

Unrestricted composition and restricted quantification

Daniel Z. Korman

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Abstract Many of those who accept the universalist thesis that mereological composition is unrestricted also maintain that the folk typically restrict their quantifiers in such a way as to exclude strange fusions when they say things that appear to conflict with universalism. Despite its *prima facie* implausibility, there are powerful arguments for universalism. By contrast, there is remarkably little evidence for the thesis that strange fusions are excluded from the ordinary domain of quantification. Furthermore, this reconciliatory strategy seems hopeless when applied to the more fundamental conflict between universalism and the intuitions that tell against it.

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The philosopher advocates a view apparently in patent contradiction to common sense. Rather than repudiating common sense, he asserts that the conflict comes from a philosophical misinterpretation of common language.... I think such philosophical claims are almost invariably suspect. What the claimant calls a ‘misleading philosophical misconstrual’ of the ordinary statement is probably the natural and correct understanding. The real misconstrual comes when the claimant continues, “All the ordinary man really means is...”.

Saul Kripke 1982, p. 65

Under what conditions do some things compose something? The predominant answer in the literature on composition is the universalist answer: always.¹ The

¹ See, e.g., Quine (1960, 171; 1981, 10), Cartwright (1975), Lewis (1986, 212–3), Heller (1990, 49f), van Cleve (1986), Rea (1998), Sider (2001, 121–32), Hudson (2001, 105–12), and Varzi (2005).

D. Z. Korman (✉)
Department of Philosophy, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 105 Gregory Hall, MC-468,
Urbana, IL 61801, USA
e-mail: dzkorman@gmail.com

popularity of this answer is somewhat surprising, since it entails that there are such strange fusions as the object composed of my nose and the Eiffel Tower.² What is even more surprising is that universalists typically take the view to be entirely compatible with what the folk say in ordinary discourse about material objects. When presented with a bowling ball and a feather, the folk might describe the situation in ways that appear to conflict with universalism, for instance, ‘there are only two things on the table’ or (if prompted) ‘there is nothing partly white and partly black on the table.’ Universalists typically insist that, in such cases, the folk are restricting their quantifiers in such a way as to exclude strange fusions, much as one restricts one’s quantifier so as to exclude the beer in the pub downtown when one looks in the fridge and says, ‘there is no beer’.³ If indeed the folk are saying (e.g.) that there are only two *ordinary* things on the table, what they say is compatible with universalism. Let us call the thesis that, in such cases, the folk restrict their quantifiers in such a way as to exclude strange fusions “restrictivism.”

Despite its *prima facie* implausibility, there are powerful arguments for universalism. By contrast, there is remarkably little evidence for restrictivism, and I will argue that there is no good reason to accept it. The universalist is better advised to accept that the apparent conflict with ordinary discourse is genuine and to try to explain the conflict rather than explain it away.⁴

For ease of exposition, I simply assume in what follows that universalism is correct. On the face of it, the metaphysical view that composition is unrestricted is entirely independent of the linguistic hypothesis that quantifiers are typically restricted in such a way as to exclude strange fusions. Universalism can consistently be combined with any view of what the folk are saying in discourse about material objects—including the natural view that they are saying exactly what they seem to be saying—and restrictivism can consistently be combined with any theory of composition.⁵ Some, however, might hold that the existence of the strange fusions can itself somehow serve as a reason for believing that the folk are restricting their quantifiers to exclude them, even though these fusions have been altogether overlooked by the folk. I consider responses to this effect in §2.

There are various ways of understanding the phenomenon of tacit quantifier domain restriction and, in particular, whether it is a semantic or a pragmatic phenomenon.⁶ For ease of exposition, I will assume (and already have been

² More cautiously, universalists are committed either to the existence of this fusion or to the nonexistence of one or the other of my nose and the Eiffel Tower (which would be no less surprising).

³ Although explicit endorsements of this view in the literature are rare—and defenses of it rarer still—the view is widespread and is commonly cited as the standard universalist account of the apparent conflict with folk belief: see Lewis (1986, 213), Sosa (1999, 142), Sider (2001, 137 and 218; 2004, 680), Hirsch (2002, 111–2), Rosen and Dorr (2002, 155–7), Varzi (2003, 213–4), López de Sa (2006, 399), and Markosian (forthcoming, §3).

⁴ Cf. Merricks (2001, 162–85), who attempts to account for the apparent conflict between eliminativism and folk belief without denying that the conflict is genuine.

⁵ One might wonder what reason there would be for someone who does not accept universalism to embrace restrictivism, but this only speaks to the main point of the paper, namely, that restrictivism lacks independent motivation.

