**Make Ontology Easy Again**

Amie Thomasson, *Ontology Made Easy*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2015. 345+*xiii* pages,hardback, $53.00.

Greg Frost-Arnold

Hobart & William Smith Colleges

gfrost-arnold@hws.edu

Amie Thomasson’s *Ontology Made Easy* develops and defends a modern-day version of the approach to ontological questions Carnap sketches in “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” (1950/1956). This book is very interesting and timely, for several reasons. First, although “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” is fairly widely cited today, it is fairly programmatic. Second, the field of ontology has changed character since 1950, so it is not always obvious how to ‘translate’ Carnap’s concerns of 65 years ago into today’s debates. Finally, there has been a minor resurgence of interest in Carnap’s views in the last 25 years or so.

*Ontology Made Easy* has many virtues. It is thoroughly conversant with the best and most influential current work in ontology, and Thomasson situates her positions and arguments within cutting-edge work very well. Thomasson’s writing is admirably clear and uncluttered. And her arguments and positions are consistently very sensible: Thomasson consistently avoids overly subtle technical distinctions or recondite formalism, whenever a more natural and intuitive way of expressing a point is available. So, if you wonder whether “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” could withstand the scrutiny of modern-day metaphysicians, you should read Thomasson’s book.

Thomasson calls her central position in *Ontology Made Easy* the ‘Easy Approach’ to ontological issues (128). What is it? In general, we start with an “undisputed claim” (135) or “uncontroversial truth” (21). Then, we infer an ontological conclusion from this claim via “trivial” or “easy” steps, using only “linguistic or conceptual” truths (21). For example, here is Thomasson’s ‘easy’ argument for the existence of propositions:

* Undisputed claim: Snow is white.
* Conceptual truth: If P then *that P* is true.
* Derived claim: *That snow is white* is true.
* Ontological claim: There is a proposition (namely that snow is white). (135)

The ‘undisputed claim’ in an easy argument can be empirical, like ‘Snow is white’ above, or it could be an uncontroversial mathematical statement. Conceptual (or analytic) truths are truths competent speakers must master in order to correctly use an expression (91). For instance, possessing the ‘conceptual truth’ in the above example is necessary to master the word ‘true,’ and the inference from the ‘Derived claim’ to the ‘Ontological claim’ requires competence with the word ‘proposition’ (specifically, recognizing that *That snow is white* is a proposition).

Accepting the Easy Approach, Thomasson explains, delivers two key philosophical positions: deflationism in meta-ontology, and “simple realism about most philosophical entities” (24) in first-order ontology. Meta-level deflationism follows from the easiness of the ontological arguments: Thomasson calls such arguments ‘easy’ because neither the starting points nor the subsequent inferences require any heavy-duty metaphysical considerations, such as substantive criteria of ontological commitment, or devising a “best ‘total theory’” (114) which maximizes theoretical virtues like explanatory power and simplicity. She frequently phrases this point as follows: the Easy Approach requires nothing “epistemically metaphysical” (a phrase borrowed from Sider), that is, it requires nothing beyond empirical and conceptual work. Thus, “if these existence questions may be so straightforwardly answered, it seems there is something wrong with the drawn-out disputes about whether entities of these types *really* exist” (22; cf. 113). Thomasson distinguishes her version of deflationist metaontology from others, in particular (i) fictionalism, and (ii) the view that ontological disagreements result from disputants using different existential quantifiers, so that such disagreements are ‘merely verbal’ disagreements over the meaning of ‘exists.’

Thomasson’s ‘first-order’ simple realism results from her belief that there is a large stock of uncontroversial claims and conceptual truths relevant to ontological debates. She is a simple realist about many things: in addition to propositions, Thomasson claims that chairs, marriages, numbers, properties, and events all exist. She offers the following necessary and sufficient condition for a type of thing to exist: “(E): Ks exist iff the application conditions actually associated with ‘K’ are fulfilled” (86). So what does Thomasson mean by ‘application conditions’? “Application conditions [for a term]… are certain basic rules of use that are among those that are meaning-constituting for the term” (89). They are “conditions under which the term would be correctly applied”; they need not be “statable,” and they “may involve deference to experts and the world” (91). So application conditions are weaker than philosophers’ explicit necessary and sufficient conditions.

