

What is Conservatism?

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One day, some years ago, Daniel Z. Korman looked out the window and saw a dog and a tree. He drew the following, apparently reasonable conclusions: there is a dog out there; there is a tree out there; there is a trunk of the tree out there, which partly composes the tree; and there is nothing out there which is composed of the trunk and the dog. Are these reasonable conclusions true? The view Korman calls *conservatism*¹ says *yes*: there are trees, trunks, and dogs, but no *trogs*, where a trog is an object composed of a trunk and a dog. Conservatism is not exhausted by appeal to these particular kinds of things. The general view concerns which highly visible (2), material (25) objects there are. According to the conservative, there are *ordinary* objects, like dogs, trunks, tables, cars, and the like; but no *extraordinary* objects, like trogs, incars,² or snowdiscalls³ (23).

Korman is a conservative, and offers both arguments in favor of conservatism and responses to arguments against it. The range of non-conservative views is, of course, vast: for every putatively extraordinary object kind, there is a non-conservative view which says there are objects of that kind. Similarly, for every putatively ordinary object kind, there is a non-conservative view which denies

¹More exactly, ‘conservatism’ is short for ‘*ontological* conservatism’: clearly, it should not be confused with any political view.

²An *incar* is an object whose existence and material extent depend on the spatial relations between a car and its surroundings. An *incar* comes into existence when any part of a car comes to be spatially contained in a garage, and is composed of just those material bits of the car that are inside the garage. If there are any incars and you drive your car into a garage, an *incar* begins to exist when the tip of the bumper first enters the garage, and grows as the car moves in. It sticks around just so long as the car remains in the garage. If you subsequently drive the car out of the garage, as it leaves, the spatial and material extent of the *incar* shrinks, and the *incar* goes out of existence when the last bit of the car exits the garage.

³A *snowdiscall* is a lump of snow that essentially has some shape between a ball and a disc. You might scoop up a lump of snow and create a *snowdiscall* by packing it into a ball. If you subsequently pack it into a brick shape, you destroy the *snowdiscall* even though the lump of snow has survived (17).

that there are objects of that kind. There are all of the boolean combinations of such views. So, for instance, there is a view which accepts the existence of dogs and snowdiscalls, but denies the existence of tables and incars. In practice, Korman restricts his attention to opponents with relatively simple views. So, he opposes *permissivism*, which holds that there are a large number of highly visible, extraordinary material objects. Some permissivists hold that, for any objects, there is an object which is composed of those objects. Korman calls these opponents *universalists*. Universalists who admit that there is a dog and a trunk outside Korman's window will claim that there is also a trog.⁴ Other permissivists go further, holding that, for every (non-empty, partial) function f from worlds to regions of spacetime filled with matter, there is an object o such that (i) at each world w , o exists iff f is defined at w , and (ii) if o exists, it is composed of exactly the matter in the region to which f maps w (17).⁵ Korman calls this opposing view the *doctrine of plenitude*. The doctrine of plenitude entails (on plausible premises) that there are incars, since there is a partial function from worlds to those regions of spacetime filled by those parts of cars that are inside garages. An individual appropriately corresponding to any such partial function is essentially garage-bound. There are also nonconservatives who deny the existence of a wide swath of ordinary, (apparently) highly visible, material objects. Korman calls these philosophers *eliminativists*. The eliminativists include certain *nihilists*, who deny that there are any composite material objects, and *organicists*, who deny that there are any composite material non-organisms. Nihilists deny the existence of both dogs and tables, and organicists deny the existence of tables.

Korman argues that each of these competitors to conservatism is implausible. The existence of the dog outside Korman's window, for instance, is a counterexample to any form of nihilism which denies it, and the nonexistence of any trog composed of that dog and that trunk is a counterexample to any form of universalism which affirms it. Korman also argues that each of a battery of interesting arguments for universalism, plenitude, and nihilism is flawed. The

⁴Claiming there is a trog does not settle questions about many of its other features, including its persistence conditions. Korman is explicitly neutral on this question (23), and thus opposes any of a range of views which accept at least one object composed of the dog and the tree, but disagree over how many such things there are or what their persistence conditions may be.

⁵My formulation is a slight amendment of Korman's, but is in line with what I take to be his intentions.

result is a fascinating and wide-ranging discussion that includes reflections, not just on first-order metaphysics, but also on the epistemology and methodology of metaphysics.

But this focus on arguments against and for this particular menagerie of opposing views leaves an important question for those of us who share Korman's plausibility judgments in particular cases: just what is the view that is defended here? As Korman says, it is the view that there are *ordinary* things, but no *extraordinary* things. We know that Korman restricts his discussion to highly visible, material objects. But what is it for such an object to be *ordinary* in the relevant sense?⁶ Evidently, dogs, trunks, tables, and cars are ordinary, and trogs, incars, and snowdiscalls are extraordinary. But Korman does not tell us how to extend our list of examples, and, for my part, I am unsure what he has in mind. On what basis, then, are we to characterize cases as examples or nonexamples of *ordinary* objects? If we don't have at least the rudiments of an answer, we can't claim to understand which view Korman proposes to defend.⁷

Korman himself is not explicit on this question. Our discussion will proceed, then, by examining certain candidate explanations for what it takes for things of a certain kind to qualify as "ordinary" in the relevant sense. Each candidate explanation yields a different conception of conservatism. Some of these candidate explanations clearly do not capture what Korman has in mind; the others seem to have some textual support. All, however, face problems. In particular, each of the explanations faces a dilemma: either they do not clearly classify dogs, trogs, *etc.*, in the ways characteristic of conservatism, or they render the resulting conception of conservatism implausible. Moreover, I will argue, there are reasons to think that this dilemma will arise for any conception of conservatism because one of the paradigmatic commitments of conservatism is itself implausible.

