Much Ado about Something-from-Nothing; or, Problems for Ontological Minimalism

ABSTRACT: Ontological Minimalism is an increasingly popular view that combines realism in first-order ontological debates with a deflationary understanding of what such existence claims amount to. In the version of the view associated with Stephen Schiffer and Amie Thomasson, Ontological Minimalism says that such existence claims can be easily shown to be true (or false) because the concepts in question include conditions for their own application. Given the obtaining of these conditions, it will be a conceptual truth that entities falling under the kind exist. I argue that the view faces serious problems. The problems concern whether and how the minimalist can establish that the entities the existence of which she accounts for have other properties that such entities are supposed to have by definition. For example, can she combine minimalism about the existence of a mereological fusion of A and B with the supposedly conceptual truth that the fusion of A and B has A and B as parts? I trace the problems back ultimately to the notion of application conditions. If one distinguishes between different kinds of application, it becomes apparent why the minimalist cannot, through the definitions of concepts, simultaneously establish that entities falling under those concepts exist, and that they have other properties. The minimalist thus faces a dilemma: to keep the minimalist approach to existence, and let the other properties go – thereby ensuring that the entities in question are very minimal indeed; or to retain a conceptual route to ensuring the other properties are true of such entities – thereby requiring some regular first-order metaphysics to establish their existence.

Keywords: Thomasson, Schiffer, Carnap, deflationism, ontological minimalism, metaontology

Ontological Minimalism (OM) with respect to Ks is a view which combines realism about Ks with a deflationary metaontological take on how to understand such realism.[1] Nihilists and maximalists about Ks disagree with each other over whether Ks exist, but they take their disagreement to be a standard, first-order metaphysical one. The minimalist's view is irenic in this context. It says, with the realist, that there

[1] Ontological minimalism *sans phrase*, as I will mostly use the expression in this paper, will just mean ontological minimalism with respect to a large and/or important range of Ks.

are Ks, but because of its deflationary understanding of this claim is also says that the nihilist has correctly described what there is. To illustrate: Peter van Inwagen (1990) is a nihilist about all types of complex objects other than organisms. So, in particular, he denies the existence of chairs, holding that where others take there to be a chair, all that exist are simple things (pieces of wood, for the sake of argument), arranged chair-wise. The maximalist about chairs, by contrast, affirms that there are chairs as well as pieces of wood arranged chair-wise. OM holds that there are indeed chairs but maintains (putting it roughly for the time being) that what it means to say that there are chairs is just that there are pieces of wood arranged chair-wise.

OM is an increasingly popular view, with a number of defenders and sympathizers.[2] It is sometimes described as neo-Carnapian since it finds its roots in Carnap (1950). In this paper, I shall examine the views of two prominent contemporary minimalists, Stephen Schiffer (2003) and Amie Thomasson (2001, 2007, 2009a, 2009b) (and of these, I shall focus mostly on Thomasson), and argue that there are serious difficulties in implementing their version of OM. I strongly suspect that the problems that afflict their views will have counterparts for other varieties of OM, but I will not follow up on that here.[3] After a more detailed exposition of OM in section 1, I begin, in section 2, the exposition of the main problem that I think afflicts it, what I call the problem of too much content. In sections 3 to 5, I consider three possible responses the minimalist might make to the critique as so far developed

[2] Including Brandom (1998), Hale and Wright (2009), Hirsch (2011), Johnston (1988), Searle (1995).
[3] For the remainder of this paper, OM and its cognates (e.g. "minimalist") will be restricted to the Thomasson/Schiffer variety of that larger trend.

and argue that none of them successfully addresses the problem. In sections 6 and 7, I resume and complete my critique through an examination of the notion of application as it figures in the minimalist's use of application and co-application conditions for concepts. In section 8, I show that my objection to OM is not simply an objection to taking a view that is designed for abstract entities and extending it to concrete entities. Section 9 offers a brief conclusion.

1. Ontological Minimalism

Thomasson approaches existence questions from the direction of the conditions for the application and co-application of concepts or linguistic terms.[4] It appears to be a truism that if the concept K applies, then Ks exist. What is distinctive of Thomasson's OM is evident in two views she has concerning this truism. First, she takes the application conditions of the concept to be, somehow, primary with respect to existence. Secondly, she understands the notion of application in the truism in a particular way. I shall return to this second feature in section 6. With respect to the first, the primacy of the application conditions for the concept means that Thomasson thinks that existence questions should be approached via the application conditions of concepts. Determining whether a concept applies involves two components. First, the concept itself, according to Thomasson, includes the conditions under which it is correctly applied. These conditions must be made

[4] Intuitively, application conditions correspond to questions of existence; co-application conditions to questions of identity. The relation between these two kinds of conditions is crucial for making sense of Thomasson's view but I will not be in a position to introduce my discussion of co-application conditions properly until section 7.

explicit. In some cases, that will involve the analysis of existing concepts. In other cases, the application conditions will lie on the surface, in the form of an explicit condition. The condition may take the form of a definition of a concept. However, it may also take the form of an existence condition for Ks of the kind one might find in set theory, mereology, etc. These existence conditions, according to Thomasson, are to be seen as expressions in the material mode of conditions, associated with and contained within concepts, on how those concepts are to be applied. In this case, the primacy of the conceptual in answering questions about existence will be disguised. The maximalist and the minimalist will appear to agree over some (apparently first-order) existence condition for Ks of the form:

EC) A K exists if and only if…..