⁶ See Stanley and Szabó (2000) for discussion of the various approaches to quantifier domain restriction.

assuming) that quantifier domain restriction is a semantic phenomenon: the restriction enters into the content of the sentence uttered. On the pragmatic approach, the tacit restriction is manifested not in what is said but, rather, in what is conveyed. Restrictivists who accept the pragmatic approach will admit that universalism is incompatible with the literal meaning of folk utterances, but will hold that it can nevertheless be reconciled with all that the folk intend to convey. The objections that I raise against restrictivism apply equally in a setting in which quantifier domain restriction is understood to be a pragmatic phenomenon.

Some might wonder why we should care at all about whether metaphysical theories can be reconciled with what the folk say. A natural proposal is that what the folk say matters because what they say reflects their unadulterated pretheoretical beliefs and intuitions. These beliefs and intuitions matter because they are the stuff that counterexamples are made of. In §3, I consider whether restrictivism can be adapted to resolve the more fundamental conflict between universalism and the intuitions that seem to tell against it. Until that point, I will assume (in the restrictivist's favor) that the folk have no beliefs or intuitions one way or the other with respect to whether these strange fusions exist.⁷ Accordingly, when I speak of the folk as excluding strange fusions from their domain of quantification, this need not be understood as requiring that they have beliefs about, or have at any point consciously entertained, strange fusions.

1 Assessing restrictivism

The folk say things which seem to suggest that they do not take there to be strange fusions. What explains their behavior? The obvious answer is that the reasons for believing in these strange things are available only to those who engage in serious philosophical reflection. The folk mistakenly insist that there are only two things on the table and would deny that there is anything partly black and partly white on the table, but this is neither surprising nor foolish, for they have no reason to believe in strange fusions. There seems to be no more reason to reinterpret folk discourse in light of the discovery that there are strange fusions than there is to reinterpret pre-Copernican discourse in light of the discovery that the earth goes around the sun (more on this in §2).

Restrictivists supply a more complicated explanation, for they agree that the folk do not possess any reasons for believing in strange fusions—which evidently already suffices to explain their behavior—but then go on to propose that the folk tacitly restrict their quantifiers in such a way as to exclude them. This explanation is not only more complicated; it lacks *prima facie* plausibility. Of course, it is beyond doubt that we do restrict our quantifiers in discourse about material objects. For instance, we typically restrict our quantifiers to exclude the parts of highly visible

⁷ Restrictivists presumably will not say that the folk believe that there are no strange fusions, for this is to admit that there is a genuine conflict between universalism and folk belief, which is at least as bad as (and presumably worse than) a conflict with what the folk say. And the view that the folk positively do (already) believe in such strange fusions as the thing composed of my nose and the Eiffel Tower is wholly implausible.

objects (e.g., we count the table but not its legs when we count up the wooden things in the room). This is something that we do automatically and without conscious effort, but all it takes is a moment's reflection to see that this is something that we do. By contrast, it not clear on reflection that we have also been restricting our quantifiers so as to exclude strange fusions—even once the existence of those strange fusions is brought to our attention—any more than it seems to us that we had been restricting our quantifiers so as to exclude extraterrestrial trees in saying 'there are no talking trees' when we find out that there are talking trees on some distant planet.

Furthermore, the postulation of the indicated restriction seems to be an explanatory dangler. In familiar cases of quantifier domain restriction, the postulation of the relevant restriction does genuine explanatory work. Consider the hypothesis that Joe is restricting his quantifier so as to exclude beer that is not ready at hand when he looks in the fridge and says 'there is no beer.' First, it does not seem to follow from what Joe said that there is no beer at the pub. The indicated restriction to items that are ready at hand would explain the absence of the entailment. Second, Joe knows full well that there is beer at the pub downtown, so postulating a restriction to beers that are ready at hand allows one to explain his linguistic behavior without taking him to be asserting something that he knows (and that he knows that we know that he knows) to be false. Relatedly, when he finds that his remarks have been taken at face value ("There's no beer *anywhere*, Joe?"), he responds not as one who takes himself to have been mistaken but as one who takes himself to have been misunderstood.⁸ The hypothesis that what he said was that there is no beer ready at hand would explain this reaction.

All of these marks of a quantifier's being restricted so as to exclude a certain range of items are missing in case of strange fusions. It does seem to follow from an assertive utterance of 'the feather is not part of anything on the table' that the feather is not part of any unfamiliar or unnoticed thing on the table. Since (as we are supposing) the folk have no beliefs one way or the other about whether there are strange fusions, one can take their remarks at face value without taking them to be saying anything that they know to be false. And there is no indication that the folk take themselves to have been misinterpreted or misunderstood when they find that their utterances have been taken at face value (e.g., "The feather isn't part of *anything* on the table?").⁹ Positing a tacit restriction that excludes strange fusions seems to do no explanatory work. There are often clear reasons for complicating the semantics of folk discourse by supposing that quantifier domains are tacitly

⁸ Likewise, one who says 'there is only one white thing on the table' knows full well that the feather has parts that are white, and will take himself to be the victim of a deliberate misunderstanding if one reminds him that he neglected to count those parts.