⁶I will assume that "extraordinary" just means "not ordinary, but highly visible and material".

⁷Full disclosure: I share Korman's skepticism about each of the targets (universalism, the doctrine of plenitude, nihilism, and organicism) of his critical discussions. Moreover, I share his view that considerations of plausibility should have significant weight in metaphysical disputes. But the rejection of a host of nonconservative views on the basis of plausibility considerations falls far short of an endorsement of conservatism.

1 Populism

It might be held that objects of a certain kind are ordinary iff ordinary people generally believe that there are things of that kind. Ordinary people are presumably people who are not regularly engaged in theoretical investigations into what there is. This group will include not just non-philosophers, but presumably also non-physicists, non-mathematicians, non-geologists, *etc.* Call this the *populist* conception of ordinariness, and the variety of conservatism yielded by that conception *populism*.⁸

It is not completely implausible that populism yields Korman's verdicts on the paradigm cases of ordinary and extraordinary objects. Ordinary people generally believe that there are dogs, tables, and cars. They almost certainly don't generally believe that there are trogs, incars, or snowdiscalls. This leaves the question of whether they also believe that there are no trogs, incars, or snowdiscalls. Matters are not entirely clear. On the one hand, it is almost certain that very few ordinary people have ever had an occurrent judgment to the effect, *e.g.*, that there are trogs, entities composed of a dog and a tree trunk. Of course, this is because (almost certainly) they have never considered the question. But, one might think, were we to pose the question of whether there was any such thing, ordinary people would judge (and then believe) that there is no such thing. Perhaps that's sufficient for us to conclude that they (non-occurrently) believe that there are no trogs.

Still, Korman is no populist, and for good reason.⁹ As the example involving trogs demonstrates, what ordinary people *actually, occurrently judge* underdetermines what there is. Instead, if populism is even to cover the paradigm conservative denials of trogs, incars, or snowdiscalls, we must consider what people generally would judge if they were appropriately educated. So, for instance, an ordinary person needs to be educated in enough mereology to understand that something is a trog iff it has a dog and a trunk as parts, and every part of it has some part in common with either the dog or the trunk. To appreciate the question of whether there are incars or snowdiscalls, they need to acquire central notions of modal metaphysics, including the notion of an essential property. So understood, the question of what ordinary people generally would believe

⁸As with conservatism, populism is not to be confused with any political view.

⁹See esp. 24-5, 31, 59-62. I detect occasional backsliding. On p. 150, for instance, Korman presupposes that the conservative is committed to accepting the existence of scattered objects that we "ordinarily recognize." This at least suggests populism.

under those conditions is in large measure empirical, and it is not obvious to me that the majority would judge in conformity with the conservative's paradigms. Moreover, it seems that the process of educating ordinary people so that they have the background to judge the truth of the existence claim would render the erstwhile ordinary person extraordinary. Dogs are familiar to ordinary people; glassy-winged sharpshooters are much less familiar. But, given the current state of field biology, we should believe in dogs iff we believe in glassy-winged sharpshooters. Even more exotic cases occur. Consider, for instance, a field biologist's claim that there is a single, massive, organism with 47,000 trunks:

Unlike giant sequoias, each of which is a genetically separate individual, a group of thousands of aspens can actually be a single organism, sharing a root system and a unique set of genes. We therefore recently nominated one particular aspen individual growing just south of the Wasatch Mountains of Utah as the most massive living organism in the world. We nicknamed it *Pando*, a Latin word meaning I spread. Made up of 47,000 tree trunks, each with an ordinary tree's usual complement of leaves and branches, Pando covers 106 acres and, conservatively, weighs in excess of 13 million pounds ... [Grant, 1993, p. 84].

These kinds of objects are, plausibly, "undreamt of" by ordinary people. If such ordinary people were to learn the relevant facts about the physiology of clonal colonies like Pando, they would no longer clearly count as ordinary people, given their newly acquired biological information. Suppose that there is an answer to the question of whether, ordinary people, *when they are in possession of all of the relevant evidence*, are disposed to judge that Pando exists. It is unclear why we should take such dispositions as our guide, rather than more directly considering the evidence. Suppose, on the other hand, that there is an answer to the question of whether ordinary people, *while remaining ordinary and so ignorant of at least some of the relevant evidence*, are disposed to judge that Pando exists. Here it is completely clear that such judgments, made in ignorance of relevant evidence, are no good guide to what there is.

Moreover, as Korman notes (59-62), ordinary people's dispositions to judge in these cases might be due to psychological factors other than their drawing conclusions from the evidence. For instance, their dispositions might evince confusion. Or, their dispositions might be due to a pro-social tendency to express

agreement with what they take to be the prevailing scientific consensus.¹⁰

I conclude that we should not look to the judgments of ordinary people (either actual or dispositional) to tell us what there is. Populism is thus not particularly plausible. Perhaps for these reasons, Korman does not claim that conservatism conforms to “folk ontology,” or “common sense.” Whether it does is a fraught, at least partly empirical question. Moreover, if it does, that would be a matter of coincidence, rather than a commitment of Korman’s conservatism. We need a better way for the conservative to distinguish ordinary from extraordinary objects.