What separates them is that for the minimalist, this existence condition is accepted because it expresses something that pertains to the very concept of a K whereas, for the maximalist, the concept of a K by itself does not suffice to guarantee the correctness of the existence condition. For the minimalist, a condition like EC will be analytic, whereas for a maximalist, it will be a substantive piece of first-order metaphysics.

The second component in thinking about the existence of Ks is determining whether or not the application conditions for the concept, or the existence conditions given by the right-hand side of a biconditional of the form EC, obtain. The work involved in determining this may be easy or difficult, depending on the concept and conditions at issue. But whatever the difficulties are in determining whether the application or

existence conditions obtain, the point of calling OM "the easy approach to ontology" (Thomasson 2009b) is that there is no further difficulty in deciding whether those conditions are correct. They are taken to be correct by definition.

Schiffer approaches the issue with his notion of a something-from-nothing inference (SFNI). An SFNI is an inference with a conclusion that implies the existence of something of a given kind K from a premise that does not. A favored example of his is the following:

1) This rose is red

therefore

2) This rose has the property of redness

We infer a proposition that implies the existence of a property from a proposition that makes no reference to such a thing. What is special about such inferences is that the premise does not *logically* entail the conclusion but does so in virtue of the concept of the entity that makes its appearance in the conclusion. Schiffer says that 2) is a pleonastic transformation of 1) and that properties are, since they are inferable by pleonastic transformation, pleonastic entities.[5] Besides properties, Schiffer identifies propositions, events, and fictional characters as examples of pleonastic entities. Like Thomasson, Schiffer holds that the existence of entities of these kinds follows from two things: a) the nature of the concepts they fall under; and b) the obtaining of some conditions which do not logically entail their existence.

[5] Precise versions of the definitions of SFNI and pleonastic entities can be found in Schiffer (2003, 56-7).

OM of the Thomasson/Schiffer variety has its roots in Carnap (1950).[6] Carnap there distinguishes what he calls internal from external questions in ontology. Internal questions are internal to a linguistic framework which includes rules for the use of terms that constitute that framework. For example, with respect to the material object framework (the world of things, as Carnap calls it), questions like "did King Arthur really exist?" or "are there unicorns?" are typically meant as internal. The framework supplies us with the appropriate (in this case, empirical) methods for answering these questions and, given these methods, the questions can be more or less easily answered. Within the framework, questions like "are there really material objects?" are entirely trivial. External questions concern which framework to adopt. It might be thought that we should accept the material object framework if and only if there really are material objects. However, the question "are there really material objects?" presupposes rules for using the term "material object," rules that are provided by the framework itself. To try and answer the question "are there really material objects?" independently of the framework (in the context of which, the answer is a trivial affirmative) is meaningless. Carnap holds, instead, that questions about which framework to adopt are pragmatic. We may adopt the material object framework if this is useful to us for some purpose. The similarity to the Thomasson/Schiffer variety of OM should be clear. The conditions for the application of terms or concepts identified by Thomasson and Schiffer are like the rules that come with a certain linguistic framework for Carnap. Ontology is "easy" because determining whether Ks exist is just a matter of applying procedures,

[6] In Thomasson's case, at least, this is quite self-consciously so. See her contribution to this volume and (ms).

empirical or logical as the case may be, that are internal to a framework, concept, or term.

2. The Problem of Too Much Content

I begin my examination of OM with a discussion of the fusions of Classical Extensional Mereology (CEM).[7] Although fusions have not been much discussed by minimalists it is clear how the theory would apply in such a case. Since we are dealing with a philosophically introduced concept we do not have to worry about whether we are getting the conceptual analysis part right. CEM includes an explicit existence condition for fusions which is to be understood, according to the minimalist, as an expression in the material mode of the application condition contained in the concept *fusion*. Hence, as long as the condition obtains, it will be true by definition that fusions exist.

What, then, is the application condition for the concept *fusion*, or the existence condition for fusions, as found in CEM? Here is how David Lewis puts it:

> MS) "Whenever there are some things, there exists a fusion of those things." (1991, 74)

In this case, the existence/application condition is nugatory – the mere existence of some things. If this condition is guaranteed, by the very concept of a fusion, to express the existence condition for fusions, it is, indeed, extremely easy to

[7] My discussion assumes some familiarity with CEM. See Simons (1987) or Lewis (1991) for background.

determine that fusions exist. As Thomasson says (putting the point in terms of language rather than concepts):

> [I]f it is simply a rule of use that (for singular terms 'a' and 'b') 'mereological sum [i.e. fusion] of a and b' applies provided 'a' applies and 'b' applies, then (assuming some other terms refer), it is a trivial matter to show that there are mereological sums. (2009b, fn 8)[8]

Unfortunately, MS cannot be taken as the first-order expression of a definition of the concept *fusion* because that concept *already has* an explicit definition as part of the theory, namely,

> FUSION) "Something is a fusion of some things iff it has all of them as parts and has no part that is distinct from each of them." (Lewis 1991, 73)

This definition says nothing about the conditions under which a fusion exists but it does tell us what a fusion *is*. So MS, at least as interpreted by Lewis or other proponents of CEM, is not *just* supposed to be telling us that there are things, call them fusions, that exist just when some other things exist. It is telling us that when some things exist, something else exists *which has them as parts*; that is, not just that

[8] In fairness, this remark is from an illustrative footnote and not part of a sustained discussion of fusions. Nonetheless, it is what one would expect the minimalist's view of them to be. It is incidental to Thomasson's minimalism about fusions that she puts the application condition for 'fusion of a and b' in terms of whether 'a' and 'b' apply rather than whether a and b exist.

something else exists, but that a *fusion* of them exists.[9] "Fusion," in MS, comes with a definition already supplied. On the minimalist's reading of CEM, then, there appear to be two competing definitions (or one definition and the first-order expression of another) for the concept *fusion*.