⁹ See Hirsch (2002, 111–12) for further discussion of this "retraction test" for quantifier domain restriction. Merricks (2001, 166) makes a similar point against the eliminativist who holds that we speak loosely when we say such things as 'there are tables nearby'.

restricted in certain ways; we should not further complicate the semantics with additional restrictions unless there are comparable reasons for doing so.¹⁰

So is there any linguistic or behavioral evidence for restrictivism? One might suggest that restrictivism is needed to explain our linguistic intuitions that such sentences of folk discourse as ‘there are only two things on the table’ are true. But there is a far more straightforward explanation of these linguistic intuitions, namely, that these linguistic intuitions are a direct product of our false object-level intuitions. The indicated sentence seems true to us because it seems to us that there are only two things on the table, even on the understanding that we are not to exclude things that have the ball and feather as parts. Universalism may be true, but we still find its implications counterintuitive.

The restrictivist might point to the fact that the folk often employ a narrow use of ‘thing,’ on which holes, events, numbers, and other oddities in the folk ontology are not counted as things. But, ordinarily, the entities that are excluded from the domain of quantification when the folk employ the narrow use of ‘thing’ are included when the folk employ the more liberal use of ‘thing’. While the folk deny that birthday parties are things, they readily admit that there of course is *such a thing as* a birthday party. By contrast, upon telling the folk what a ballfeather is, namely, that (if anything) which has a bowling ball and a feather as parts, one would not expect them to readily admit that of course there are such things as ballfeathers. So the usual marks of being excluded as a result of failing to fall under the narrow use of ‘thing’ are missing in the case of strange fusions.

The restrictivist might try to appeal to the fact that the folk have no beliefs one way or the other about whether strange fusions exist as positive evidence that strange fusions are typically excluded from our domain of quantification. But it is hard to see why, for we do not in general take our quantifiers to range only over those things that we believe to exist. When Joe says ‘there is no beer’, not realizing that there are some Coronas in the vegetable drawer, we take him (and he subsequently takes himself) to have said something false—not to have said something true and restricted so as to exclude the contents of the vegetable drawer. Nor is the domain of quantification ordinarily restricted to *kinds* of things that the speaker takes to exist. When Joe says ‘nothing can travel faster than ten thousand miles per hour’, we again ordinarily take him (and he subsequently takes himself) to have said something false, even though we know that he has never heard of the sorts of (microscopic) things that do exceed these speeds. So the fact that the folk have no beliefs one way or the other about whether strange fusions exist by itself is no evidence that they are not included in the ordinary domain of quantification.

The restrictivist might point to anecdotal evidence about how the folk (or his students) react to philosophical interrogation, for instance, upon realizing that they

¹⁰ There is even some amount of linguistic evidence supporting the Lewisian hypothesis that we typically restrict our quantifiers to exclude nonpresent and nonactual entities. For at times we seem willing to quantify over such entities, as in ‘There are many people who have died for their cause’ and ‘There are many things that we feared as children that we no longer believe in’. Of course, there is more than one way of understanding such utterances. But the point is just that not there is not even this minimal evidence for restrictivism and that not all seemingly revisionary postulations of tacit domain restrictions are as unmotivated as restrictivism.

cannot identify a principled reason for countenancing ordinary objects but not strange fusions.¹¹ But this sort of reaction cannot serve as the kind of evidence we are looking for: what the folk are willing to say after becoming convinced that there can be no reason to exclude strange fusions is no indication of what they were saying before becoming convinced. Nor is the fact that they can be convinced that there are fusions any indication that they were restricting their quantifiers, any more than the fact that they can be convinced of mereological essentialism (and just as easily) is any indication that they are speaking loosely in saying ‘this tree used to have fewer branches’.¹² So we still have yet to find any evidence for restrictivism.

In the absence of linguistic, psychological, or behavioral data, the postulation of the indicated restriction looks to be entirely unmotivated. More importantly, if there is no special reason to think that our quantifiers are restricted in such a way as to exclude strange fusions, there will be no good reason to favor restrictivism over competing semantic hypotheses. For instance, one might instead hold that, while the folk are not excluding strange fusions when they say ‘there are only two things’, they are (as van Inwagen suggests) speaking loosely when they say ‘there are chairs nearby’.¹³ Or that what they say is that according to the folk-ontological pretense there are chairs nearby.¹⁴ Or that, without realizing it, they systematically insert and omit negations by a slip of the tongue, and what they mean to say is that there are *not* only two things on the table. Or that they are saying exactly what they seem to be saying: that there (really!) are chairs nearby and that there is nothing (at all!) partly black and partly white on the table. It is unreasonable to prefer the restrictivist interpretation over these competing interpretations solely on the grounds that *if* it is correct then there is no conflict between universalism and folk discourse, for this is nothing more than wishful thinking.