2 Intuitionism

As we have seen, a key part of Korman’s defense of conservatism appeals to the plausibility of its ontological claims in the paradigm cases. Unlike the nihilist, the conservative says that there are tables, dogs, and tree trunks. Thus, conservatism is more plausible than nihilism. Unlike the universalist, the conservative denies that there are trogs, incars, or snowdiscalls. This, Korman argues, makes conservatism more plausible than universalism. Korman signs on, however, to a particular epistemology of these plausible judgments. Each of them, Korman contends, is based on a particular, conscious, occurrent mental state which presents as true, *e.g.*, the nonexistence of any trog outside his window. Following Bealer [1992], he characterizes this kind of mental state as an “intellectual seeming:” it is the state I am in when it occurrently, consciously seems to me as if (under such and such circumstances) there is no trog. This sort of mental state is what Korman calls an *intuition* (31ff.). Korman’s defense of his objections from the plausible judgments in paradigm cases appeals to the nature and epistemological role of intuitions. I will not discuss these epistemological reflections here. The point for present purposes is that one key difference between dogs, trunks, and tables on one hand and trogs, incars, and snowdiscalls on the other, according to Korman, is that we have intuitions that (under actual circumstances) there are things of the former kinds but no such intuitions regarding the latter kinds.

¹⁰Korman offers these hypotheses as part of a defense against the suggestion that ordinary people would affirm anti-conservative verdicts in the paradigm cases (59-62). But his proposals apply equally well to the suggestion that ordinary people would affirm pro-conservative verdicts, too.

This suggests a conception of ordinariness according to which a kind of highly visible, material object is ordinary iff we have intuitions that (under actual circumstances) there are things of that kind. On this conception, conservatism is naturally characterized as the view that those things we intuit to exist (under actual circumstances) really do exist, and no highly visible, material things that we do not intuit to exist really do.¹¹ An equally natural alternative characterization is that no things that we intuit *not* to exist really exist, and all things that we intuit to exist really do.¹²

As it stands, this characterization of conservatism is much too strong, since Korman is prepared to admit, in principle, that there are kinds of things such that it seems to us as if there are highly visible, material objects of those kinds, even though there are no such things. And, we may have an intuition as of the existence of a thing of the relevant kind even if we do not believe that there is any such thing, and, in fact, even if we know that there is no such thing. So, for instance, if I have a mirage experience, it seems to me as if there is shimmering material thing, perhaps a puddle, somewhere off in the distance. Now, there is material in the relevant location, mostly composed of nitrogen, oxygen, and water vapor. But there is no such material thing. It seems to me as if there is a puddle there in way similar to the way it seemed to Korman that there was a dog in the yard.¹³ Other, similar examples are familiar: experiences of sun dogs and a clear, blue sky each seem to present us with highly visible, material objects, located at some distance from us.¹⁴ In

¹¹This conception of conservatism differs from populism in at least two ways. First, it is our intuitions, rather than the intuitions of ordinary people, which determine whether conservatism affirms the existence of a given kind of thing. There is the question of who “we” are, which I briefly engage below. But I assume that “we” include at least Korman, who is extraordinary in all of the relevant ways. Second, it is *intuitions* rather than anyone’s beliefs or judgments which determine the commitments of conservatism. Korman explicitly distinguishes the two kinds of psychological state (31-33).

¹²This second, weaker characterization is at odds with the assumption that I made in n. 6, though not in a way that will matter in our discussion. The difference between the two characterizations is due to cases in which we fail to have any intuition one way or the other in certain cases. I don’t know about you, but it seems to me neither that Pando exists, nor that it doesn’t. My intuitions – conceived of here as intellectual seemings – are silent on this case. Michael Grant, the field biologist who wrote the account quoted above, clearly thinks there is such a thing. The matter, it seems to me, will have to be settled without the direct aid of any pre-theoretic intuition of existence or nonexistence. I should emphasize that, on my reading, Grant is not claiming that Pando is a superorganism, with individual trees as suborganisms; Korman considers such cases (149). Rather, Grant is claiming that Pando is a really big organism, with no suborganisms as parts.

¹³There are complications here concerning the correct way to characterize the contribution, if any, that intuition, as opposed to perception, makes in such cases (30-1).

¹⁴If you are the sort of person who enjoys thinking about the existence and nature of highly

each case, there is matter suitably located to compose the supposed material thing. But there is no such thing. So, on pain of implausibility (given what we know about how such phenomena arise), we shouldn't stick conservatism with a commitment to the existence of such things as material objects presented in mirage experiences. A more charitable and plausible version of conservatism would hold, then, that our intuitions about what there is and what there is not (under actual circumstances) are *by and large* correct.

Also, for reasons similar to some we encountered in our discussion of populism, we should characterize the relevant variety of conservatism in terms of what we are *disposed* to intuit. To illustrate, conservatism should not be conceived so that, given the fact that almost all of us have never intuited that (under actual circumstances) there are clonal colonies or glassy-winged sharpshooters, the view is committed to there not being any. Instead, we should reckon object kinds as ordinary in the relevant sense iff we *would* have intuitions that there are (under actual circumstances) objects of that kind if we were to entertain the question. So, on this conception, conservatism amounts to the view that the intuitions we are disposed to have about what there is (under actual circumstances) are by and large correct. Call this view *intuitionism*.¹⁵

Intuitionism suffers from some of the same drawbacks as populism. In particular, the question of whether any particular group of people are disposed to have any particular, conscious occurrent mental state is largely empirical. We currently lack the evidence we need for the conclusion that intuitionism classifies the paradigms of ordinary objects as ordinary and the paradigms of extraordinary objects as extraordinary.

There are several holes in our present body of evidence. Now, it is plausible that most people believe in dogs, tree trunks, and tables, and do not believe in trogs, incars, and snowdiscalls. But, as Korman is at pains to emphasize, intuiting and believing are two different things. For instance, intuiting that there is some highly visible, material thing that I encounter when I have a mirage ex-

visible things of no special theoretical importance, you can have a lot of fun thinking about rainbows. If there are any such things and they have anything close to the features they seem to have, they are extremely strange. You'll want a test subject. Set up a sprinkler with the sun at a suitably low angle, and study the resulting rainbow. Ask yourself, in particular, where it is located, what matter it is made of, what its shape is, what makes it move and change shape, whether it has a back side, whether it is extended, and whether it is colored. Almost immediately, interesting combinations of answers to these questions will suggest themselves to you.