It might be thought that this is a merely presentational problem. Yes, we appear to have two definitions here, but why not simply combine the two into one definition? This, as I shall argue, cannot be done satisfactorily, and that it cannot is what I call the problem of too much content (the problem for minimalism being that it requires more content in the alleged definitions than can be there). The amalgamation of MS and FUSION would look like this:

> MS-FUSION) If some things exist, then there exists something, a fusion, such that those things are all parts of it.

There is no problem in supposing that such an axiom might be true or that fusions, as understood in CEM, might exist. The problems come in trying to understand MS-FUSION from the minimalist point of view. The antecedent gives a condition for two things: the existence of something and the obtaining of a relation in which that thing stands to some distinct objects, referred to in the antecedent. But the minimalist faces a dilemma. On the one hand, it seems unproblematic to say, with the minimalist, that we can associate with any given condition the concept of an object

[9] For the sake of simplicity, I ignore here and throughout the details about a fusion's not having any parts that don't overlap the things of which it is a fusion.

that exists just as long as that condition is met. For example, one might associate a concept, *nextion of A and B*, let us say, with the condition that A be next to B. So likewise, there is no problem in supposing that there is a concept of something, the fusion of A and B, that exists just so long as A and B exist. But one cannot simply assume that the objects falling under such concepts meet some further condition; hence, it cannot be part of the concept of something for the existence of which the obtaining of some condition is conceptually sufficient, that things falling under the concept must have any further properties that do not follow logically from the existence condition. So, one cannot suppose it to be true in virtue of the concept *fusion*, if that concept contains the condition that the fusion of A and B exists just in case A and B exist, that a fusion of A and B has them as parts. Of course, concerning some object C, it would be a conceptual truth that it had some other objects A and B as parts, if C fell under the concept *fusion of A and B* as given by the definition FUSION above. But that brings us to the other horn of the dilemma. If one were to suppose, with Lewis, that it is true by definition of the concept *fusion* that the fusion of A and B has A and B as parts, then one cannot also suppose it to be true, *merely by definition of the concept*, that the existence of A and B is sufficient for the existence of their fusion. If one thinks that that condition is sufficient for the existence of a fusion, that must be taken not as a conceptual truth, but as a piece of genuine first-order metaphysics (as, I believe, Lewis so takes it).

3. Being and Nothingness

In this and the following two sections, I consider some responses the minimalist might make to the argument so far. I argued above that if the existence condition for fusions as expressed in MS were taken as true by definition, then we could not assume the further condition on fusions, expressed in FUSION, to be true of them. Still, it might be replied, unlike the case to be discussed in the next section, there is nothing incoherent about the idea of something which exists just in case A and B do and which has A and B as parts. So even though we can't be sure that fusions, as defined by MS, have the things on which they depend for existence as parts, they might do, nonetheless. It might, therefore, be thought that our problem is, essentially, one about knowledge. The minimalist gets us as far as the existence of things which resemble the mereologists' fusions with regards to their conditions of existence. Whether they resemble fusions with respect to their parts remains unknown (at least at this stage of enquiry). Perhaps the minimalist harbors the hope that we can confirm somehow that her fusions have the right parts; or perhaps she consigns herself to the impossibility of ever knowing for sure that they do (and is prepared to assume they do, since it seems no harm will come of it). But either way, our difficulties here would stem from lack of knowledge on our part rather than lack of something on the part of the entities concerned.

In fact, I think the problem is not of this nature and one need only state this imagined response to feel how unconvincing it is. Granted that our knowledge of things is generally imperfect, what are the blocks to knowing in this case? Or, to come at things from the other direction, what could possibly determine whether

fusions, as defined by MS, also have the things on which they depend for existence as parts? The problem of too much content shows that it cannot be by definition or the logical consequences thereof, since it is evident that the existence of A and B does not logically imply that there is anything of which they are parts at all. If anything could determine an answer to the question about parthood, it would have to be the nature of the fusions themselves. Yet it is precisely here that we come up short. The problem of too much content, on the part of definitions, has as its flip side, a problem of too little substance, on the part of genuinely minimal objects. Ontologically minimal, or pleonastic, entities truly deserve the epithet "existential." The slogan of existential ontology is that existence precedes essence. In the case of OM, it is a matter of existence's not just preceding essence but exhausting it, a much worse predicament. Minimal entities are entities for which there is no "there" there. If the definition of a concept includes conditions for the application of a concept or for the existence of the things falling under it, then nothing else can belong to the concept, and hence there is nothing in virtue of which any other properties might belong to entities falling under the concept.[10] "Nothingness," to appropriate Sartre's expression, "lies coiled in [their] heart[s]… like a worm" (1958, 21).

Of course, in some sense, this 'lightness of being' is exactly what OM is after. The whole point of the language-first approach is to free ourselves from the idea that there are these real essences in the world that may, but also may not, offer themselves to a metaphysical gaze and reveal their secrets. But even the minimalist

[10] Properties like being self-identical or being thought about by someone might be exceptions but would hardly seem much comfort to the minimalist.

wants to say more about the objects she posits than merely that they exist. Some way must be found to incorporate into the account some of the other things we take, either in common sense or in some special theory like CEM, to be true of some range of things.

