Comments on *Ontology Made Easy* by Amie Thomasson

Katherine Hawley, May 2016

1. Introduction

Ontology Made Easy is a wonderful book. It vindicates the disquiet felt by many people about contemporary metaphysical wrangles over the existence of numbers, propositions, 'arbitrary sums', and the like. Yet it does not require the reader to countenance anti-realism, relativism, or multiple types of existence. It even leaves some honest toil for metaphysicians to do once the dust has settled, so long as we do not get ideas above our station. Thomasson provides a powerful critique of mainstream approaches to ontology, and I am tempted to suggest an alternative title for future reprints: '*Ontologists Made Uneasy*'.

The book is part of a larger research project. It stands alone in that one can enjoy it, learn a lot, and understand Thomasson's positive proposal, without having read her earlier work. But the reader who starts to think about objections to this proposal, or to raise questions about how the framework applies to certain sorts of dispute, will need to consult *Ordinary Objects* (2007); indeed Thomasson refers us to the earlier book on various occasions, often in response to potential objections. Intriguingly, she also makes passing reference to a book-in-progress entitled *Norms and Necessity*.

At the heart of the present book are situations like the following. Suppose that we discover empirically that a house is red, and that we discover through analysis of the concept *property* that if something is red then there is a property, redness, which that thing has. According to Thomasson, we can easily infer that there is a property, redness, i.e. we infer that the property exists. More generally, things of a kind K exist if and only if the application conditions which actually govern use of the term 'K' are satisfied. It may be difficult to find out what those application conditions are, and to find out whether they are satisfied. But once that work is done, the ontologist's task is an easy one.

For Thomasson, existence itself is not easy; inventing new concepts does not bring new entities into existence, and existence facts are as 'hard', 'robust', 'thick' or what-have-you, as any other. (To my mind, this is a key strength of her position, along with her ability to critique mainstream metaphysics without resorting to the idea that disputes are 'merely verbal'.) But *doing* ontology is easy, in that existence questions are easily answered once we

have clarified our terminology through conceptual work, and gathered any relevant empirical information.

A first-order account of what exists flows from this second-order account of how to do ontology: simple realism. '[O]n the simple realist view, there are the disputed entities all right, but these are not 'posits' that are parts of 'theories', the inclusion of which is justified by their explanatory power. Instead, we can simply see that there are guaranteed to be such things given the truth of an uncontroversial sentence.' (157) The 'uncontroversial sentence' says, for example, that the house is red.

In these comments, I will explore Thomasson's intriguingly sceptical remarks about explanation and explanatory power in ontology. Explanation is not a principal theme of the book, and the relevant remarks are scattered across several chapters. But I think that Thomasson's views about explanation are doing significant and original work to support her view of ontology, and I would like to understand more about what's going on here. Moreover, this investigation of explanation helps me apply Thomasson's approach to an example she does not herself investigate, that of the existence of possible worlds.

2. Against Neo-Quineanism

Thomasson discusses explanation both in her negative attack on a rival picture of ontology, and in her positive articulation of her own view. First, she sets out her opposition to orthodox neo-Quinean methodology in ontology. Neo-Quineans model ontological theorising on scientific theorising: the goal is to formulate an account of what exists, then defend this against its rivals by reference to 'such theoretic virtues as simplicity of ontology and ideology, explanatory power, and empirical adequacy' (3). Although 'explanatory power' here features as one theoretic virtue amongst others, it is natural to see this methodology overall as implementing inference to the best explanation, where simplicity and empirical adequacy supposedly contribute to a theory's explanatory goodness.

Why reject this methodology? Thomasson stresses that empirical adequacy is a very weak constraint in ontology, especially where ontologists feel unconstrained by empirically-successful scientific theories which seem to quantify over organisms, composite objects, and so on. Moreover entry barriers are much lower in ontology than in science: it takes ingenuity to formulate a brand-new ontological theory which our peers will take seriously, but this is nevertheless much easier than formulating a brand-new respectable scientific theory. So far the attitude is not scepticism about inference to the best explanation *per se*, merely denial that

IBE will give us epistemic leverage in ontological enquiry. In addition, however, Thomasson suggests that virtues such as simplicity may be merely 'pragmatic' (214) rather than truth-conducive, and that there are too many ways of resolving clashes of such virtues. This threatens to tell against IBE across the board, not just within ontology. Uncertainty about the scope of Thomasson's rejection of IBE makes it pressing to consider this alongside remarks she makes about explanation in a different context.