¹⁵Of course, intuitionism of the sort now under consideration is a metaphysical view, not to be confused with the ethical and mathematical views also tagged by this label.

perience is not the same as believing that there is such a thing. So, widespread belief in dogs does not provide much in the way of evidence about what most people are disposed to intuit. Intuiting that P is, rather a certain particular, conscious, occurrent mental state, distinct from believing. It is in large measure an empirical question as to whether any particular person has any particular conscious, occurrent mental state on any particular occasion. The question of whether any particular person is disposed to have such a mental state is equally empirical. Furthermore, there are difficult methodological questions concerning how to discern which occurrent, conscious mental states people are disposed to have, since introspective reports may not be reliable.¹⁶ There is also the question of who “we” are, who are supposed to have these intuitions. Korman reports intuiting that there are dogs, trunks, and tables, and that there are no trogs, incars, or snowdiscalls. But, as he acknowledges, not everyone who has considered the question, reports sharing these intuitions (33-5). For my part, I believe I share Korman’s intuitions, though with an important caveat that I will discuss in §4 below: things do seem to me, I think, as if there are dogs but no trogs. I would not object to characterizing things’ seeming so as an occurrent, conscious mental state. But intuitionism does not take Korman’s and my intuitions in particular as the final word on which things are “ordinary.” There is no reason in general to think that there are broadly shared dispositions to intuit the paradigm cases in a way consistent with conservatism’s commitments. We simply lack the empirical evidence that intuitionism yields the conservative’s verdicts about the paradigm cases. Further, given the methodological issues with interpreting people’s reports of their intuitions, it is not entirely clear how we might get such evidence.

Perhaps for these reasons, Korman is no intuitionist (35). His own intuitions, he claims, provide him a reason to believe as he does in the paradigm cases. He argues that the intuitions that I report give me a reason to believe as he does in the paradigm cases. But he does not think of conservatism as the idea that we, whoever we turn out to be, are disposed to intuit in these ways, and he makes no attempt to offer the empirical support such a claim would require.¹⁷

¹⁶See [Schwitzgebel, 2008] for some doubts about the reliability of introspective reports. Also, as Korman argues, it is easy to confuse one’s disposition to intuit P with one’s beliefs concerning P , one’s dispositions to judge that P , one’s finding P obvious, *etc.* (32-3). This makes someone’s reports of intuitions at best weak evidence that they are in fact in the right sort of occurrent, conscious mental state.

¹⁷Korman might contend that objects of a given kind are ordinary in the relevant sense

3 Communitarianism

There is another salient difference between dogs and trops that suggests a different conception of “ordinary” objects. One important difference between dogs and trops is that trops (if there are any)¹⁸ are *scattered* objects. In particular, their parts are not connected (139): there is no way to draw a continuous path between a point inside the tree trunk to a point inside the dog’s tail without going through some point not occupied by the supposed trog. Moreover, the parts of the dog, unlike the parts of the trog, are causally linked to one another and exhibit a form of unity which is badly in need of clarification (139).¹⁹ One might think this makes the alleged trog extraordinary in the relevant sense. Let us summarize these differences by saying that the trog, unlike the dog, is *disconnected*.

On this view, an object is “ordinary” in the relevant sense only if it is not disconnected. This necessary condition is presumably not sufficient. Suppose my spouse and I find ourselves superglued together, and consider the claim that we then compose a kind of object we might call a *bliss*: an object composed of two people superglued together. The bliss (if there is such a thing) is connected. Its parts are causally interdependent, since where one of us goes the other goes too. There is, I hope, a significant amount of unity among its parts. Nevertheless, blisses will strike Korman’s conservative as extraordinary objects, and they will deny that there are any such things.²⁰

So, we appear to have only a necessary condition for an object to count as “ordinary” in the relevant sense. This leaves us with no good account of why blisses should not be on the list of objects whose existence is endorsed by Korman’s brand of conservatism, but the result is still an interesting view con-

just in case *he himself* intuits that there are things of that kind. The resulting view seems more like dictatorship than conservatism. In any case, though I have the greatest respect for Korman’s gifts as a philosopher, this is not an attractive view in general, not least because there are many kinds which cannot be helpfully finitely specified, and so about which Korman could have no intuitions.

¹⁸I will often be suppressing qualifications of this sort in what follows.

¹⁹Korman does not address the question of how to characterize that form of unity. I won’t either, except for some vague suggestions about a couple of particular cases below.

²⁰Why think conservatives will deny the existence of blisses? The case involving the bliss is obtained by adding superglue to van Inwagen’s example of two people shaking hands. Korman explicitly denies that there is anything composed of the two people in such a case (26). I am taking Korman’s actual response to be a reasonable guide to the conservative position here. I should admit that it seems to me implausible that there is any such thing as a bliss, though see the discussion below for an important qualification.

cerning what fails to exist. A thing will count as “extraordinary” in the relevant sense if it is disconnected. Since the resulting view emphasizes the importance of connection and unity among the parts of a thing, call it *communitarian conservatism*, or *communitarianism*²¹ for short. The communitarian holds that there are no highly visible, material objects whose parts are disconnected.