2 Arguing from universalism to restrictivism

I have argued that there is no linguistic, psychological, or behavioral evidence that we typically restrict our quantifiers so as to exclude strange fusions. Perhaps the existence of strange fusions can itself be cited as evidence for restrictivism. But how can their mere existence serve as a reason for thinking that they are typically excluded from our domain of quantification?

Charitable Interpretation. One possible explanation is that, in light of the truth of universalism, the principle of charity in interpretation compels us to accept restrictivism. For if we interpret the folk in such a way that they do not employ the indicated restriction, then we must understand them as saying (or at least as being

¹¹ See, e.g., Rosen and Dorr (2002, 156–7) and Sider (2004, 680).

¹² Nor, I should add, is their willingness to agree that there are strange fusions always an indication that they have been convinced of anything; it is often far more plausible that they are simply playing along in the spirit of cooperation (and because they do not know how else to respond to such an outlandish suggestion). Cf. Bonomi (2006) on “discommodation.”

¹³ See van Inwagen (1990, 98–114).

¹⁴ See Rosen and Dorr (2002, 168–71).

disposed to say) a great many false things. The idea would then be that restrictivism supplies a far more charitable interpretation, for it takes the folk to be speaking truly. So, *ceteris paribus*, the restrictivist interpretation is to be preferred.

But, as a number of authors have observed, charity requires only that an interpretation rationalize utterances, not that it verify them.¹⁵ An interpretation on which speakers say and believe a great many false things is not in the least uncharitable if their mistakes are perfectly intelligible, given their evidence. Is it irrational for the folk to say that there are only two things on the table, despite the fact that there is a third thing on the table, namely, the fusion of the ball and the feather? Not at all. The only known reasons for thinking that this third thing exists are highly theoretical, so the philosophically unformed folk can hardly be charged with irrationality for not having realized that it exists. The principle of charity, properly understood, supplies no reason for accepting restrictivism.

Achille Varzi raises a similar point in his critique of van Inwagen's attempt to reconcile folk discourse and the elimination of nonliving composites.¹⁶ Varzi observes that charity demands nonliteral interpretation in such cases only if there is reason to think that the speaker is "part of the gang." For instance, whether charity requires that we take someone to be speaking loosely in saying 'the sun moved behind the elms' depends in part on whether the speaker has informed views about astronomy. Charity does not automatically require that we find a way to understand him as saying or conveying something true, especially if he is uninformed or misinformed. After all, he might really believe that the earth is stationary. Charity does require that we take van Inwagen and other avowed eliminativists to be speaking loosely when they say such things as 'there is a table nearby'. By contrast, to take the folk to be speaking loosely when they utter these words is not a charitable interpretation; it is plain misconstrual. There is no reason to take the folk to be part of the eliminativist gang, and there similarly appears to be no reason to take the folk to be part of the universalist gang.

The Magnetic Theory of Content. Alternatively, one might try to invoke Lewis's magnetic theory of content in defense of restrictivism.¹⁷ According to the magnetic theory, the semantic content of our utterances is determined in part by our linguistic behavior and dispositions and in part by the intrinsic eligibility of candidate contents. The correct semantic theory is the one that finds the best balance between assigning maximally eligible contents and respecting our use of the relevant utterances. The suggestion would then be that restrictivism provides a better balance of use and eligibility than do interpretations on which strange fusions are not excluded from the domain of quantification by some tacit restriction.

The appeal to the magnetic theory is simply a nonstarter if "respecting our use" is understood in terms of charitably interpreting the relevant utterances. For, as we have just seen, restrictivism is no more charitable than interpretations that do not

¹⁵ See Grandy (1973, 440f), Lewis (1974, 336–7), Wiggins (1980, 198–200), Hirsch (2002, 105), and Varzi (2002, 61–5). As Wiggins puts the point, the appropriate notion of charity "founds interpretation not in maximization but in *explanation*" (1980, 199).

¹⁶ Varzi (2002, 65).

