

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Objects: Nothing out of the Ordinary

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Summary

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Imagine mindlessly kneading some clay into some arbitrary shape. A gollyswoggle is an object that has exactly that shape and cannot survive even minimal changes in shape. An incar is an object that, at its full size, looks just like a car in a garage, but that, unlike a car in a garage, will cease to exist if its constitutive matter leaves the garage. A trog is an object composed of a dog and tree trunk.

There are no trogs, incars, gollyswoggles or other such extraordinary objects. But there are dogs, tree trunks, statues and other such ordinary objects. In *Objects*, I defend this conservative view about which objects there are. It's an uphill battle. (More on what exactly conservatism is in my exchange with Louis deRosset.)

In Chapter 2, I present the arguments and puzzles that have driven so many metaphysicians away from conservatism: debunking arguments, arbitrariness arguments, the argument from vagueness, the overdetermination argument, the problem of material constitution and the problem of the many. In Chapter 3, I examine the alternatives to conservatism: permissivist views that affirm the existence of trogs, incars and/or gollyswoggles, and eliminativist views which deny the existence of dogs, trunks and/or statues.

In Chapter 4, I explain why I am a conservative: it's because there seem perceptually to be dogs and other such ordinary objects and because there seem intuitively to be no trogs or other such extraordinary objects. I contend that such perceptual and intuitive seemings underwrite serious arguments from counterexamples against eliminativist and permissivist views. (More on these arguments from counterexamples in my exchange with Meg Wallace.)

Eliminativists and permissivists are well aware that their views seem wildly counterintuitive, and have a variety of strategies for addressing such concerns. The three chapters that follow are devoted to addressing these strategies.

In Chapter 5, I address ‘compatibilist’ strategies, which attempt to diagnose the temptation to assent to ‘there are statues’ or ‘there’s nothing composed of the dog and trunk’ as resulting from a failure to distinguish between loose and strict talk, or restricted and unrestricted uses of quantifiers, or lightweight and heavyweight uses of quantifiers. I argue that these diagnoses rest on linguistic and psychological hypotheses that there is no good reason to accept and good reason not to accept.

In Chapter 6, I address attempts to stipulatively introduce a new language for ontology (‘Ontologese’), as a means of recasting debates about objects. This is meant to enable would-be eliminativists to sidestep the arguments from counterexamples by denying only the *existence*_O of tables, while remaining silent on the existence of tables. I argue that the resulting ‘deep eliminativist’ view is entirely unmotivated: neither the usual puzzles about the existence of ordinary objects, nor existential_O counterparts of those puzzles, nor considerations of parsimony give us any reason to accept it.

In Chapter 7, I address attempts to ‘debunk’ the experiences and intuitions that are supposed to provide the principal support for conservatism, by exposing them to be unduly influenced by arbitrary biological or cultural factors. Much of the chapter is devoted to developing the arguments, on my opponent’s behalf, and showing that they are a double-edged sword, which also threatens to impale permissivists who wield them against the conservative. I contend that the debunking arguments can be blocked by (and only by) taking facts about how the world divides up into objects to have substantial influence on how we perceptually and conceptually divide up the world into objects. I call this influence on perception and cognition ‘apprehension’. (More on how these debunking arguments are supposed to work, and the role of apprehension, in my exchange with Chris Tillman and Joshua Spencer.)

In Chapter 8, I address attempts to show that the conservative’s ontology is intolerably arbitrary, on account of including objects that seem no less extraordinary than those they reject. Scattered objects like the Supreme Court, for instance, seem no less extraordinary than trops, and modally fragile objects like islands (which allegedly cease to exist when submerged at high tide) seem no less extraordinary than incars. I examine a number of such comparisons and attempt, in each case, to identify an ontologically significant difference that vindicates the differential treatment. (And I examine some additional examples in my exchange with deRosset.)

In Chapter 9, I address the argument from vagueness, which purports to show that conservative views are committed to borderline cases of composition, which is supposed to commit one to existential indeterminacy, which in turn is supposed to force one to reject linguistic theories of vagueness, which used to be very much in vogue. I embrace existential indeterminacy, reject the linguistic theory and explain what proponents of an ontic theory of vagueness should say about Ted Sider’s ‘numerical sentences’. Along the way, I

attempt to solve a puzzle due to Katherine Hawley concerning what it is for a term to be vague on an ontic theory. I also show that embracing the argument from vagueness has unwanted (or at least surprising) ramifications for the metaphysics of things like fictional works, musical works and words.

In Chapter 10, I address the overdetermination argument, according to which one should stop believing in ordinary objects once one recognizes that there is no causal work for them to do that isn't already being done by the atoms that putatively compose them. Like most critics of the argument, I embrace the view that ordinary objects overdetermine the effects of their atoms, and I respond to an epistemic objection to overdeterminationism, drawn from Trenton Merricks's initial presentation of the arguments, that I think has been underappreciated in the literature.

In Chapter 11, I address the problem of material constitution. I affirm the non-identity of the statue and the lump of clay that constitutes it, and I address the 'grounding problem' of accounting for their modal differences. Following Noël Saenz, I advance a 'grounding solution' to the grounding problem, according to which the modal differences are grounded in a difference in what grounds the different objects, and contending that the grounds grounding the grounded ground the grounds' grounding the grounded.

In Chapter 12, I address the problem of the many, and I advance a solution according to which, where there appears to be a single desk, there is indeed a single desk, albeit with indeterminate boundaries and constituted by a single hunk of wood that likewise has indeterminate boundaries.

If I could do it all again? I would have taken a pretty different approach to Chapter 7. If I knew then what I know now, after a deep dive into the moral debunking literature, I would have done more to emphasize the deficiencies of debunking arguments, and how trivially easy it is to resist every existing, clearly articulated formulation of them (leaning heavily on the work of David Enoch and Justin Clarke-Doane, among others). Perhaps there is a better formulation out there to be found, and I suspect there might be, but given the aim of the book I should have put the burden on my *opponents* to find it. (And yet, I continue to do their work for them, in my response to Tillman and Spencer.)

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