I suspect communitarianism may be the view, or at least part of the view, that Korman wishes to defend. Evidence for this interpretive hypothesis is provided by Korman’s extended discussion of what he calls the *argument from arbitrariness* (6-7, Ch. 8). Strictly speaking, Korman discusses arguments for some of the extreme opposing views mentioned above: universalism, the principle of plenitude, and nihilism. So, this discussion is not focused per se on a defense of communitarianism. But the way Korman proceeds can easily be converted to such a defense. The arguments generally take the following form. The objector notes that, by conservative lights, a thing *o* of a certain kind exists. The objector then argues that there is no “ontologically significant” difference between *o*’s existence and the claimed existence of some paradigm “extraordinary” object *e*. Universalists and defenders of plenitude conclude from the (admitted) existence of *o* that their view, which affirms the existence of *e*, is correct; nihilists conclude from the (admitted) nonexistence of *e* that their view, which denies the existence of *o*, is correct. So, for instance, there was an *assortment* of things on Korman’s desk at a certain point. The assortment has disconnected parts, in a way relevantly similar to the way that the trog’s parts are disconnected. Korman’s defense is that there is no such thing. The assortment of objects is just the objects, taken collectively, rather than an additional object that has these objects as parts (16-7, 140-1). So, Korman’s defense in this case is, in effect, also a defense of communitarianism from a putative counter-example.

Communitarianism arguably does not classify the conservative’s paradigm cases incorrectly: dogs, trees, trunks, and tables seem not to count as “extraordinary” in the relevant sense, while trogs do count as “extraordinary.”²² Unfortunately, communitarianism is not particularly plausible on the merits. There seem to be clear cases in which there are objects that are disconnected. Let’s consider some of those cases.

²¹ Again, this is a view in metaphysics rather than in politics.

²² I omit discussion of incars and snowdiscalls for reasons of space. It is implausible that there are any such things, but they do not seem to be disconnected.

4 Disconnected objects

We'll start with assortments. Recall that Korman argues that, while

- (1) The assortment of items on Korman's desk includes a ceramic mug
is true and entails
- (2) There is an assortment of items on Korman's desk

that there is no single, disconnected object that is an assortment of items on Korman's desk. How are we to reconcile this claim with the truth of (1)? Korman argues that, although the complex noun-phrase 'the assortment of items on Korman's desk' is grammatically singular, it refers (collectively) to many things, rather than to a single, disconnected thing.²³ He calls an expression of this sort a *disguised plural*.

This is an interesting linguistic hypothesis. Is there any evidence for it? Korman suggests four diagnostics for disguised plurals, each stemming from the most plausible answer to each of the following questions:

- (i) *The single object test*: Is O a single object bearing the features that it should have if it were a single object?
- (ii) *The in test*: Is every part of O in [in the sense of *being a member of* rather than in the sense of *spatially inside* (145)] O ?
- (iii) *The growth test*: Does O grow whenever it gains new parts?²⁴
- (iv) *The transitivity test*: Does O have parts whose parts are not part of O ?

If the intuitive answer to (i) is *no* and the intuitive answer to the other three is *yes*, that suggests that O is a plurality of things, and that ' O ' is a disguised plural (145, emphasis original).

To illustrate the import of the tests, consider the assortment of objects on Korman's desk.

²³Similarly, though Korman does not explicitly engage the question, the indefinite singular noun phrase 'an assortment of items on Korman's desk' can be given a suitably revised satisfaction semantics, on which many things may (collectively) satisfy a formula. In any case, a pluralized reference relation for the definite noun phrase must somehow be paired with a suitably similar semantics for the indefinite noun phrase.

²⁴The way Korman actually applies the growth test indicates that a better formulation of the test would have used a question concerning the replacement of some parts of O by others: 'Is it the case that, whenever a part of O is removed, and several parts are added, O grows by the replacement?' (145-6)

- (i) Assuming the assortment includes a ceramic mug and a plastic pen, is there a single object which is partly ceramic and partly plastic? Intuitively, the answer is *no*.
- (ii) Are the parts of the assortment – the mug and the pen, say – in the assortment? Intuitively, the answer is *yes*.
- (iii) Suppose Korman takes the (50 gram) mug off his desk, but then replaces it with 25 (1 gram) paper clips. Has the assortment grown by this replacement? Intuitively, Korman would claim, the answer is *yes*, by 24 items (145-6).
- (iv) The mug’s ceramic handle is part of the mug. Is it part of the assortment? Intuitively, *no*. So, intuitively, the assortment has parts whose parts are not also parts of the assortment.

Suppose that Korman is right about the results of the tests (i)-(iv) in the case of ‘the assortment of items on Korman’s desk.’ There seem to be other singular noun phrases which refer to highly visible, material, disconnected wholes, but which are not classified as disguised plurals by these tests. Consider the territory of Russia at the present time. To be clear, I am not talking about the state of Russia, a political entity which has grown and shrunk over the centuries according to the vicissitudes of politics and war. I am talking about the land itself, with its mountains, rivers, and snowfields. This territory is scattered: it includes an isolated bit of territory that contains the city of Kaliningrad and is cut off from the rest by the territories of Lithuania and Belarus and by the Baltic Sea. (There are also islands in the territory of present-day Russia.) Let’s consider whether ‘the territory of Russia at the present time’ is a disguised plural, according to our tests.

- (i) Is that territory a single thing that is tundra in some places, forested in others, densely populated in others, *etc.*? Intuitively, the answer is *yes*.
- (ii) Is every part of that territory in the territory? The answer, intuitively, is *yes*, but the sense of containment is ordinary spatial containment. So, for instance, the territory has an Asian part and a European part, and the Asian part is in the territory, in the sense that it is spatially contained in that territory. Intuitively however, the Asian part is not a member of the territory. So, the answer, on the intended reading of ‘in’ is *no*.

- (iii) Suppose there is a huge granite boulder that is part of the territory, that boulder is demolished and the debris taken out of the territory, and it is replaced by twenty-five tiny pumice pebbles. (Pumice is much less dense than granite.) Does the territory grow by this replacement? Intuitively, the answer is *no*.
- (iv) The Asian part of the territory has the Kamchatka Peninsula as a part, and the Kamchatka Peninsula is part of the territory. Is there any part of a part of the territory that is not also a part of the territory? Intuitively, the answer is *no*.