¹⁷ See Lewis (1983) and (1984).

postulate the relevant restriction. Consequently, restrictivist and nonrestrictivist interpretations are on a par with respect to use, so understood. But the candidate contents that incorporate this restriction will be more complex, and therefore less natural and eligible, than those that do not. So, if the magnetic theory is to be of any help to the restrictivist, “respecting use” must be understood in terms of verifying a certain range of utterances—for instance, the “platitudes” of folk theory.¹⁸

But even so understood, there is no clear indication that the magnetic theory favors restrictivism. Whether it does depends in large part upon the intrinsic eligibility of the restriction that is needed to secure the truth of the relevant sentences of folk discourse. Its eligibility (as Lewis understands it, at any rate) will, in turn, be a function of its complexity and naturalness. The problem is that the obvious candidates for a natural restriction all fail to respect certain aspects of use. For instance, one might suggest that the quantifiers are restricted to ordinary things. But we plainly do quantify over highly nonordinary things (bizarre works of art, strange organisms, etc.) so long as they exhibit the right degree of unity; so, supposing that this restriction is in effect, we miscount when we count such things. Similarly, a restriction to things whose parts exhibit a high degree of unity would fail to verify what we say when we count such scattered entities as baseball card collections, Michigan, and tokens of the letter ‘i’. Likewise for a restriction to things for which we have sortal expressions, for even the restrictivist will agree that one would be speaking falsely in saying ‘There is nothing on the table’ when presented with an assortment of strange Martian items that resist classification. And we have already seen (in §1) that taking quantifiers to be restricted to things that the speaker believes in also leads to misconstruals of folk discourse.

It would seem, then, that the only way to specify a restriction that respects all of these aspects of use is by brute force—that is, by building into the semantics of the sentence the highly complex, unwieldy relation that underwrites our ordinary judgments about whether some things compose something.¹⁹ In that case, it would be far from clear that the use/eligibility calculation would favor the use-respecting restrictivist interpretation and its monstrous restricted quantifier over the more straightforward and eligible interpretation on which quantifiers are not restricted in such a way as to exclude strange fusions.

Of course, from the perspective of the magnetic theory, the fact that the more natural restrictions fail to verify some of the platitudes of folk discourse does not by

¹⁸ If the magnetic theory is to be at all plausible, there must be some restriction on the range of utterances whose verification counts in favor of an interpretation; that an interpretation verifies the pre-Copernican utterances of ‘the sun goes around the earth’ should not even be a pro tanto reason for favoring that interpretation. So the envisaged restrictivist would have to assume, further, that the utterances that he wishes to reconstrue (e.g., ‘nothing on the table is partly white and partly black’, ‘the feather is not part of anything on the table’) are in this privileged class of utterances that need to be verified by a use-respecting interpretation. I will simply grant that they are; to evaluate whether they indeed belong to this privileged class would require an investigation into the foundations of this kind of magnetic theory that would take us far beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁹ Both commonsense ontologists and their critics will agree that there is almost certainly no uniform or elegant way to capture the conditions under which the folk (ostensibly) take some things to compose something. See, e.g., van Inwagen (1990), Hirsch (1993), Horgan (1993), Markosian (1998), and Johnston (2002, 147).

itself reveal those proposals to be incorrect. For the superior eligibility of a given restriction might counterbalance these shortcomings. Or it might not. I am aware of no way of calculating whether, among all of the various ways in which our quantifiers might be restricted, the restriction that best balances use and eligibility is one that excludes strange fusions from the domain of quantification. Without special reason for thinking that the use/eligibility calculations favor a restrictivist interpretation, to suppose that they do is simply wishful thinking.

There are further problems with holding the nature of the restriction hostage to the use/eligibility calculations in this way. To illustrate, suppose that the calculations favor a restriction to things believed to exist by the speaker. In that case, the proponent of the magnetic theory is committed to serious violations of privileged access.²⁰ Consider the case described in §1, in which Joe says ‘nothing travels faster than ten thousand miles per hour’ (perhaps because he mistakenly thinks that this is the speed of light). He will deny that what he says is only that nothing that he believes in travels faster than ten thousand miles per hour. He recognizes that there probably are all sorts of things that exist without his knowing it, and he believes that what he is saying and thinking would turn out to be false if any of them turn out to travel faster than ten thousand miles per hour. On the present proposal, he would then be mistaken about what he is saying, and cannot manage to say what he is thinking. (Or, even worse, he does say what he is thinking, but is mistaken about what he is thinking and what he believes.) Relatedly, the present strategy undercuts one central motivation behind restrictivism, namely, to dissolve the apparent conflict between universalism and folk belief. The restrictivist who opts for the present strategy does not dissolve the conflict; he merely relocates it as a conflict between restrictivism and folk belief.

3 Rephrasing intuitions

The trouble with the restrictivist strategy for conflict resolution becomes even more apparent when we turn our attention from the conflict between universalism and ordinary discourse to the conflict between universalism and our intuitions. Here I have in mind not only the intuitions that the folk report having, but also the intuitions reported by philosophers, who understand the questions being put to them, are alert to relevant distinctions, and know the difference between consulting their intuitions and theorizing. Many philosophers report having the intuition that a bowling ball and a feather placed next to each other on a table do not compose anything.²¹ Since universalism entails that they do compose something, universalism has counterintuitive implications. When a theory has counterintuitive implications at the level of concrete cases (vs. general principles), it is common

²⁰ See Stanley (2001, 47) for a related point concerning fictionalist strategies for reconciling ordinary discourse with revisionary metaphysical theses.