4. Wishdates

A second response the minimalist might make is to say that the objection I have raised has been made already, under the rubric of the 'bad company objection,' and answered by invoking on concepts suitable for minimalist treatment a requirement of conservative extension (RCE). Since Schiffer has dealt with this aspect most extensively, we may turn our attention to him at this point. Schiffer defines the concept of a wishdate thus:

> WD) "x is a wishdate $=_{df}$ x is a person whose existence supervenes on someone's wishing for a date, every such wish bringing into existence a person to date." (2003, 53)

It now seems that we can make the following SFNI:

> 3) S wishes for someone to date

therefore

> 4) There exists a wishdate.

The validity of the inference from 3) to 4) is allegedly guaranteed by the concept of a wishdate, since by definition, a wishdate is something for whose existence (or for the application of the concept of which) nothing more is required than that someone wish for a date. Since it is absurd to suppose that we can establish the existence of wishdates merely by pointing to the fact that someone wishes for a date, and since we are antecedently of the opinion that there are no wishdates, OM clearly faces a problem: to say why the inference from 1) to 2), valid in virtue of the concept *property*, is acceptable, whereas that from 3) to 4), apparently valid in virtue of the concept *wishdate*, is not. This is the bad company objection to minimalism.

Schiffer responds to the objection by imposing on the concepts that may underwrite a valid SFNI the condition (very roughly) that by their presence, no consequences expressible without them should be provable that are not already true. OM, in other words, only pertains to concepts the addition of which to a theory provides a conservative extension of that theory. It is clear how the concept of a wishdate violates RCE. Suppose a person goes into an otherwise empty area to wish for a date. Prior to the introduction of the concept, we think only one person is there, the wisher. By introducing the concept, it will now follow that two people are there. Since this was expressible, but false, before the introduction of the concept of a wishdate, the concept violates RCE. Thomasson follows Schiffer in her response to the bad company objection and speaks generally of the need, in the definitions of the relevant concepts, for "consistency, conservativeness, generality, and harmony (among interrelated definitions)" (2009b, 10).

It might be thought that my objection to the minimalist treatment of fusions in section 2 was really just pointing out that the concept *fusion* runs foul of RCE. For example, for two things which, without the concept of fusions at hand, we might think are not co-parts of anything (say the number three and the moon), it follows, from the existence of those entities and the introduction of the concept *fusion*, that there is something (their fusion) of which those things are co-parts. If so, the minimalist might concede my objection to fusions, which turn out – perhaps surprisingly – to be more like wishdates than like properties, but claim that this shows nothing new and interesting about OM as such. However, I do not think the problem of too much content is a problem about failure to meet RCE. First, although I shall not go through the details, Schiffer's careful formulation of the notion of a conservative extension (2003, 54-61) would not classify the fusion case as a violation of RCE. But more importantly, my contention that a minimalist cannot take to depend on some condition both the existence of a minimal entity and a further fact about it was not that this would imply substantive truths that would be expressible, but false, without the introduction of the concept in question. It was that if the entities in question were really such that the condition by itself were sufficient for their existence, there would be nothing about *them*, in themselves, to make true (or false) those further claims involving them, even if those further claims did not contradict anything we already thought. Even if we did not think there was nothing of which 3 and the moon were parts, if their mere existence is sufficient for the existence of their fusion, there is nothing about that fusion to guarantee that it has 3 and the moon as parts. The problematic claims, according to my objection, are

not ones that are expressible without the introduction of the relevant concepts; they are claims about the entities that fall under those concepts.

Further examination of the example of wishdates yields, I think, the conclusion that the problem Schiffer identifies about conservative extensions is really itself just a symptom of the problem of too much content. Consider, again, the definition that Schiffer gives of the concept *wishdate*:

> WD) "x is a wishdate $=_{df}$ x is a person whose existence supervenes on someone's wishing for a date, every such wish bringing into existence a person to date."

The strange syntax is a sign that there is something peculiar about this definition. In fact, it contains three claims about wishdates, each distinct from the others. a) The existence of wishdates supervenes on someone's wishing for a date. b) Wishdates are brought into existence by the wish of someone on whom their existence supervenes. c) Wishdates are people. The oddity of the example lies in the fact that a) and b) are distinct claims about wishdates but easily conflated. a) is what makes this a potential counter-example to OM. It is a condition such that its satisfaction is, by definition, sufficient for the existence of an entity of the given kind. So far, so good. But of course, this does not guarantee all sorts of other facts about wishdates, including b) and c). It is a paradigm instance of a minimalist existence condition and it guarantees only the existence of something with too little substance, as I put it above, to make true anything else about wishdates. b), too, looks like an existence condition and hence, it seems, ought to have a place in the minimalist scheme. But in

fact, it is quite different from a). It represents a 'further fact' about wishdates that does not follow from the satisfaction of the existence condition in a). For a), while ensuring that the existence of wishdates supervenes on a person's wish for a date, does not itself require that that wish *cause* the existence of the wishdate. The real problem with the concept *wishdate* is that there is too much content in the definition.[11] It is not that wishdates would be inconsistent with our conception of what causes the existence of what. We might, after all, however surprisingly, come to discover that wishing to date someone *does* bring into existence a person. But that would not make people caused to exist in that way pleonastic entities (i.e. wishdates, as defined by a)), any more than ordinary people should be considered pleonastic entities because they are caused to exist by something more than merely wishing for a date.

