoreetilisi voorusi saab võrrelda, võiks siis ikkagi küsida, kas see võrdlus ütleks meile midagi selle kohta, mil määral võistlevad teooriad peegeldavad maailma objektiivset struktuuri. Lahtiseks on siin jäetud ka küsimus, kas maailmal üldse on objektiivne struktuur. Need pole aga muidugi uued küsimused, mis seoses selle doktoritööga tekivad: need on pigem ulatuslikud (ja ehk võiks isegi öelda, et igavesed) taustaprobleemid, mille olen pidanud siin kõrvale jätma.

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Academic Appointments

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Publications

Peer-reviewed publications

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Book Reviews

Kitsik, Eve. 2018. Review of: Thomas Nagel's *The View from Nowhere* and *The Last Word* (Estonian translations). *Akadeemia* no 1, 149–163. [In Estonian]
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Presentations

- 2017 (August), “How Can Revisionary Ontology Improve Our Beliefs?”. *European Congress of Analytic Philosophy 9 (ECAP9)*, LMU Munich, Germany.
- 2017 (May), “Mainstream Metaphysics and Feminist Metaphysics as Two Projects of Conceptual Engineering”. *Annual Conference of Estonian Philosophy*, University of Tartu, Estonia.
- 2016 (June), “Yes, But Not Really: How Philosophical Explications Relate to Common Sense”. Workshop *Philosophical Methods*, Duisburg-Essen University, Germany.
- 2015 (September), “Can Philosophical Ontology Be Practically Significant?” *9th Congress of the Gesellschaft für Analytische Philosophie (GAP.9)*, Osnabrück University, Germany.
- 2015 (May), “Filosoofilise ontoloogia ühiskondlikust tähtsusetusest”. *Annual Conference of Estonian Philosophy*, Tallinn University, Estonia.
- 2014 (August), “Do Social Entities Exist in a Distinct Sense or Way?”. *European Congress of Analytic Philosophy 8 (ECAP8)*, University of Bucharest, Romania.
- 2013 (October), “On the Troubles With ‘Existence’ and ‘Reality’ in Social Ontology”. *3rd Conference of the European Network on Social Ontology (ENSO III)*, University of Helsinki, Finland.
- 2013 (July), “The Secret Language of Metaphysics”. Workshop *The Viability of Metaphysics*, Durham University, UK.
- 2013 (June), “How Ontological Disagreements Can Be Deeper Than They Seem”. *Graduate Conference on Ontology*, University of Warsaw, Poland.

Courses Taught

As the sole instructor

- 2018, 2017, 2015: *Elements of Argumentation Theory*, University of Tartu
- 2017: *The Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence*, University of Tartu
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Co-taught

- 2018 (with Vivian Puusepp), 2017 (with Roomet Jakapi, with Kadri Simm), 2016 (with Siobhan Kattago): *Master’s Seminar*, University of Tartu
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Publikatsioonid

Eelretsenseeritud publikatsioonid

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- 2017 (mai), “Mainstream Metaphysics and Feminist Metaphysics as Two Projects of Conceptual Engineering”. *Eesti filosoofia aastakonverents*, Tartu Ülikool, Eesti.
- 2016 (juuni), “Yes, But Not Really: How Philosophical Explications Relate to Common Sense”. Töötuba *Philosophical Methods*, Duisburg-Essen Ülikool, Saksamaa.
- 2015 (september), “Can Philosophical Ontology Be Practically Significant?”. *9th Congress of the Gesellschaft für Analytische Philosophie (GAP.9)*, Osnabrücki Ülikool, Saksamaa.
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- 2014 (august), “Do Social Entities Exist in a Distinct Sense or Way?”. *European Congress of Analytic Philosophy 8 (ECAP8)*, Bukaresti Ülikool, Rumeenia.
- 2013 (oktoober), “On the Troubles With ‘Existence’ and ‘Reality’ in Social Ontology”. *3rd Conference of the European Network on Social Ontology (ENSO III)*, Helsinki Ülikool, Soome.
- 2013 (juuli), “The Secret Language of Metaphysics”. Töötuba *The Viability of Metaphysics*, Durhami Ülikool, Suurbritannia.
- 2013 (juuni), “How Ontological Disagreements Can Be Deeper Than They Seem”. *Graduate Conference on Ontology*, Varssavi Ülikool, Poola.

Õpetatud kursused

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- 2018, 2017, 1015: *Argumentatsiooniteooria alused*, Tartu Ülikool
- 2017: *Tehisintellekti filosoofia*, Tartu Ülikool
- 2016: *Filosoofiline kirjutamine*, Tartu Ülikool

Koos õpetatud

- 2018 (Vivian Puusepaga), 2017 (Roomet Jakapi ja Kadri Simmiga), 2016 (Siobhan Kattagoga): *Magistriseminar*, Tartu Ülikool
- 2015 (Francesco Orsi ja Alexander Daviesega): *Isikute ja nende häälte austamine: objektistamine ja vaigistamine*, Tartu Ülikool
- November 2015 – jaanuar 2016 (Mats Volbergiga): *Filosoofia*, Tartu Tamme Gümnaasium
- 2014 (Nelli Jungiga): *Filosoofiline kirjutamine*, Tartu Ülikool

DISSERTATIONES PHILOSOPHICAE UNIVERSITATIS TARTUENSIS

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