

Amie L. Thomasson, *Ontology Made Easy*, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 360, \$ 39.49, ISBN 9780199385119

Irene Olivero, Università degli Studi di Padova

A book remarkable for its thoroughness and clarity, *Ontology Made Easy* by Amie Thomasson aims to provide “an explicit articulation and defense of the easy approach to existence questions and of the deflationary attitude towards ontological debates that results from it” (p.21), in order to show that this view is not only a tenable one, but a real attractive alternative to hard ontology.

Ontology, or the discipline considered to be central to metaphysics, is concerned with answering existence questions, such as “Do numbers exist?”, “Do ordinary objects, such as tables and televisions, exist?”, “Do temporal parts exist?”, and so on. Beyond answering these questions, metaphysicians try to formulate an “ontology”, that is a theory about the kind of things which have existence.

Easy ontology is an approach to answer to those existence questions, one which is clearly distinct from neo-Quineanism, or what was defined as “mainstream metaphysics” or “hard metaphysics”, which treats ontological questions as continuous with questions of the natural sciences, and which has dominated the scene for the past sixty years. Nevertheless, the easy approach is not completely new, for its origin can be found formerly in Carnap and other philosophers who thought that “answers to certain disputed ontological questions can be reached easily by starting from an uncontroversial truth [...] and reasoning by what seems like trivial steps [...] to reach ontological conclusions” (p.21).

The project of Thomasson’s work is thus largely one of reorientation. In a historical sense, clarifying that neo-Quineanism is not as unavoidable as it may appear, but rather quite an outlier: observed within the broader history of philosophy of the last 150 years or so, it goes against the basic idea which had centred around such diverse thinkers as Husserl, Wittgenstein, Carnap, and Ryle. For all these philosophers there is a clear distinction between the role of empirical sciences and philosophy, with the role of metaphysics lying on the conceptual side. From a philosophical perspective, Thomasson attempts to

reorient the debate away from essentially arguing against quantifier variance (which has been the main move in the defense of hard ontology), to note that a clear-cut challenge comes from the easy approach. According to the latter, epistemology is relatively clear, for all the answers may be given by conceptual or empirical methods, or even by their combination; and the relation between scientific and metaphysical inquiry is also clear-cut, thanks to the division of labor. Therefore, lastly, work in metaphysics can be generally reoriented “away from the misguided focus on existence questions and towards issues that may prove more tractable and clear” (p.330).

The book is subdivided into ten sections, preceded by an articulated introduction and followed by a significant conclusion. The reasons mentioned above for wishing to choose the easy alternative over the neo-Quinean approach are given in the introduction, which ends with some preliminary clarifications. Thomasson calls the approach for which she argues “easy”, “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” (p.20). This approach, perfectly in line with the older one (that of Carnap), leaves the philosophical contribution on the conceptual side (a role not specified by neo-Quineanism).

The first chapter is devoted to explaining why – and what difference its rediscovery can make to contemporary metaontology – Carnap’s original form of deflationism has been missed in most of the recent discussion. The reason is that it was commonly misinterpreted, wrongly associated with verificationism and antirealism. Nonetheless, the author innovatively argues, Carnap’s deflationism does not rely on the idea that the existential quantifier varies in meaning, and thus that an approach along these lines seems immediately more promising.

In chapter 2, following on from the conclusion of the previous chapter, Thomasson aims to “motivate and develop an easy approach to existence questions in contemporary terms” (p.83), proposing a view which treats the quantifier ‘exist’ as having a univocal, fixed, formal rule of use. This is a position which enables most of the existence questions debated in metaphysics

to be easily and often trivially and straightforwardly answerable by conceptual and/or empirical means. In addition, the author argues, if this analysis of ‘exist’ is correct, it follows that common proposals for substantive across-the-board criteria of existence (such as causal efficacy, mind-independence, etc.) are wrong, and so that many arguments for eliminating various sorts of entities should be rejected. It would be a victory if, for all these reasons, the defenders of hard ontology at least acknowledged that the easy approach is a viable alternative. However, Thomasson concludes the chapter with an overview of lines of reply which remain open for those who find easy ontology unbearable.

Chapter 3 clarifies the relation between this new view and various contemporary easy ontological approaches, including the work of neo-Fregeans in philosophy of mathematics, Stephen Schiffer’s defense of “pleonastic” entities, and Thomasson’s own work on ordinary objects. The main difference is that, whereas all these approaches share the feature of making existence questions easy to answer by conceptual and/or empirical work or trivial inferences from uncontroversial truths, only Thomasson’s new view relies on the univocal rule of application of the existential quantifier. She then goes on to explain why her approach is preferable, also arguing what follows from this easy approach to existence questions: a first-order simple realism about most disputed entities; and a deflationary metaontological approach which sees the majority of metaphysical debates on what really exists as pointless, for they can be resolvable straightforwardly.