So, the tests do not classify ‘the territory of Russia at the present time’ as a disguised plural.

That territory is, as I have said, scattered. What’s more, the isolated bit containing Kaliningrad is not causally integrated with the rest, except in some of the ways in which the dog is causally integrated with the tree trunk. To illustrate, just as changes in the trunk can cause changes – *e.g.*, perceptual changes – in the dog, changes in the territory around Moscow can cause changes – *e.g.*, as a result of rainfall, air pollution, or the decisions of bureaucrats – in the territory around Kaliningrad. There is no tighter respect in which the territory is unified. So, the territory is disconnected. According to communitarianism, the territory of Russia at the present time is “extraordinary.” Thus, communitarianism implausibly commits us to the claim that there is no such thing. Since the tests for disguised plurals do not classify ‘the territory of Russia at the present time’ as a disguised plural, Korman’s defensive strategy does not apply in this case.²⁵

In fact, examples of this sort seem to be very common. Though it would be implausible, I think, to claim that there was a trog outside Korman’s window, I learned in my high school physics class that there is a *physical system* comprising the matter of the dog and the tree trunk.²⁶ I was taught that it had certain measurable properties, like a location, an electrical charge, and a center of mass. I was taught that these properties determined the physical behavior of the system, including its evolution (if unaffected by other systems) and its effects

²⁵Korman admits that there are hard cases for conservatism (151-2), and he might concede that this is one of them. It is not clear what the import of the existence of hard cases is; see §5 below for discussion.

²⁶This is an adaptation of an example due to Mark Moyer.

on other systems. I was taught that this physical system had relevantly similar features and was governed by the same principles as other physical systems, like the solar system or the system comprising Jupiter and its moons.

I am not merely appealing to the authority of my high school physics teacher. The existence of such a physical system is settled science.²⁷ Now, the truth about that physical system differs in important ways from the (radically simplified and Newtonian) physics I was taught. Still, the physical system will approximately (and with high probability) obey the principles I was taught in the physical regimes I was taught to handle. And there are some suitable principles that govern its evolution and interactions. Some might claim that deep physics – quantum mechanics or quantum field theory – gives us reason to reject the claim that there is any such physical system: either there is no such system, or it has no location, charge, center of mass, *etc.* [Ladyman et al., 2007] But, insofar as those differences are relevant to the question of whether there is a physical system comprising the matter of the dog and the trunk, they are equally relevant to the question of whether there are dogs, trees, trunks, or tables. If results from deep physics should convince us to deny the existence of the physical system, for instance, they should also convince us to deny the existence of the dog. So, communitarianism cannot be defended by any such appeal to deep physics. More generally, objections to the existence of such a physical system from deep physics can easily be adapted to yield objections to conservatism.

Let's consider, then, whether 'the physical system comprising the matter of the dog and the trunk' is a disguised plural.

- (i) Is that system furry in some places and wooden in others? Intuitively, the answer is *yes*.
- (ii) Is every part of that system in the system? The answer, intuitively, is *yes*, but the sense of containment is ordinary spatial containment. So, for instance, the lump of matter comprised by the dog's heart is in the system, in the very same sense that the heart is in the dog. Intuitively however,

²⁷It might be held that the existence of such physical systems is not settled science. The thought is that, though this is how the science is typically expressed, this expression can be paraphrased in terms of features of pluralities. In this case, the paraphrase would advert to the features of the plurality of objects comprising the dog and the trunk. Nihilists say something similar about paraphrasing 'dog' and 'trunk' truths in terms of features of pluralities of their constituent material bits. Korman notes a number of problems with strategies of this sort; see Ch.'s 5 and 6.

that lump of matter is not a member of the system. So, the answer on the intended reading of ‘in’ is *no*.

(iii) Suppose that we shave the dog, and twice as many tiny hairs grow back in, but they are small enough that the new hairs, in the aggregate, are much less massive than the old fur. Does the system grow by this replacement? Intuitively, the answer is *no*.

(iv) The matter comprised by the dog has the matter comprised by its heart as a part, and the matter comprised by the heart is part of the physical system. Is there any part of a part of the system that is not also a part of the system? Intuitively, the answer is *no*.

So ‘the physical system comprising the matter of the dog and trunk’ seems not to be a disguised plural.²⁸

It nevertheless seems to be disconnected. Obviously, the physical system (if it exists) is scattered, for the same reason that the trog (if it exists) is scattered. Similarly, if the trog is not unified in the relevant way, neither, presumably, is the physical system. So, the plausible claim that there is such a physical system presents a problem for communitarianism.

A communitarian might respond to this problem by claiming that ‘the physical system comprising the matter of the dog and the trunk’, though not a disguised plural, is a disguised mass noun expression. Consider, for instance, the expression ‘the snow on the lawn outside.’ This expression is plausibly used to refer to some stuff, rather than a particular individual. It can be used to attribute features to that stuff, as in

(3) The snow on the lawn outside is white.

We can make sense of the idea that this snow is distinct from other stuff, as when we truly say

²⁸It should be noted that Korman’s discussion of whether ‘the solar system’ is a disguised plural suggests that his judgments on (i), (ii) and (iv) in the case of ‘the solar system’ may differ from mine (152). I conjecture that part of the problem is that one may use ‘the solar system’ as a disguised plural, referring (collectively) to the Sun, Mercury, Venus, *etc.*, but that when it is so used it is not used to talk about the physical system at issue. (I leave the interesting linguistic details concerning, *e.g.*, whether this indicates lexical ambiguity, a merely pragmatic phenomenon, *etc.*, to the side.) This would be a kind of metonymy or ambiguity: just as we may use the expression ‘Vermont’ to talk about the University of Vermont hockey team (which Korman thinks is a plurality of individuals rather than a single individual (150)), so may we use ‘the solar system’ to talk about the Sun, some planets, moons, asteroids, comets, *etc.* Having to be careful about metonymy or ambiguity of this sort is one of the occupational hazards of the kind of linguistically infused metaphysics we are now discussing.