²¹ Contra Sider (2007, 62), it is on the basis of such intuitions—and not the fact that such objects are “undreamt of by most”—that many philosophers resist universalism. Nor can their being undreamt of plausibly explain our intuitions, for we are ordinarily willing to countenance the possibility of all manner of undreamt of things (evil demons, inverts, twin earths, etc.)

practice to treat those implications as counterexamples to the theory. Virtually everyone agrees that potential counterexamples are a serious problem for any theory.²² There is a long list of theories that are widely held to have been refuted by intuitions of just this kind: logical behaviorism, the justified-true-belief analysis of knowledge, Fregean descriptivism, and content internalism, to name only a few of the most famous cases.

Can the restrictivist strategy be adapted to handle the objection that universalism is open to counterexamples? That is, can the restrictivist strategy be adapted so as to reconcile universalism with the intuitions that seem to tell against it? Universalists might suggest that philosophers themselves restrict their quantifiers when they report the alleged counterexamples, for instance, that they are in fact saying that there is no *ordinary* thing composed of the ball and the feather. But this is wholly implausible: since the restricted claim so obviously is not a counterexample to universalism, it is uncharitable in the extreme to suppose that this is what fellow philosophers claim and believe to be a counterexample.

Alternatively, the universalist might concede that philosophers are making the unrestricted claim that the ball and feather do not compose anything, but hold that they are incorrectly reporting the intuition. For instance, one might hold that no one actually has the intuition that there is nothing composed of the ball and feather: we have only the restricted intuition that there is no *ordinary* thing composed of the ball and the feather, and philosophers have been mistaking the latter for the former. In that case, although there may be a conflict between universalism and what philosophers come to believe on the basis of their intuitions, there would be no genuine conflict between universalism and those intuitions (vs. the intuition reports), and hence no counterexamples to universalism.

Is this psychological hypothesis at all plausible? Occasionally, there is a strong case to be made that philosophers are misreporting their intuitions. Kripke argued persuasively that we sometimes mistake intuitions of epistemic possibility for intuitions of metaphysical possibility.²³ Many who initially reported having the intuition that water could have turned out to lack hydrogen found it plausible that they had been misreporting a (veridical) intuition to the effect that one could have been in a phenomenologically indistinguishable situation in which some water-like substance lacked hydrogen. Had Kripke's suggestion not seemed plausible on reflection, there would have been no more reason to think that we were misreporting the anti-Kripkean intuitions than that we were correctly reporting the anti-Kripkean intuitions and misreporting the pro-Kripkean intuitions.

In the present case, by contrast, the intuition is robust; it persists after distinctions about restricted and unrestricted quantification have been made. In this way, the case of the ball and the feather is unlike Kripke's cases.²⁴ We do not find it plausible on reflection that we have been confusing restricted and unrestricted claims, and so

²² Weatherson is an exception (see his 2003). But his argument presupposes a magnetic theory of content which, as we have seen, fails to render any clear verdict regarding restrictivist interpretations of discourse about material objects.

²³ Kripke (1980, 103–5).

²⁴ Cf. Sider (2001, 183) on anti-eliminativist intuitions.

there are no serious grounds for holding that we are. Moreover, in Kripke's case, we had intuitions pointing in opposite directions, which was why we suspected in the first place that some intuition was being misreported. In the present case, however, we do not have a pro-universalist intuition that the ball and the feather do compose something; we have only the apparently anti-universalist intuitions. So we also lack any *prima facie* reason for thinking that the anti-universalist intuitions are being misreported.

Universalists might try to allay the invidiousness of the suggestion that their colleagues are unable to distinguish between restricted and unrestricted propositions by insisting that the contents of these intuitions are inscrutable. One cannot tell, by introspection alone, whether one is having the restricted or unrestricted intuition. But if these intuitions truly are inscrutable, even to the trained eye, there is no better reason to think that our anti-universalist intuitions are misreported than there is to think that our anti-universalist intuitions are correctly reported while our pro-table intuitions are misreported or, indeed, that both our anti-universalist intuitions and our anti-eliminativist intuitions are correctly reported. Worse still, the present proposal calls into question virtually all arguments by counterexample. Perhaps the intuition was only that Gettier-man does not know *with certainty* that the man who gets the job has ten coins in his pocket. Or perhaps the apparently pro-Kripkean intuition was only that there is no *earthly* water on twin earth. The restrictivist may take some comfort in the claim that, for all we know, we are misreporting our intuitions; but to then conclude that we are in fact misreporting these intuitions is again just wishful thinking.