5. Simultaneous Definition

FUSION defines fusions in terms of parthood and it is the requirement that a fusion must have the objects on which its existence depends as parts that creates a problem for the minimalist's understanding of MS-FUSION. The concept of parthood is a primitive in Lewis's presentation of CEM. By calling it a primitive we mean that it is undefined in the theory and yet a source of content for the theory, and

[11] b) also fails to be acceptable in a definition of a pleonastic entity for another reason, that I discuss more fully in section 6. Briefly, it violates a restriction that existence conditions should not presuppose the existence of the entities in question. To be fulfilled, the requirement for something's being a wishdate, that a person's wish for someone to date be the cause of *its* existence, clearly requires its existence. Not so with a), which has the right form for a minimalist existence condition.

constraints stemming from the content on the theorems and definitions of the theory, in which it appears. It is precisely this content and these constraints which we cannot assume to obtain merely through the fulfillment of the existence condition in MS-FUSION. One thing the minimalist might do to respond to the question, how do we ensure that fusions have the things on which their existence depends as parts, is to treat MS-FUSION as simultaneously defining the concepts of both fusion and parthood.

In assessing this move, it may help to distinguish the case in which MS-FUSION is treated as wholly defining *part*, along with *fusion* (subject to the provision of further co-application conditions, the effect of which I am still refraining from discussing) from the case in which it is allowed that *part* is somehow allied to a concept of parthood that is independent of MS-FUSION, but which MS-FUSION is then thought to modify or refine in some way. In the first case, the minimalist treatment of MS-FUSION would be less misleadingly expressed if we avoided the word "part," since we may have a hard time not importing its ordinary meaning. While we're at it, we can replace the word "fusion" too, for good measure. That leaves MS-FUSION looking like this:

> There is a kind K and a relation R such that, by the definitions of K and R, if A and B exist, then there exists something C such that C is a K, and R(A,C) and R(B,C).

However, with no independent understanding of what K and R are, this tells us nothing. We may, if we like, look for models for which this claim would hold. For example, the domain of sets would provide a model: K is interpreted as *set* and R as the subset relation. David Lewis would take reality, unrestrictedly, to offer a model on which K is taken as *fusion* and R as parthood.[12] But that's because Lewis already accepts CEM as a substantive theory. The minimalist, who is using MS-FUSION as a simultaneous definition of the concepts they call *fusion* and *part*, cannot take reality as a whole for a model without simply begging the question.

If we attempt to avoid this by supposing, instead, that MS-FUSION refines an existing concept of part that contributes at least some of its content to the refinement, we are back with the original problem, however. Whatever the content is that attaches to *part* that is independent of MS-FUSION itself, on what basis can we assume that if A and B exist, there exists something further such that A and B have that relation to it? Again, the maximalist about CEM asserts this to be the case; she sees herself as making a claim the falsity of which is a conceptual possibility. The minimalist, however, is treating MS-FUSION as a partial definition.

6. A Problem about Application

[12] Indeed, reality, unrestrictedly, provides a model on which K is taken as *set* and R is taken as the membership relation. At least until the provision of co-application conditions, minimalism about fusions is indistinguishable from minimalism about sets so long as we take MS-FUSION as defining *part* along with *fusion*.

So far, I have been discussing only the application conditions that are, according to OM, contained within concepts. However, the view also asserts that concepts come with co-application conditions and it may be thought that my objection will ultimately be answered by drawing on the resources supplied by these. For the minimalist will say that we only have an adequate definition of a concept when we take, together, both the application and the co-application conditions for it. It is time, therefore, to begin to see what, if anything, they add to the view. To do so, however, we must step back and look a little further, first, at the very notion of application.

If there are entities of some kind K, then the concept K applies to each of them. The concept *tiger* applies to each tiger. Let us call this kind of application, the application of a substance sortal to the things that fall under it, "sortal application." The conditions of sortal application, however, cannot be the kind of application conditions of interest to OM. Thomasson rightly says, in discussing application conditions, that "the application conditions for a term *K* must not be understood as appealing to the existence of Ks" (2009b, 4). That restriction would be violated by conditions of sortal application. The conditions of the application *to a tiger* of the concept *tiger* must presuppose its existence, hence presuppose the existence of tigers.

It is important to realize that this restriction on application conditions, and the reasons for it, are quite different from restrictions on definitions to avoid circularity.

As Thomasson puts it, without such a restriction, an "understanding of application conditions could provide no help in evaluating the truth of existence claims via claims about reference, and those about reference in terms of the fulfillment of application conditions" (2009b, 4). The point of OM is to help us understand something about the conditions for the existence of entities of some kind through the notion of the application of the concept of that kind of thing. But if the conditions for the application of the concept in turn presuppose the existence of the very object the conditions for whose existence we are trying to understand, the detour via reference and application conditions will have been pointless. In other words, the restriction in the formulation of application conditions is a consequence of the priority that OM accords to concepts or language even while the application of concepts or terms runs in tandem with the existence and nature of things falling under those concepts or terms; I referred to this priority in section 1.

What notion of application, then, is at work in OM? Consider fusions again. Here, we are given a condition, that A and B exist, that is supposed to be sufficient for the truth of the claim that a fusion of A and B exists, or for the application of the concept *fusion of A and B*. Thus, the condition is not a condition for the application of the concept of a fusion *to* anything. The application the conditions of which are given for the concept *fusion* is its application in a proposition of the form "a fusion (of A and B) exists." It is a case of what we may call "bare application." Of course, given a fusion, we can apply the concept of a fusion to it. That would be a case of sortal application (assuming *fusion* is a substance sortal). But it is not conditions for that

kind of application that the minimalist appeals to. If the existence of A and B were supposed to be conceptually sufficient for the application of the concept *to* a fusion of A and B, the minimalist would violate the constraint against appealing to the existence of things falling under the concept for which application conditions were being given. Thus, the minimalist's application conditions for the concept *fusion*, in the first instance, cannot be conditions of sortal application but are rather conditions of bare application.