- (4) The snow on the lawn outside is distinct from the snow on the University Green.

But, plausibly, there is no *individual* that serves as the referent of ‘the snow on the lawn outside.’ A symptom of this referential difference is that certain counting claims using the expression and the predicate ‘snow’ are not well-formed. So, for instance, though we may grammatically express counting claims about physical systems, as in

- (5) The physical system comprising matter of the dog and the trunk is one of three physical systems I have mentioned

no similar counting claim using ‘the snow on the lawn outside’ is grammatical:

- (6) #The snow on the lawn outside is one of two snows I have mentioned.

This follows, of course, from the fact that ‘snow’ (in the relevant use) is not a count noun. The response we are considering is that ‘the physical system comprising the matter of the dog and the trunk’ also refers to no individual, but rather to some stuff. The communitarian may readily agree that there is some stuff which is disconnected; she denies only that there is any particular individual which is disconnected.²⁹

This is an interesting linguistic hypothesis. Is there any evidence for it? Not that I can see. As the example (5) illustrates, ‘physical system’ is a count noun, and ‘the physical system comprising the matter of the dog and the trunk’ does not pass our rough and ready linguistic test for referring to some stuff, rather than any particular individual. Presumably this is the point of suggesting that it is a *disguised* mass term. But there seems to be no reason independent of a desire to defend communitarianism for denying that it has the same kind of referential semantics as ‘the dog outside Korman’s window’.³⁰

²⁹See [Markosian, 2015] for a view roughly along these lines. This sort of view is readily extended to the case of ‘the territory of Russia at the present time’, which the communitarian might claim to be a disguised mass term for some land. It should be noted that Markosian endorses an underlying ontology that includes both individuals and stuff, but does not assert the particular linguistic hypothesis under discussion.

³⁰Inspired by [Sider, 2011], a communitarian might suggest at this point that, though the linguistic semantics of natural language terms for the physical system involves reference to an individual, the deep metaphysics of the situation requires that we characterize the conditions in virtue of which a claim like (5) is true in terms of the features of a quantity of stuff. As Sider might put it, the linguistic semantics for (5) assigns truth conditions that appeal to the features of a certain individual, but the metaphysical semantics for it attributes truth conditions which require reference only to some stuff. On this view, if we were to speak a

A different response would be to agree that the physical system comprising the matter of the dog and the trunk is an existent, highly visible, material individual, but to argue that it is not as disconnected as it might seem. To be sure, it is scattered. But, as Korman notes, there is some reason to think that the microscopic parts of the conservative's paradigm cases of ordinary objects like dogs and tree trunks are also scattered (139). What is important about the (perhaps scattered) parts of the dog is that they are unified in the relevant sense. It is difficult to know how helpfully to explain the kind of unification in question. But one might think that the parts of the dog are unified because they are governed by a certain body of principles that say how the parts of a dog systematically interact to yield the creation, development, and maintenance of dogs. From this point of view, it is not completely implausible to think that something similar can be said about the physical system comprising the matter of the dog and the trunk. Its parts are unified because they are governed by a certain body of principles that say how the parts of the system interact to yield the creation, evolution, and maintenance of the system. The principles describing the relevant interactions of canine parts are biological, and those describing the interactions of the parts of the physical system are physical. But that consideration seems as irrelevant to the question of unification as the fact that the principles describing the interactions of the parts of the dog are zoological and those describing the interactions of the parts of the tree are botanical. The question of whether such systematic principles indicate unity is independent of our distinctions among disciplines.

One might worry that this concession would bring communitarianism uncomfortably close to universalism. It does not take us all the way to universalism. The universalist holds that, whenever there are some individuals, there is an individual composed of them. So, given that there are symphonies and a physical system comprising the matter of the tree and the dog, universalism entails that there is a composite of one of the symphonies and that matter. But there seems to be no physical system comprising all of those parts, and so no reason afforded by the concession that physical systems are unified for the communitarian to affirm universalism.

language whose structure more accurately reflected the underlying nature of the circumstance described by (5), it would contain no reference to any individual comprising the matter of the dog and the trunk. Korman himself notes a number of difficulties with responses of this sort; see Ch.'s 5 and 6.

So, a communitarian who accepts the existence of physical systems made up of scattered matter does not thereby embrace universalism. But this is still not a position that sits easily with the communitarian's conservatism. Conservatives deny the existence of trogs. It might be thought that the kind of communitarianism on offer commits us to the existence of trogs. Technically, this is not correct: a communitarian of this sort is not forced to affirm the existence of a trog. Recall that a trog is an object composed of a dog and a tree trunk. The physical system we have been discussing is composed of the matter of a certain dog and a certain trunk, but nothing we have said required that the dog itself be a part. The question of whether the dog itself is a part of that physical system turns in part on difficult questions concerning the relation between the dog and its matter.³¹ In particular if the dog just is the bit of matter it comprises, then, since that bit of matter is part of the physical system, the dog is, too. Together with some ancillary premises,³² this would entail that the physical system is a trog. Absent some such additional claims, however, the kind of communitarianism at issue may deny the existence of trogs.