3. Against Explanatory Realism

Second, Thomasson uses claims about explanation to positively distinguish her preferred simple realism from a rival 'explanatory realism'. Like simple realists, standard modern Platonists believe that the red house has the property redness. Why then is Thomasson not a standard Platonist? She does not distinguish herself from Platonists by watering down the nature of existence for properties: they exist to the same degree and in the same manner as everything else does. But, as Thomasson sees it, Platonists must appeal to the supposed explanatory power of positing such properties, thus incurring the problems endemic to neo-Quinean appeals to inference to the best explanation in metaphysics. In contrast, simple realists need not appeal to explanatory value, since they infer the existence of properties in other ways. But, intriguingly, it's not just that they *need* not appeal to explanatory value; they *must* not appeal to the explanatory value of the entities in question.

Suppose again that we discover empirically that a house is red, and we discover through analysis of the concept *property* that if something is red then there is a property, redness, which that thing has. Now we easily infer that there is a property, redness, i.e. we infer that the property exists. Suppose that we discover empirically that there are some particles arranged tablewise, and we discover through analysis of the concept *table* that if there are some particles arranged tablewise, then there is a table. Now we easily infer that a table exists. Or suppose that we discover empirically that various people went through various processes, and said certain words, and we discover through analysis of the concept *marriage* that when such events have happened, there is a marriage (the equivalent of conceptual analysis here will involve consultation of legal texts). Now we easily infer that a marriage exists.

Thomasson argues that we do not gain explanatory insight by making these easy inferences. If we infer the existence of the property, the table, or the marriage in this manner, we are not thereby equipped to explain anything which could not already have been explained by

reference to the red house, the particles arranged tablewise, or the circumstances surrounding the marriage ceremony. *A fortiori*, we cannot thus explain why the house is red, why the particles are arranged tablewise, or why those circumstances occurred. It is perfectly proper for us to cite the property, the table, or the marriage in explanations, but these explanations will be no better than those we could have constructed with reference to the house, particles, or circumstances.

Suppose we infer the existence of a property from the house's being red, via the application conditions for *property*. What exactly is it about this inference which stops it from increasing our explanatory insight? Consider three possibilities. Perhaps it is the fact that the inference is deductively valid. Or perhaps it is the fact that we easily grasp the fact that the inference is deductively valid. Or perhaps it is the fact that one of the premises is a conceptual truth (i.e. the premise concerning the application conditions for *property*).

On any of these options, it seems clear that the relevant notion of explanation is not a metaphysical relationship between entities 'out there in the world', on a par with grounding or ontological dependence. Thomasson seems unsympathetic to such notions more broadly. Moreover if we think of explanation in this metaphysical fashion, it makes little sense to suppose that whether one entity explains more aspects of the world than another could depend upon how we come to know about that entity. (Recall that, for Thomasson, properties, tables, and marriages exist just as robustly as everything else does.) And those who embrace metaphysically-real explanatory relations are likely to take the arrangement of particles to explain the existence of the table (by grounding it), rather than vice versa; likewise for the marriage. The direction of inference need not be the direction of metaphysical explanation.

Instead, Thomasson is concerned with our explanatory insights, with what we are able to explain, given our knowledge (and with related issues around inference to the best explanation). With this in mind, consider the three possible reasons why 'easy inferences' do not improve our explanatory insight. First, deductive validity does not in general prevent increases of explanatory insight. Deductive inference often permits us to expand our knowledge, using what we already know as premises which enable us to reason to new knowledge of the conclusion. Indeed deductive inference is a paradigmatically secure means of expanding our knowledge. When we know more, typically we can explain more.

As philosophers, we may puzzle about how deductive inference can increase knowledge: after all, the conclusion was already somehow contained in the premises, which, by hypothesis, we already knew. Even with this puzzlement in mind, however, we should expect that bringing such knowledge to the surface – making it explicit – would enable us to offer explanations we could not previously offer. So I don't think that easy inferences fail to advance our explanatory insight merely because they are deductively valid.