The impression that something has gone wrong with hard ontology is not new. In chapter 4, Thomasson locates her easy approach among other suspicious views, clarifying where they are consistent and where they diverge. As she puts it: “The primary goal of this chapter and the next is to make clear where the easy approach fits among broadly deflationary or skeptical views, and to argue that it is a strong and attractive contender among them” (pp.161-162).

Fictionalism, one of the deflationary views, deserves an entire section (chapter 5), since it is perhaps the most important rival to the easy approach to ontology. Despite everything which the two approaches have in common, the easy one leads us to simple realism about the disputed entities, whereas fictionalism asserts that whatever discourse in question (whether it concerns

mathematics, properties, possible worlds, etc.) needn't be taken to commit us ontologically to those doubtful objects (which exist only within a make-believe discourse). Thus, fictionalism leads to the metaontological conclusion that ontological debates are mistaken and that even the deflationary view takes the ontological discourse too seriously. However, Thomasson replies, this objection is misguided and the form of deflationism we obtain from the easy approach is, all in all, a preferable and less problematic view which serves the motivations of fictionalists as well as, or even better than, fictionalism itself.

Thomasson wittily inserts her discussion of the easy approach within the context of its hard criticisms (which have also criticized the older view), for – as she herself notes – it is precisely within this context that a detailed examination of the approach makes sense. The easy approach has a metaontological bearing: “it leads to a kind of meta-ontological deflationism, holding that something is wrong with typical ontological disputes about what really exists, and arguments among those who defend competing ‘ontologies’” (p.22). Chapters 6 to 10 do provide an extended defense of the easy approach, addressing the many objections raised against it or its related versions, in order to show that “if, even after reviewing those objections, the view remains unassailed, its initial attractions will remain untarnished, and we can retain the hope that well-formed ontological questions really are easy to answer” (p.230). In particular, chapter 6 replies to the objection that we are not guaranteed that there really are all the objects vindicated by the easy view, and to the objection that they might not be the entities with which serious metaphysicians are concerned. Chapter 7 focuses on an important recent line of criticism of the idea that there are analytic or conceptual truths (those on which easy ontology relies to derive ontological conclusions): Timothy Williamson's criticism. Thomasson aims to show that his argument does not undermine the trivial inferences on which the easy approach relies. Chapter 8 deals with what is called the “bad company” objection (originally raised against the neo-Fregean approach to mathematical objects), according to which some of the principles used keep “bad company” with superficially similar but notorious problematic principles. Once again, not even this objection applies to the easy approach, for the entailments to which it is committed do not take the form of bi-conditionals (unlike the

neo-Freagean ones). In chapter 9, Thomasson examines the argument of Thomas Hofweber, according to which only the internal use of the quantifier is at work in the output of the easy inferences, thus that they do not provide genuine existence answers. But, again, Thomasson replies that the easy approach is preferable overall, for it can accommodate the relevant linguistic insights without being committed to the two uses of the quantifier. Lastly, one last line of reply is discussed in chapter 10: although existence questions asked in ordinary English may be answered in the way suggested by the deflationists, those questions may be expressed in “Ontologese”, thus that the hard metaphysical debate is reopened. Thomasson also considers Sider’s related argument that, if the deflationist aims to reject this view, she then becomes engaged in just as much hard metaphysics as her rivals.

In the conclusion Thomasson reminds us first why the easy approach to ontology is not only a tenable view, which can represent a unified approach threatening hard mainstream metaphysics, but also an attractive one, since it avoids the epistemic mysteries of neo-Quineanism. She then ends with some suggestions about what else it is to be done if we are persuaded to give up the earnest pursuit of existence questions, since most of them can be answered easily: we might address new questions and do metaphysics in a new key, since progress has been achieved with the new view. With this easy approach, philosophy has regained its rightful status, so that our efforts can be refocused more productively.

Ontology Made Easy ultimately provides a very good defense of the Carnapian approach to existence questions, a view which, as Thomasson resourcefully argues, has so far been misunderstood. The merit of this book is multiple: it guides readers into a meticulous and informative overview of the main approaches to ontology of the past 150 years, addressing their critical points and filling a crucial gap in the literature. But, above all, easy ontology is persuasively presented as a viable and good alternative to an approach so far considered as inevitable in the debate about existence. It also gives us a new key to metaphysics: many ontological and epistemic issues can be easily solved, while, at the same time, the proper use and role of existence claims in ordinary English can be captured, thus making metaphysics more fruitful.