The consistency of the kind of communitarianism I have suggested with the nonexistence of trogs does not, however, show that there is no tension between conservatism and my suggestion that the communitarian accept the existence of scattered physical systems. A tension remains, because (i) Korman clearly classifies universalism as an anti-conservative view, and (ii) universalism, like communitarianism, does not entail the existence of trogs. This is because universalism does not say much about what kinds of things there are. It appeals to only one primitive non-logical relation, parthood. It is committed to all of the kinds that can be defined in those terms using logical vocabulary. So, for instance, there are those things that have parts, those things that are parts, for each thing *a* there are the things that have *a* as a part; *etc.* But universalism does not entail that there are dogs, so it does not entail that there are things like trogs, that have dogs as parts. Korman is completely clear on this wrinkle, and adjusts his account of the paradigm cases of non-existence accordingly. Not only, according to the conservative, are there no trogs, there is nothing of any sort at all composed of the material contents of the location where the dog ap-

³¹See Ch. 11 for discussion and references.

³²We need a premise that a similar relationship holds between the trunk and the bit of matter it comprises, and another, very plausible premise to the effect that any part of the physical system has a part in common with either the dog or the trunk.

peared to be and the location where the tree trunk appeared to be (28, cf. 170). This rules out the existence of the physical system. Denying the existence of the physical system, however, is implausible in light of the results of settled science. So, the strategy I have suggested restores plausibility to communitarianism at the apparent cost of its conservatism.

For the same reason, the claim that there are physical systems made up of scattered matter is at odds, not just with a version of communitarianism that holds that such things would be disconnected, but also with a paradigmatic commitment of Korman's conservatism. Korman's conservative is paradigmatically committed against the existence of a physical system comprising the matter of the dog and the trunk. As I have emphasized, Korman has not given us much to go on about what conservatism claims, other than those paradigmatic commitments. So, it is not clear that one can remain conservative while giving up the claim that there is no such physical system.

5 What is conservatism?

We have surveyed some alternative conceptions of conservatism. Each of the conceptions is either implausible or fails to classify Korman's paradigms in a way friendly to his version of conservatism. Perhaps, however, these difficulties stem from attempting to impose some more or less systematic conception of what makes objects "ordinary." Perhaps this push to systematize conservatism, to interpret it so that it is committed to some helpful general characterization of what there is, is a mistake. Perhaps conservatism is essentially unsystematic.

This view is suggested by Korman's reflections on the question of whether the conservative view can plausibly be held to "carve reality at the joints." Universalism, the principle of plenitude, and nihilism, whatever their other faults, offer simple, systematic views of what there is. The arguments from arbitrariness, at bottom, challenge the conservative to state principles that differentiate some of the things that conservatism paradigmatically claims do exist from other things that it paradigmatically claims do not. Korman considers a series of such cases, and, in each one, suggests that the case has been mischaracterized by the objector in important ways. Ultimately, however, he admits that there are hard cases for conservatism: cases in which, for instance, it is hard for the conservative to say what principle might differentiate some scattered objects which the

conservative holds do exist from trogs.³³ Korman does not think that this is a weighty objection to his view. He cites approvingly the technique of Cook Ting, whose methods of butchery are much subtler than simply carving at the joints:

I go along with the natural makeup . . . and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint . . . However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I'm doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety. [Chuang Tzu, 1996, p. 47, as quoted by Korman (158)]

The injunction to carve at the joints, according to Cook Ting, is too crude. One must avoid cutting, not just through bone, but through tendons, ligaments, and any other connective tissue. This will require care and attention in some cases.

Similarly, Korman argues, the conservative should admit that there will be no small set of helpful, simple principles that accurately delimit the kinds of things that exist. This seems right, but it is not a reason to abjure attempting some helpful specification of what conservatism comes to. That will involve saying what, other than endorsement by the *vox populi* or “our” intuitions, qualifies an object as “ordinary.” Cook Ting’s example does not suggest that we should do without principles altogether. Cook Ting himself follows a principle, *viz.*, “do not touch the smallest bone, ligament, or tendon.” Instead, it suggests that we should do without principles that are too simple to be plausible. In particular, even if articulating what conservatism comes to would be more complicated than articulating universalism, the principle of plenitude, or nihilism, we still have good reason to try.

I have argued that we still need an account of what conservatism comes to, apart from our short list of paradigm existence claims endorsed by the conservative. I have further contended that one of the paradigmatic existence claims is itself implausible in light of the results of settled science. None of this should be taken to suggest that we ignore Cook Ting’s exhortation to handle cases carefully and in detail, and to proceed slowly and with the greatest subtlety. Nor should it suggest that there is no role for plausibility to play in assessing

³³The hard cases include disassembled artifacts and physical systems comprising scattered bits of matter (151-2). Obviously, I have argued that the conservative verdict in the latter case is implausible, given the deliverances of settled science.

the principles we consider. Considerations of plausibility appear to play a significant role in ontological theorizing, even of the radical sorts Korman criticizes (33).

It does suggest, however, that conservatism should give way to what we might call *liberalism*.³⁴ Ontological liberals are guided by common sense and initial plausibility, aided and corrected by the sciences. Scientific investigation shows that there is no material object presented by mirage experiences, despite how things initially seem. It shows that there are physical systems comprising scattered bits of matter. It may show that there is such a thing as Pando. It has not shown that there is an object composed of symphonies, fur, and wood. It also has surprising ontological consequences that go beyond the existence of highly visible, material objects. It shows that there is a common ancestor of dogs and trees, but no absolutely simultaneous events and no recursively specifiable procedure for listing all of the arithmetical truths. These existence judgments may not all comport with common sense, our initial intuitions, or conservative doctrine, but they are plausible in light of all of the facts that serious and sustained investigation has turned up. The right course, it seems, is to indulge more in the way of “tolerance, and an experimental spirit” [Quine, 1948, p. 38] than conservatism seems to allow.³⁵

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³⁴Metaphysical, not political.

³⁵Thanks to David Mark Kovacs and Mark Moyer for extensive comments and discussion on an earlier draft.

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