This observation allows us finally to see what is really wrong with the minimalist construal of MS-FUSION and hence fully appreciate the problem of too much content. I insisted that we cannot define concepts like *fusion* in such a way as to make an appropriate condition sufficient both for the application of the concept in question and for its implying some further condition on the objects falling under it. We cannot, that is, simply combine the unobjectionable minimalist construal of MS with the existing definition of *fusion* in FUSION. Now it might have been wondered why the further substantive condition is not itself a kind of application condition. And so on what basis could I have made this separation between the two kinds of condition? After all, the condition that a fusion of A and B must have A and B as parts of it could easily be expressed in terms of application. We could say that the concept *fusion of A and B* applies to something just in case it has A and B as parts. We can now see why this would not be the kind of application condition of interest to OM. It would be a sortal application – there would have to be something that had A and B as parts (i.e. a fusion of A and B) for us to apply to *it* the concept *fusion of A and B*. By

contrast, the genuine application condition for that concept, that A and B exist, does not presuppose in itself the existence of the fusion. I suggest, in fact, that the problem of too much content is the problem of trying to combine a genuine bare application condition with a condition of sortal application, something that must be expressed in terms that presuppose the existence of something to which the concept in question is applied. A genuine existence condition tells us what it is for something of a certain kind to exist – and hence cannot presuppose the existence of anything of that kind. Further substantive conditions are expressed in terms of what something that exists must be like, if it is to be of a certain kind. This is evident if we look once again at MS-FUSION:

> MS-FUSION) If some things exist, then there exists something such that those things are all parts of it.

There is a condition for the bare application of the concept *fusion*, namely, that some things exist. Their existence is sufficient for us to say "a fusion (of them) exists." But then we also give a condition for sortally applying the concept *fusion* to something: x is a fusion of some things only if those things are parts of *it*.[13]

[13] Thanks to Elijah Chudnoff for helping me see this. And here is where the footnote above about the further reason for disqualifying b) from the definition of *wishdate* fits in.

Thomasson makes much of the application of OM to artifacts.[14] Against nihilists about artifacts, like van Inwagen, she argues that there really are such things as chairs; but in opposition to maximalists, this result is allegedly secured by the fact that the application conditions for the concept *chair*, contained within the concept, are merely that some wood be arranged chair-wise. Thus, given the existence of wood arranged chair-wise, it is not a substantive piece of metaphysics to argue that there are chairs as well. It is a conceptual truth. What notion of application is at work here? If we are dealing with bare application, then the application conditions for the concept *chair* are such that it can be barely applied when some wood is arranged chair-wise. The problem we face, as we did in the case of fusions, is that much more is supposed to be true of chairs, even true of them by definition, than follows merely from the fact that some wood is arranged in a certain way. One crucial point is that when some wood is arranged in a certain way, not only does a chair exist, but it is supposed to exist in a very particular relation to that wood; it is supposed to exist just where the wood is, to have the same weight as it, etc. These are the features that are usually implied by saying that the wood constitutes the chair. The features of constitution are not, however, implied merely by the satisfaction of the existence condition. For this is a condition for the application of the concept not *to* the chair-wise arranged wood, but barely. Thus, we face again the problem of too much content. If the existence condition for chairs – the chair-wise arrangement of some wood – is taken to be true for them by definition, then other features (summed up under the rubric of constitution) cannot be; nor will chairs, if

[14] This is one of the main differences between Thomasson and Schiffer, the latter of whom does not extend his views to (concrete) artifacts. See section 8.

their definition is exhausted by their existence condition, have the substance to make true those features pertaining to constitution. Alternatively, if the features of constitution are, in some way, built into the definition of the concept, then the existence condition cannot be true by definition. It seems as if the minimalist cannot escape the need for serious first-order metaphysics here to capture what we ordinarily want to say about chairs and their relations to certain pieces of wood.

The minimalist might hope to isolate a further sense of application that is at work in the case of concepts like *chair* that, unlike bare application, involves application of the concept to something but is distinct from sortal application in not requiring the existence of the thing to which the concept sortally applies. Let us call a putative kind of application of this sort "constitutive application." On this view, when some wood is arranged chair-wise, that is sufficient for the application *to it*, the wood, of the concept *chair*. But we would not be saying that the wood itself is the object that falls under the concept *chair*. Thus the chair the existence of which is implied by the application of the concept *chair* would not be presupposed in its application. We can express the relation between the wood and the chair by saying that the wood constitutes the chair, a relation which allows that the wood is not identical to the chair, that there are two distinct objects, but so related that many properties of the wood, its weight and location, for example, are inherited by the chair. That there is such a notion of application is maintained by philosophers like David Wiggins, who identifies a use of "is" that he calls "the 'is' of constitution" (1980, 30).

This is an attractive suggestion. However, it requires us to distinguish a further type of application, what I called constitutive application, that comes with certain metaphysical characteristics built in, as it were. Sortal application is just the subsumption of something under its kind or type. Bare application is the assertion of the existence of something of a given kind. But constitutive application involves a distinctive relationship between two objects, a chair and some wood, that is, while familiar, far from metaphysically neutral. An appeal to this kind of application may help to explain why an entity of a given kind, a chair, should have certain properties such as its location and weight; but it does so not as an alternative to substantive first-order metaphysics but in virtue of just that. The very recognition of this further variety of application, in addition to bare application, is at odds with OM's attempt to explain away serious metaphysics through the idea of the application conditions of concepts or terms. If this is to be the simplifying move the minimalist hopes, it is essential that the account of application not depend on importing substantive metaphysics. This is indeed the case for bare application (though the cost, as we have seen, is the existential malaise that befalls objects so recognized). But it would most certainly not be true for constitutive application. Indeed, constitutive application of a concept to an object is equivalent, in some sense, to the bare application of that concept taken together with independent metaphysical postulates governing the nature of the objects falling under the concept. But in that case, though the justification for the existence of the constituted object might succeed in minimalist terms, the justification for accepting the relevant postulates would not.

