

standing, showing in particular how Adorno's understanding of human action challenges the widespread philosophical assumption that actions are somehow caused by "mental states" such as "beliefs". The fact that we may

he is more interested in why it only becomes a central philosophical concern in the early modern period. Whether we are in control of an on-off switch that determines a course of action tells us nothing about the content of that

users subjects incapable of real critical self-appraisal, and so open to being co-opted into acts of exceptional cruelty. Shuster's explicit decision to concentrate on the "conceptual problem" of autonomy does not, though, always do justice to Adorno's

offers a perspective still lacking in too much philosophy today. Martin Shuster does excellent work in bringing Adorno into contemporary philosophical discussion, but underplays the extent to which Adorno also questions the very form of much of that discussion.

Philosophers are prone to heated debates about which things really exist. Not only do they love to argue about the existence of arcane things such as "temporal parts" and "mereological fusions"; they also like to ponder the existence of more familiar things such as numbers, events and even ordinary objects like tables and chairs. Such disputes are apt to leave the non-specialist at best bewildered and, at worst, disdainful of an apparently frivolous enterprise. "It's easy to show that there are chairs, events and numbers"; one might naturally protest. "Just last week I sat on a chair at the event of my friend's birthday party, where the number of pieces of cake I ate was two!"

The view that questions of existence – "ontological" questions – can be easily settled using such straightforward examples, and that philosophers really have taken a wrong turn in treating such questions as very difficult, is one championed by Amie Thomasson in *Ontology Made Easy*.

Of course, philosophers will all agree that in everyday conversation it is perfectly acceptable to talk "as if" there are the things (chairs, events, numbers) whose existence they dispute. The disagreement centres on whether this everyday talk is enough to guarantee the real existence of the things in question. But what it means for a thing to "really" exist will depend on whom you ask. One dominant approach, invented by the American philosopher W. V. Quine, is that what really exists is whatever is included in the proper formulation of the best

complete scientific theory of the world. "Best", in this context, is understood in terms of scientific virtues such as simplicity. So when followers of Quine dispute the existence of things like tables, they are claiming that we could construct a simpler (and therefore better) complete theory of reality that does not mention them (for example, by talking only in terms of physical particles and their arrangements).

One problem with the mainstream Quinean programme (as Thomasson and others note) is that so far it has done little to stem the proliferation of competing ontological theories. Faced with this lack of progress, one might feel that an entirely different approach is needed. Thomasson's book seeks to outline just such an alternative. The view she develops, which has its roots in the thinking of Quine's mentor Rudolf Carnap, is that whether or not numbers, say, exist depends only on whether the "application conditions" associated with the term "number"

are fulfilled, where the application conditions of a term are the linguistic rules of use associated with it. On Thomasson's view, all it takes for numbers to exist is that the rules of use for the term "number" in English make it clearly acceptable to proceed from an undisputed claim like "I ate two pieces of cake at the party" to another in which the term "number" is correctly applied (for example, "the number of pieces of cake I ate was two"). The result is that existence questions can be settled easily, without the need for protracted armchair philosophizing.

While "easy" approaches to ontology have been proposed recently in a few specialist areas, *Ontology Made Easy* represents the first comprehensive account and defence of the approach as a general position since Carnap introduced it in the 1940s. As such, it is a valuable contribution to the philosophical literature. The book's chief virtue lies in how methodically and artfully it collates and re-evaluates the criticisms that have kept easy approaches to ontology largely at bay for the past fifty years. Thomasson ingeniously defends the view against a variety of challenges, including the charge that the approach is implicitly circular in its reasoning and the accusation that easy approaches to ontology render the question of what exists implausibly dependent on human activity. In the light of

this work, one cannot help feeling that easy approaches to ontology deserve reappraisal by mainstream philosophy. Whether this discussion will ultimately lead to a renewed belief in the Quinean ideology or in a new paradigm of easy ontology remains to be seen, but the discussion needs to be had, and for showing this, Thomasson's book should be commended.

Even if a new age of easy ontology does take hold, however, I am not entirely convinced that the Quinean project will be rendered redundant, as Thomasson seems to imply. The question of which things will and won't be mentioned in the best scientific theory of the world will, for many thinkers, continue to be of philosophical significance. Will such a theory include, for example, only things that exist independently of minds? Will it only mention things that are capable of causally making a difference to the world? Such questions are of great philosophical interest. Perhaps Quineans are not best understood as contributing to the debate about which things "exist" in the sense discussed by Amie Thomasson. But even if this is conceded, there are still substantial questions of the sort just mentioned. The approach developed in *Ontology Made Easy* thus leaves the Quinean project largely intact, only denying it the use of the word "exist" and the label "ontology". And unless it really bothers Quineans whether they are known as "ontologists" rather than by some other title, those engaged in Quine's project should therefore not worry too much about the dawn of easy ontology.

# Two cakes

TOM GRAHAM

Amie L. Thomasson

ONTOLOGY MADE EASY

345pp. Oxford University Press.  
£32.99 (US \$49.95).  
978 0 19 938511 9