As I read the positive view advanced in *Ontology Made Easy*, several objections sprang to mind. The second half of the book addressed all of them, plus many others. These include Williamson’s recent doubts about analytic or conceptual truths, Hofweber’s linguistically-based argument that easy arguments fail to establish that the relevant terms (e.g. ‘proposition,’ ‘number’) genuinely refer, generalizations of the Bad Company objection to Neo-Fregeanism (Thomasson identifies Neo-Fregeanism as one species of the Easy Approach genus), and Sider’s suggestion that deep ontological questions should be tackled in ‘Ontologese,’ a language intended to answer difficult ontological questions. The only surprise for me was that Thomasson simply brackets Quine’s worries about analyticity, without engaging in sustained arguments against Quinean views (however, she cites several sources, including her own earlier work, that provide detailed arguments against Quine) (52; 232). Thomasson concedes she needs “something like Carnap’s analytic/synthetic distinction” (53), and moves on.

To conclude, I will mention one portion of Thomasson’s position about which I have lingering doubts. Because many of our everyday, common-sense concepts apparently harbor inconsistencies, I worry that the Easy Approach to ontology is, at best, less widely applicable than Thomasson believes—and at worst, it is a recipe for generating contradictions.

For instance, consider Thomasson’s easy argument above for the existence of propositions. The ‘conceptual truth’ is ‘If P, then *that P* is true.’ Presumably, the converse is also a ‘conceptual truth’ that is part of an competent speaker’s mastery of the word ‘true.’ That is, the so-called ‘T-schema for propositions’ is a conceptual truth concerning the word ‘true.’ But then, given a few other apparently ‘uncontroversial’ principles, we can derive a Liar-style contradiction by well-known means. So accepting the easy argument for propositions appears to lead to inconsistency.

This particular objection does not immediately condemn all the Easy ontological arguments Thomasson endorses, since this example relies on specific pathologies of the concept of truth, which do not generalize directly to numbers, properties, events, etc. But for at least some of these other cases, an analogous objection can be made. ‘Numbers exist’ supposedly follows, via an easy argument, from ‘5 is a number.’ However, this inference does not follow in so-called ‘free logics.’ And free logics were designed to avoid certain apparently absurd consequences of two of classical logic’s apparently ‘trivial’ claims (in a natural deduction setting, they are underived rules). In classical logic, for any name *c*, *c*=*c* is true. And if a sentence …*c*… is true, then so is ∃*x*(…*x*…). These two principles presumably count as ‘trivial’ or ‘conceptual truths’ in Thomasson’s sense. But together, they entail that, for any name *b*, ∃*x*(*x*=*b*) is logically true. So, since ‘Pegasus’ and ‘Atlantis’ are names, ‘Pegasus exists’ and ‘Atlantis exists’ both come out as (logically) true in classical logic. But since neither Pegasus nor Atlantis exist, we appear to have another contradiction, reached via apparently uncontroversial claims and trivial inferences.

Now, I must stress that Thomasson acknowledges that the rules governing expressions in everyday English are sometimes vague (44), “indeterminate” (327), or even contradictory (328) (cf. 248). However, Thomasson claims that this is not “typical” in ontological investigations: the Easy Approach is the best method for addressing “*most*” ontological questions philosophers ask (82; 113). “We can have first-order knowledge that there are properties, propositions, or the other entities accepted on the grounds of easy arguments even without having a justification of the claim that the inferences used are unproblematic” (268). I grant that at least *some* ontological questions that philosophers discuss can be addressed via Thomasson’s Easy Approach; I am less confident that ‘most’ are. I suspect this can only be resolved on a case-by-case basis, and the cases of propositions and numbers above make me less sanguine than Thomasson that the Easy Approach can be widely applied. Plausibly, philosophers begin paying attention to a particular existence-question *because* the associated application conditions and relevant uncontroversial claims are (*prima facie*) indeterminate or inconsistent, and these tensions generate a philosophical puzzle. But to work out a satisfying answer to such a puzzle, the supposedly uncontroversial or undisputed principles become controversial and disputed, so ontological questions are no longer easy.

Thomasson describes her view as ‘neo-Carnapian.’ However, in certain respects, she explicitly distances her view from Carnap’s. In particular, “Carnap’s primary interest lay in formal, technical languages, while I will be more concerned with existence questions that are … asked in ordinary English” (44). One of Carnap’s primary reasons for working within formal languages was to avoid the inconsistencies hidden within natural languages. This could be one reason for someone sympathetic to Easy Approaches in general to favor the Carnapian original over Thomasson’s neo-Carnapian version.

**References**

Carnap, Rudolf (1950/1956). “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology,” in *Meaning and Necessity*, 2nd edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.