The second relevant feature of 'easy inferences' is that they are not just deductively valid but obviously so, as instances of modus ponens: once we establish the truth of the premises, it is easy to see that the conclusion is true. Indeed, this is the only respect in which such reasoning is genuinely easy, since, as Thomasson emphasises, it can take a great deal of work to establish the truth of each premise. Again, however, the obviousness of an inference does not *per se* mean that the conclusion adds no explanatory value over and above that contained in the premises. The very fact that we use concepts such as *redness*, *table* and *marriage*, despite their supposedly transparent connection to other facts, suggests that we can do things with knowledge expressed in these terms that we find difficult to do otherwise.

The third possibility is that what renders the easy inferences explanatorily empty is the fact that the premise about the application conditions is a conceptual truth; the move from first premise to conclusion amounts to an explanatorily-valueless reconfiguration of a single fact. This interpretation best fits Thomasson's remarks on this topic. She says that we cannot explain why the house is red by reference to the house's having *redness*, because the latter 'is just a redundant way of restating the former (introducing a new noun term for a property).' (157) She cites Moliere's doctor, who 'explains' why poppies make us sleepy by referring to their dormitive virtue:

> 'Now, if saying that something has the dormitive virtue is just a fancy way of saying they make us sleepy, it may be perfectly true to say that poppies have the dormitive virtue. The joke lies in the fact, however, that if [this] is just a fancier way of restating the fact that poppies do make us sleepy (one that introduces a new noun term) and so is redundant, it clearly cannot…provide any explanation of the fact that poppies make us sleepy'. (156)

The idea is that, in easy inferences, the conclusion (there is a table) adds no explanatory value over and above the first premise (there are particles arranged thus-and-so): this because they are mutually transformable via the conceptual truth. I think that, for Thomasson, the key to

why easy inferences do not advance our explanatory insight is that they do not provide us with knowledge of genuinely new facts. The fact that poppies have dormitive virtue just is the fact that poppies make us sleepy, and likewise the fact that there are particles arranged tablewise just is the fact that there is a table, the fact that the house is red just is the fact that there is a property redness that the house has, and the fact that legitimate wedding circumstances occurred just is the fact that there is a marriage.

(This identification of facts is reminiscent of neo-Fregeans' talk of 'recarving', though, as Thomasson notes, her view has much wider scope than theirs. For neo-Fregeans, the fact that the *F*s and the *G*s are equinumerous just is the fact that the number of the *F*s is identical to the number of the *G*s: these are different carvings of the same underlying reality, only one of which explicitly reveals the existence of numbers.)

There seem to be two risks for Thomasson here. The first is we will find analogous situations in logic or mathematics where we think that facts can differ in their explanatory power even though one is derived from the other via conceptual truths. Indeed, insofar as we explain a mathematical proposition by proving it, this phenomenon will be widespread. In response, Thomasson might argue that mathematical proof goes far beyond 'fancy ways of restating' the starting point. But for complex social entities such as marriages, it is also much less clear that the fact of the marriage just is the fact of all the legitimate wedding circumstances, or a fancy way of restating these, as opposed to merely being derivable from them. (To be fair: Thomasson's 'dormitive virtue' remarks are focused on the much simpler case of redness.) Thomasson might also argue that the form of explanation within mathematics is not what we standardly expect in metaphysics, and that it cannot play a role in neo-Quinean inference to the best explanation.

The second risk is that regarding explanatory power as no more fine-grained than fact-identity may covertly involve an account of explanation which is too 'metaphysical' to be palatable to Thomasson. The reason we do not get explanatory insight via easy inferences is supposed to be the underlying identity between our starting point (the house's being red) and our finishing point (the house's having the property redness). Consider the supposed identity between poppies making us sleepy, and their having a dormitive virtue. Reference to dormitive virtue would have some explanatory value after all if attributing a dormitive virtue to the poppies was a way of saying that the poppies themselves have some intrinsic property which makes us sleepy, and thus that the sleepiness is not merely a learned response on our

part to the sight of poppies. Likewise the ruling that reference to properties is unexplanatory seems to rely upon metaphysical assumptions about the limited nature of properties. This brings us to the issue of restrictions upon the way that 'new' terms can be introduced via the specification of their application conditions, which I discuss in the next section.