Universalists might concede that the philosopher does have the suitably unrestricted intuition that there is (absolutely) nothing composed of the ball and the feather, but contend that philosophers have this intuition only because their intuitions have been corrupted by too much theory. But there seems to be no more reason to think that these intuitions are adulterated than there is to think that any other intuitions are adulterated. There is no indication whatsoever that these intuitions diverge from the unadulterated intuitions of the folk. (And is this not the pot calling the kettle black? After all, the only people who seem not to find the universalist thesis counterintuitive are those who have been exposed to the arguments against restricted composition.)

Finally, the universalist might concede that even the folk have the suitably unrestricted intuitions, but hold that even the folk's intuitions are theoretically adulterated by their "folk ontology." But this puts the restrictivist in a deeply unstable dialectical position. First, all intuitions are thereby called into question. For if folk ontology is a source of corruption, then presumably so must be the folk epistemology that guides our intuitions about Gettier cases, and so on for twin earth, multiple realizability, and the like. Second, if the restrictivist concedes that the folk have intuitions that contradict universalism, it is more difficult than ever to see what is to be gained by postulating the relevant restriction: for if there is a conflict even with folk belief and intuition, it would seem that there is nothing to be gained in claiming that what the folk say, at any rate, is compatible with the existence of strange fusions.

4 The retreat to the ontology room

There is another option open to the restrictivist. He can concede that the relevant sentences of folk discourse are literally true even when taken at face value and agree that there is no true reading of the English sentences ‘There is something composed of the ball and the feather’ or even ‘composition is unrestricted’. He must then concede that our anti-universalist intuitions are correct and correctly reported. That is, he must concede that universalism—the thesis that composition is unrestricted—is open to counterexamples and is false.²⁵ But he could then insist that these are not counterexamples to the proposition that he expresses with the words ‘composition is unrestricted’ in “the language of the ontology room” or “Ontologese.”²⁶

The envisaged restrictivist denies that the quantifiers of English are restricted in a way that is contextually determined by usage; instead the view is, roughly, that it is part of the semantics of the quantifiers of English that they do not utilize the largest possible domain. I say ‘roughly’ because the suggestion is incoherent as it stands, for it entails that there are things that are not among the things that there are; and it is unclear whether there is any way of describing, in English, the nature of the alleged restriction. (As with Vegas, what happens in the ontology room stays in the ontology room.) But one can attain some understanding of what is being suggested by way of analogy. Imagine a language, “Nihilise,” in which the expression behaving syntactically like an existential quantifier is semantically associated with a domain that includes only simples. Using the most unrestricted quantifier available to them, speakers of Nihilise can say of our world ‘there are no composite objects’ and be speaking truly. The envisaged restrictivist is claiming that, in just the way that the quantifiers of Nihilise are expressively impoverished from the perspective of English, the quantifiers of English are expressively impoverished from the perspective of Ontologese.

The speakers of Ontologese are, of course, free to mean whatever they want by their words, but only if it is there to be meant. Granting that the quantifiers of English do not range over strange fusions, what reason is there to think that there is a possible quantifier that (in some hard-to-specify sense) is more comprehensive than ours? One may try to enlist one of the standard arguments for universalism, and argue, in English, as follows: if composition is not unrestricted then there are borderline cases of composition, and if there is borderline composition then it is indeterminate how many things there are, but it cannot be indeterminate how many things there are, so composition is unrestricted.²⁷ But the envisaged restrictivist *denies* that composition is unrestricted, so he must hold that this and other standard arguments for universalism are unsound. Indeed, he owes us an explanation of

²⁵ Accordingly, let us suspend our assumption that universalism is correct.

²⁶ See, e.g., Dorr (2005), Chalmers (forthcoming), and Sider (forthcoming) for discussion of the language of the ontology room. N.B. Some who invoke the language of the ontology room take themselves to be speaking strict and literal English. But it is only by invoking the ontology room in the more radical way just described that one is in a position to make the indicated concessions and thereby bypass the threat of counterexamples.

²⁷ Cf. Sider (2001, 121–132).

where these arguments go wrong. Let us suppose that he concedes that it is possible for it to be indeterminate how many things there are.