7. The Problem of Co-Application

I come, finally, to the twice-deferred issue of co-application conditions. Can these provide any way out of the problems we have been looking at? Intuitively, where application conditions are supposed to speak to questions of existence, co-application conditions are supposed to address questions of identity, both over time and at a time. It might be hoped that entities suffering from the existential malaise I described above could be given a little backbone if we could provide for them not just conditions of existence but identity conditions as well. And it is, of course, quite standard in first-order discussions of ontology to provide existence and identity conditions for various kinds of entities that get discussed. So an appeal to co-application conditions might seem quite natural and appropriate.

We should start our investigation by recognizing that the "application" in "co-application conditions" must be application of a different kind from the "application" in "application conditions." The reason the two kinds of application must be different is this. In the case of application conditions, we saw that whatever they are, they are not, by the minimalist's own admission, conditions for sortal application. However, in the case of co-application conditions, it can only be sortal application that is intended. It cannot be bare application, since we are after conditions for the application of a concept *to the same thing* on two different occasions, whereas in bare application, the concept applies without applying *to*

anything at all. Even if we allow a notion of constitutive application, as described at the end of the previous section, that cannot be intended in talk of co-application conditions either. For in constitutive application, we are dealing with the conditions under which, say, the concept *chair* may apply to some wood (not because the wood is itself a chair – that would be sortal application – but because it constitutes a chair). But conditions under which the concept *chair* may apply to the same wood on two occasions will not necessarily be cases in which we have a single chair at all. I may make a chair out of some wood at t1, destroy it, and make a chair out of that same wood at t2. The conditions under which *chair* applies to the wood at t1 and t2 are, according to OM, just that, at t1, the wood be arranged chair-wise and that at t2, it be arranged chair-wise. But they do not require that we take the chair at t1 to be the same chair as at t2. Whether we should, or not, of course, is a topic of much discussion, but we can clearly give conditions under which the concept in question applies (constitutively) to the same wood on different occasions without resolving that further question. Furthermore, the concept *chair* may be applied on two different occasions to different wood, and yet there still be just one chair involved; these are cases where a single chair undergoes some change in the wood that constitutes it. So, *chair*'s being applied twice to the same wood is neither necessary nor sufficient for there being a single chair.

In fact, it is clear from what she says that Thomasson does take co-application conditions to be conditions of sortal application. For example, she talks of

"conditions under which the term S may be properly re-applied to one and the same S" (2009b, 4).[15] And, in the example of an imaginary term "fillow," she writes:

> supposing the term 'fillow' to be successfully applied on two occasions, the conditions under which it is true that 'fillow' is applied (in both cases) to one and the same object fix the conditions under which the first is the same fillow as the second. (2009a, 448)

Both of these quotations indicate clearly, I think, that she is conceiving of co-application conditions as conditions of the sortal of application of a concept to the same things on different occasions.[16]

That different kinds of application are at issue in application conditions and co-application conditions is not an objection, *per se*. What is a problem is the attempt to bring conditions of sortal application into the picture at all. Let us look at our example of fusions. The application conditions for *fusion of A and B* are supposed to be nothing more than the existence of A and B. Now under what conditions do two applications of the concept *fusion of A and B* apply to the same things? Remember, this should not be taken as a trivial question if all that is so far taken to be true of

[15] But this formulation is infelicitous. Surely the term S may be properly re-applied to *one and the same S* under any conditions whatsoever.

[16] Incidentally, the language of the indented quotation is revealing. It is part of Thomasson's view that "object" is not a real sortal, yet she uses the term here. What is it a dummy for, then? If for "fillow," it becomes evident that the appeal to co-application conditions here is really just a roundabout way of asking the first-order question about the identity conditions of fillows. But if for something other than "fillow," then what?

fusions is what follows from the satisfaction of the bare application condition for the concept *fusion*. The substantive answer to our question is that they will apply to the same thing just in case that to which each is applied has A and B as parts (and nothing as part that doesn't overlap A or B). But that a fusion of A and B has parts is, as we saw above, not something that can be taken to be true by definition. So, the co-application conditions for the concept *fusion of A and B* must themselves rest on the substantive metaphysical claim that a fusion of A and B has A and B as parts. Essentially, we are running up, once again, against the problem of too much content. If co-application conditions are supposed to be true for the objects falling under a concept by definition of the concept involved, then the existence conditions cannot be taken to be sufficient for the existence of something falling under the concept. If the existence conditions are really sufficient, further conditions can only be supplied by some substantive metaphysical avenue such as postulation. The point about how co-application conditions involve sortal application, which was rightly taken to be unacceptable in the case of (bare) application conditions, is a reflection of the already noticed problem that in formulations like MS-FUSION or WD, there is an illicit importation of reference to an "it" the existence of which is not secured independently of the existence-condition part of MS-FUSION or WD itself.