4. Possible Worlds

Are there possible worlds? And, if so, are they Lewis-style concrete entities spatio-temporally isolated from us? Thomasson explicitly defers discussion of modality to future work, and doesn't discuss possible worlds. However, I think that exploring this case helps us understand the contours of her current position. At least at first sight, Thomasson's framework is tailor-made to handle existence questions posed using philosophical jargon. Let us understand 'possible world' to be a technical term introduced thus:

- Possibly p iff there is a possible world in which p.
- Necessarily p iff for all possible worlds, p.

I take it that Thomasson thinks that somehow we can come to know, for example, that although I had breakfast this morning, possibly I skipped breakfast this morning. Once we know that possibly I skipped breakfast this morning, and we understand the role of 'possible world' in the biconditionals above, we can easily infer that there is a possible world in which I skipped breakfast this morning. We can easily infer that such a world exists.

But this easy inference doesn't tell us anything about the nature of possible worlds, whether they are concrete or abstract for example. Thomasson will argue that, since we have inferred the existence of the skipped-breakfast world from the known possibility of my skipping breakfast, we cannot now invoke that world to *explain* why skipping breakfast is possible. This blocks any attempt to investigate the nature of possible worlds using inference to the best explanation. This, of course, challenges Lewis, whose *On the Plurality of Worlds* argues that the existence of concrete entities spatiotemporally-isolated from us is the best explanation for many features of modality.

Do possible worlds seem somehow well-suited for explaining modal facts, even before we start to think about their natures? There is a sneakiness about the way in which the concept of possible worlds is standardly introduced in the paired definitions above. 'Possible' and 'world' both had ordinary meanings already; so it is tempting to think that possible worlds, if they exist, are both possible and worlds. We notice the enormity of taking such entities to be

worlds in the ordinary concrete sense, hence the incredulous stare. (Moreover, like van Inwagen, Thomasson may object to the use of 'world' as a sortal or count noun, much as she objects to the supposedly totally-general use of 'object'.)

But we less easily notice that 'possible' is repurposed by the introduction of the concept *possible world*. As Lewis writes in a different context '[one does not] have mighty biceps just by being called 'Armstrong'' (Papers in Met and Ep, p.40). If, as Thomasson's account suggests, we can infer the existence of possible worlds via the stipulative definitions, we must take care not to infer anything about the possibility of possible worlds from the fact that they are called 'possible'.

This is an instance of a more general issue for Thomasson. Her easy inferences enable us to discover what exists via our grasp of the application conditions for terms. But not every way of specifying application conditions will support these easy inferences. For example, we might try to specify that when there is a mysterious old woman there is a witch, note that there are mysterious old women, easily infer the existence of witches, recall that witches have magic powers, and infer that there are people who have magic powers. Something wicked this way comes.

Thomasson must rule against any purported stipulative definitions involving terms (like 'witch') which already make a claim on the world. She says that 'Introducing [a] term must not analytically entail anything statable in [the unextended language] that was not already analytically entailed by truths stated in [the unextended language].' (263) If we introduce the term 'possible world' via the biconditionals, we cannot import any pre-existing understanding of 'possible' which would allow us to infer the existence of possible things from the existence of possible-worlds.

Moreover, although for Thomasson there is an easy 'yes' to the question 'are there possible worlds?', this is not the case for the question 'are there concrete entities spatio-temporally isolated from us?' She must reject specifications of application conditions such as:

- Possibly p iff there is a concrete entity spatio-temporally isolated from us in which *p*.

And this denial seems eminently reasonable. Although Lewis accepts the biconditional, he does not take it to be true by definition: his is an explanatory, not a simple realism.

The question whether there are concrete entities spatio-temporally isolated from us shows how Thomasson is no verificationist. We cannot investigate such putative entities by

conceptual means. But it is in the nature of such entities that they are empirically inaccessible, since by hypothesis they are spatio-temporally isolated from us. The question whether there are entities spatio-temporally isolated from us is not an 'easy' question to answer, nor is it empirical, and nor is it obviously illegitimate: it does not depend on an illegitimate stipulation of application conditions.

I do not regard this as a problem for Thomasson: her view is not that all existence questions are amenable to empirical and/or conceptual answers, but rather that there is no third 'special metaphysical' way of answering questions. Perhaps she should simply deny that we can find out whether there are concrete entities spatio-temporally isolated from us, whilst accepting that the question is not defective. It is a credit to *Ontology Made Easy* that it provides the resources to think about these issues in fresh ways, whether or not we ultimately accept the temptations of ontological ease.