He might instead provide a sound-alike argument in Ontologese. But we have no way of assessing its premises until we know what they mean. Remember: we are in the middle of trying to decide whether there is anything more comprehensive than the meaning of ‘there are’ in English to serve as the meaning of ‘there are’ in Ontologese. Now we reach the Ontologese premise ‘it cannot be indeterminate how many things there are’. Is this true? That depends upon what ‘there are’ means. If there is nothing more comprehensive for it to mean, then presumably it means the same as the English quantifier.²⁸ In that case, the indicated Ontologese premise expresses the proposition that it cannot be indeterminate how many things there are, which the envisaged restrictivist agrees is false. For this reason, the envisaged restrictivist must first establish that there are more comprehensive quantifiers before he can determine whether the Ontologese argument from vagueness is sound. But then the argument from vagueness cannot itself be used to establish the possibility of more comprehensive quantifiers. This result generalizes. Since one must first understand the quantifiers of Ontologese before one is in a position to assess the truth of Ontologese premises involving those quantifiers, it is difficult to see how any argument for the greater comprehensiveness of the Ontologese quantifier can even get off the ground.²⁹

What this shows is that, although for all we know the Ontologese sentence ‘composition is unrestricted’ might be true, the envisaged restrictivist lacks the resources to argue for its truth and perhaps lacks the resources even to assure himself of its truth. I leave open the possibility that the envisaged restrictivist has cognitively encountered a new range of propositions, has directly intuited their truth, and (like the mystic) tragically lacks the means to convey his discovery. What seems more likely, however, is that those who have retreated to the ontology room are intuiting the truth of familiar propositions, but think otherwise because they have become convinced for one reason or another that metaphysical claims made in English, but not those under discussion in the ontology room, are held to the standards of folk discourse and intuitions about cases.

²⁸ Or perhaps it would then mean the same as the Nihilese quantifier, in which case the Ontologese premise ‘If composition is not unrestricted, then there are borderline cases of composition’ would be false.

²⁹ Similar remarks apply to the suggestion that the truth of ‘composition is unrestricted’ in Ontologese can be established by appeal to its featuring in the best comprehensive theory. The idea would be that the best systematization of our judgments about which Ontologese sentences are true and which are false includes or entails the Ontologese sentence ‘composition is unrestricted’. But we are in no position to judge which Ontologese sentences are true until we know what they mean. And we cannot know what they mean until we know whether there can be quantifiers that are more comprehensive than the English quantifier which, in turn, is what we are in the middle of trying to establish. So we are in no position to assess this argument. In fact, our only clue as to the form of the best comprehensive theory in Ontologese is that the best systematization of the sound-alike English sentences does *not* include or entail the English sentence ‘composition is unrestricted’ (since, as we are presently supposing, universalism is false).

5 Conclusion

One often hears it said in conversation about universalism that the apparent conflict with folk discourse poses no serious problem, for the universalist can just say that the folk are restricting their quantifiers. What I have tried to show is that this is not something that the universalist can “just say.” Rather, this is a substantive semantic hypothesis, which stands in need of justification, and for which there seems to be no evidence.

Restrictivists are not alone in trying to reconcile revisionary metaphysical theories with discourse about material objects. For instance, many philosophers (but no linguists, to my knowledge) have endorsed the semantic hypothesis that such English sentences as ‘there are tables in the next room’, ‘this piece of paper exists now’, or ‘this tree had fewer braches last year’ have two uses in English: a “loose and popular” use on which they say something obviously true, and a “strict and philosophical” use on which they express substantive philosophical claims.³⁰ Others have contended that there is a tacit pretense operator at work in our discourse about material objects: what we say in uttering ‘there are tables in the next room’ is that according to the folk ontology there are tables in the next room.³¹ These other reconciliatory strategies are beset by the same problems facing the restrictivist, for there seems to be no more evidence for these semantic hypotheses than there is for restrictivism.³² Moreover, the abundance of revisionary semantic hypotheses only increases the dialectical instability (mentioned at the close of §1) of favoring one over the others in absence of clear evidence in favor of the preferred hypothesis.

I strongly agree with John Hawthorne and Michaelis Michael that reconciliatory strategies have been “badly abused.”³³ And I agree with Kripke (quoted in the epigraph) that these claims are almost invariably suspect—though it is crucial to recognize that, *pace* Kripke, these are linguistic hypotheses, not philosophical claims. There seems to be a widespread methodological assumption that reconciling revisionary metaphysical claims with what the folk say requires nothing more than providing a systematic reinterpretation of the relevant domain of folk discourse. It has been all too common to find reconciliatory semantic hypotheses put forward, which depart—sometimes drastically—from straightforward interpretations of discourse, without any evidence being cited in their favor. But in the absence of clear evidence for these reconciliatory hypotheses, and against interpretations that take folk discourse at face value, there is little reason to take seriously the suggestion that the revisionary ontological theories are consistent with what is said in ordinary discourse.

³⁰ See van Inwagen (1990, 100–3), Heller (1990, 12–14), and Chisholm (1976, chapter 3), respectively.

³¹ See Rosen and Dorr (2002, 168–71).

³² See Hirsch (2002, 109–11) on the lack of evidence that we speak loosely when we talk about persistence through change, and Merricks (2001, 163–170) on the lack of evidence that we speak loosely when we talk about chairs.

³³ Hawthorne and Michael (1996, 118).

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