8. Abstractness

I come, finally, to an issue that some may think to be the real crux of what I am getting at here. One of the differences between Schiffer and Thomasson concerns the

range of cases they take OM to apply to. Schiffer's cases are all cases of abstract objects: properties, propositions, and fictional characters are his primary examples. Thomasson concentrates on a wider range of cases and gives prominent play to concrete artifacts like chairs and tables. It may, therefore, be thought that the problems I am suggesting are really problems that minimalism faces when it attempts to go beyond abstracta and into the realm of concreta like chairs. There is, I think, something to this; but it is does not quite capture the real moral of the story. The basic form of the problem I have posed is that OM runs into problems when more is supposed to be true of the minimal entities than follows from the satisfaction of the existence conditions alone. In other words, ontologically minimal entities, if there are such, will indeed be minimal, radically so. For many abstract objects, this degree of minimality may be harmless. I say "may" rather than "is" because a sustained look at minimalism applied to properties, propositions or fictional characters is not guaranteed to find that nothing is supposed to be true of these entities in addition to what follows from the minimalist's existence conditions. For example, take fusions. CEM takes the notion of parthood generally so that it is supposed to apply across the abstract/concrete divide. Given two abstract objects, CEM asserts the existence of their fusion, which will itself be an abstract object. But the abstract object which is their fusion will still be something that, according to CEM, has the two objects of which it is the fusion as parts. So all the issues I raised about fusions and parthood will apply even when the fusions at issue are abstract. Abstractness as such is no guarantee against the problem of too much content. Some abstract objects, like fusions of other abstract objects, must have a "there" there, as

it were; they must have a nature in virtue of which it will be true that the things of which they are fusions are parts of them.

Regarding other abstract objects, such as works of music, literature, or fictional characters, I think a lot of what motivates minimalist views can be preserved even on views in which there is a "there" there, in which such objects do have substance to make true various claims about them that do not follow merely from satisfaction of what the minimalist takes as existence conditions. For example, suppose we agree that fictional characters are abstract entities. Thomasson (1999) argues, correctly in my opinion, against views which take them to be sets of properties. But those arguments do not preclude views on which sets of properties are taken as the matter of fictional characters, that out of which writers make them. I do not have space to explore or defend this view here.[17] I mention it merely to round out these remarks about abstracta and minimalism: some abstracta, such as fusions of abstract objects, seem problematic for minimalism, for reasons suggested; and some, such as fictional characters, may be amenable to treatments that go some way with the minimalist (treating them as abstract artifacts) but take such objects to have more substance to them than the minimalist allows.

What is true is that all concrete objects will raise problems of the kind I have discussed, if we take concreteness to involve having a spatio-temporal location. For an entity's spatial location, if nothing else, will have to be accounted for either by

[17] I develop a treatment along these line of musical works in (2009).

postulation in addition to bare application conditions, or by invocation of something like what I called constitutive application, which itself relies on substantive metaphysical views about different kinds of objects.

9. Conclusion

OM is supposed to be the "easy approach" to ontology (Thomasson 2009b). It takes the concepts of disputed entities to contain the conditions for their application. Since the application of a concept goes hand in hand with the existence of objects falling under the concept, this means that there is an "easy" way of determining whether such objects exist: just check whether the conditions contained in the concept for its application are, or are not, met.

Against this view, I have argued that if a concept contains the conditions for its application then that is all it can contain. The entities falling under the concept will be genuinely minimal. Where OM is supposed to be a theory of some type of entity of interest to others – mereological fusions, chairs, etc. – that means that the minimalist will not be offering solace to either maximalists or nihilists about such entities. Those parties agree on what they are arguing about, and disagree about whether there are such things. By contrast, the minimalist will be establishing the existence of entities that, though resembling the disputed entities in terms of application/existence conditions, can resemble them in no other ways. The minimalist's fusion of A and B, like that of the maximalist classical mereologist,

exists just in case A and B exist; but unlike the maximalist's, it cannot be guaranteed, by definition, to have A and B as parts; nor is there anything about it in virtue of which it could be determined whether it has A and B as parts independently of definition.

Furthermore, the apparently anodyne notion of the application of a concept, central to OM, turns out to be a lot more complex than at first it seems. It cannot be, as the minimalist herself realizes, a matter of sortal application, the application of a sortal concept to something falling under the concept. For the conditions of application of that kind must presuppose the existence of something to which the concept is applied: *it* must be thus and so if *it* is a K. But the whole point of the minimalist's use of application conditions was to get at what it is for there to exist something of a certain kind, not what it is for something that exists to be of a certain kind. With a prohibition on sortal application in place, we can see why the minimalist cannot add to the application conditions for a concept K something more than the conditions needed to assert that a K exists. For example, she cannot add to the condition that A and B exist, sufficient for the bare application of the concept *fusion of A and B*, a further condition that *it* must have A and B as parts. For that presupposes the existence of something falling under the concept for which the condition is supposed to be an application condition. Similar problems afflict the attempt to bring co-application conditions into the picture since these must be, and implicitly are taken by the minimalist to be, conditions of sortal co-application.

The minimalist is thus faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, she can continue the minimalist project, but face the consequence that the entities she thereby establishes the existence of are a) extremely minimal; and b) quite different from the entities at issue in the debates to which minimalism was supposed to be a resolution. On the other hand, she can look to ordinary metaphysics to ensure the entities she deals with are like the entities at issue in the typical debates. She may employ postulates governing the entities, postulates that are independent of the satisfaction of the application conditions for the relevant concepts; or she may, at least in some cases, resort to other, metaphysically loaded kinds of application, for example, to what I called constitutive application. But in this case, she abandons the basic tenet of minimalism and simply leads traditional metaphysical debates through an unnecessary semantic or conceptual detour.[18]

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[18] Thanks to Elijah Chudnoff and Kathrin Koslicki for help with this paper. And special thanks to Amie Thomasson for the great and generous effort she made to help me understand her views and sharpen my objections to them.

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